

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Rachel Howard: A fascination with madness

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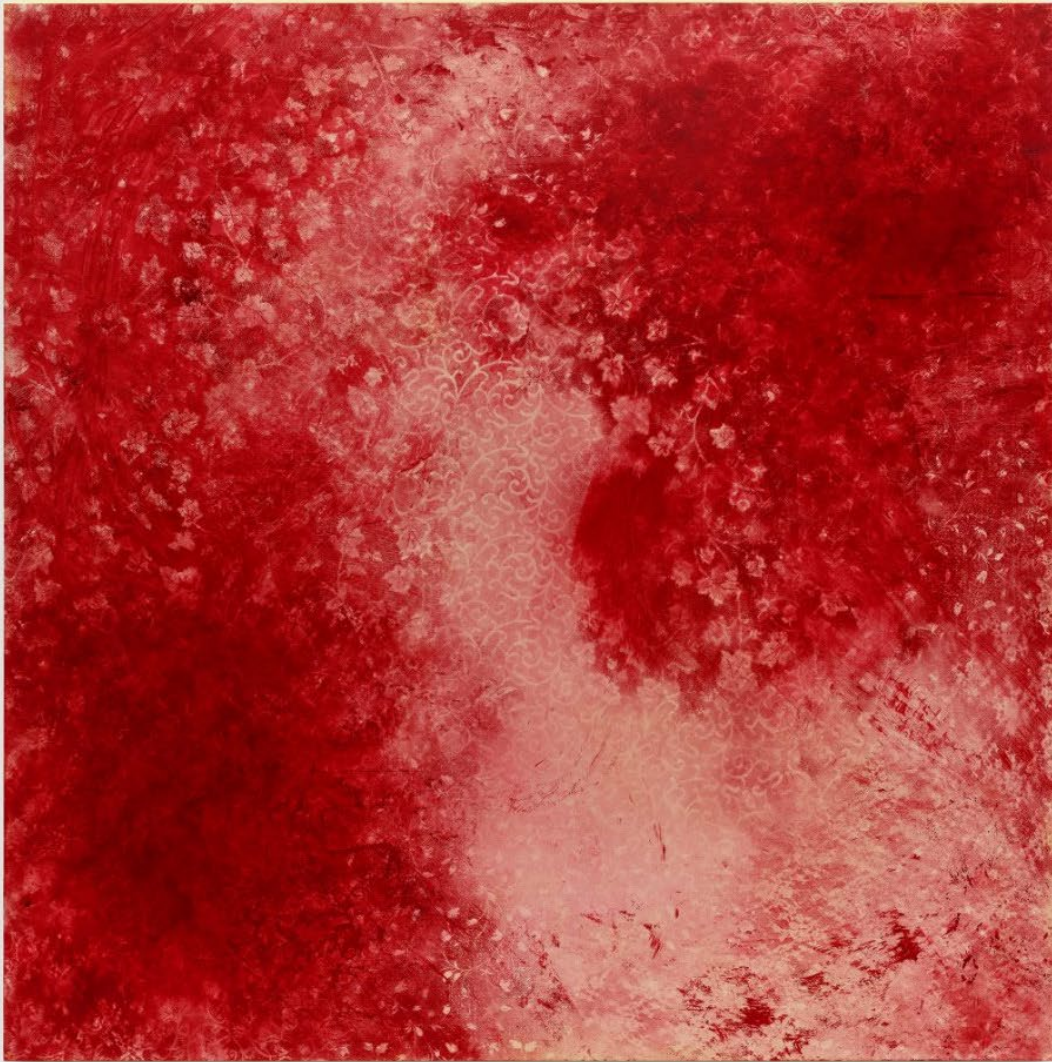
Rachel Howard, Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian) (detail), 2011 – 2016; oil and acrylic on canvas, wood, 7 x towels and pigment; 10 canvases each, 66 1/8 x 66 1/8 inches. 2019 installation at Mass MOCA.

Contributed by Sharon Butler / British painter Rachel Howard is in town this month, presenting "L'appel du vide," her first New York solo show, at Blain|Southern. Howard is known for a visceral, intuitive approach to abstraction that embraces painting, sculpture, and work on paper. Last week, after she'd finished installing the show, she and her old friend (and Brooklyn gallerist) Stephanie Theodore stopped by Two Coats HQ to talk about color, process, theory, and "gentle shifts and slippages that happen at the edges of our minds."

Sharon Butler: I've heard that your show at Blain | Southern features five large-scale alizarin crimson monochromatic paintings, and I know you recently presented "Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian)" a powerful installation at Mass MOCA that was also limited to red. Tell me about your relationship with red. When did you begin restricting your palette in this fashion and why?

