

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

Art in America

Michael Berryhill
NEW YORK, at Kansas
Carrie Moyer
September 19, 2014



Michael Berryhill: *Coven Oven*, 2014,
oil on linen, 37¼ by 33¼ inches; at Kansas.

Michael Berryhill has a most delicious way with paint. In "Beggars Blanket," the second solo show at Kansas by the Brooklyn-based artist, Berryhill brought a heightened sense of color and tactility to his intimate consideration of life in the studio. Painted in a palette as sweet and chalky as Necco Wafers, nine easel-size paintings (all 2014) comprise a series of small tableaux set inside fanciful scaffolding. The template composition—a kind of flattened display case that conveys a sense of a Wunderkammer—allows us to focus on Berryhill's inventiveness and evident pleasure as he moves from one picture to the next.

At the entry to the gallery, a narrow vitrine layered with quick, palm-sized sketches offered a glimpse into the importance of drawing to Berryhill's process. Roughed out in magic marker and pencil, the drawings depict a panoply of biomorphic forms, making explicit the strong current of Synthetic Cubism and Surrealism that ran throughout the show. Here the white paper acts as a ground, punching out small pockets of space around individual shapes. The paintings, by comparison, are concerned with the idea of space rather than the illusion of it. Primary shapes, transposed from the drawings, are formed and then held in place by an interlocking jigsaw of grid, drapery and brushy daub.

Signs of the painter's craft are crammed into *Coven Oven*, *Axis of Easel* and *Palais de Lottery*. In each, an abstract gestural flourish, thickly drawn diagram or bit of crosshatching holds as much weight of content as any of the more representational vignettes, such as mannequins, model stands and attenuated limbs. In *Tabernacle Trapple* there is a kind of narrative suggested in