Rachel Howard: It's not always restricted, but yes with these particular bodies of work, it is. I should do a show titled "problems with crimson," I just can't help myself, it's carnal and life affirming and brutal. When I'm painting, I don't like to think too much about the whys of what I'm doing — I like to plow through on a much more basic corporeal level, my paintings are very physical to make — they're almost sculptural. I went to Goldsmiths University London, and the course was very theoretical, I did a joint honors in Art History and Fine Art, which in many ways is absurd — trying to find your way in making art while the history of art screams over your shoulder. During that period, I gorged on philosophy, literature and critical theory and then, when I left, I got back to the basics of reveling in the material, and pushed the thinking away. Now, I appreciate what I did there, but at the time I felt like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

These paintings aren't strictly monochromatic as I also have a penchant for nasty fluorescent acrylic, which I usually apply as a base coat after the primer and before the oil, with the hope that even if the tiniest of vestiges poke through on the final painting it will have the desired effect, smidges of color that pull you in, to then seek them out. These paintings in New York, in "L'appel du Vide," have fluorescent yellow on the top and bottom edges of the canvas, you can't see the colour, only the gentle hum of their glow on the wall.



Rachel Howard, Love Fool, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern. Photo: Prudence Cuming



Rachel Howard, Missive to the Mad, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 41 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern. Photo: Prudence Cuming

Stephanie Theodore: Your works strikes me as extremely physical. Do you see your works as performative?

RH: The larger pieces yes, my MASS MoCA show — which consisted of ten paintings my height and arm span (60" x 60") and one sculpture — definitely had a performance aspect to it. Through the repetition of the slicing of the paint down the canvas guided by a T-square over and over again, to the wiping of the T-square to clean away the paint for the next slice, and then the folding of the soiled towels that were placed on the plinth — the final act. The title of the work is "Paintings of Violence (why I am not a mere Christian)," and it took me 5 years to complete. I painted the work because I was fed up with all the fucked-up shit going on and on in the world.

I went to a Quaker school and it had such a powerful effect on my life that I've carried it with me ever since. I'm an atheist now but Quakerism was the first time as a child I came across a religious structure that made some sense. The lack of hierarchy, to sitting in a "Meeting House" with "Friends" in a square format, facing one another — the silence, contemplation, the acknowledgement of our responsibilities not just to each other but also to nature, they are pacifists. I was quite unruly as a child — Quakerism makes you take responsibility for your own actions without being heavy-handed, it's subtle and beautiful. The Quakers believe in celebrating the light within, it'll come as no surprise that James Turrell is a Quaker, for example.

SB: You once said that the paintings are an exploration of uncertainty and instability. I wonder if you're more interested in instability in the personal realm or the overwhelming global instability inflicted on citizens by the rise of autocratic leaders around the world.

RH: This show is more about the entropy within, which of course can be influenced by the world events around us. But with these it's more an exploration of my fascination with madness and what that is exactly. "L'appel du vide" translates as "the call of the void" a desire to jump off tall buildings or swerve into on-coming traffic etc. I thought it was only me that felt this until I started reading about how it's a common passing thought, which is in fact life-affirming and shows the "will" to live.

I'm interested in the gentle shifts and slippages that happen at the edges of our minds — the quiet madness that we might all experience to a greater or lesser extent. This manifests itself in the large red paintings such as *Love Fool*, *Mouth to Mouth*, *High Flyer* and *If it Sounds like This*, as they shift from clarity to confusion in the clear and crisp patterns which then slip to the smears of a murky blur and clots of painterly mess. Some of the patterns are images of flowers, stylised roses or daisies, for example, or of leaves and twine. I build up these surfaces of synthetic nature using cotton or acrylic nets, the kind people have in windows for privacy — fake nature — I love the way humans want to replicate nature in such an unnatural way it's brilliantly bizarre and wonderful.

ST: For all the theory you studied at Goldsmiths, your paintings strike me as more emotional than conceptual.

RH: Yes. I'm interested in how we each make sense of the world. In paintings such as *Missive to the Mad* and *Missive to the Sad*, I use the grid in varying degrees of degradation and dissolution, building up the ground and then the grid only to knock it back using gravity, turps and gloss varnish, a balance between control and chaos. They are odes to madness and melancholia, the gentle slip and slide of life, what the mind can do and where it can lead you. I think that's why I'm fascinated with religion and human beliefs and what we need to make it all work.



Installation view: Paintings of Violence (Why I am not a mere Christian), MASS MoCA, February 2018 – March 2019. Courtesy the artist and MASS MoCA

SB: Tell me about the hazel stick objects that you have included in the new installation.

RH: The title of the hazel wands is *Sisters and Daughters*, they're like a tribe of women of all shapes and sizes, I like the 'witchy-ness' of a stick, something to support, but can also be used as a weapon — we all need a hazel wand. These have a humor too, I hope...

If you aren't familiar with the poem by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, *The Song of Wandering Aengus*;

*I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.*

*Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.*

I love this poem.

ST: Speaking of the tribe, what artists' work are you the most intrigued by and why.

RH: Perhaps we need to meet in a pub and have proper chat about this one.



Rachel Howard, Sisters & Daughters (details), 2018-2019; mixed media (37 x hazel sticks, 2 x Charolais sheep skull, European badger skull, pheasant feathers, 5 x painted plastic flowers, string and ribbon, acrylic, primer and gloss paint; approx. 167¼ x 236¼ inches. Courtesy the artist and Blain/Southern



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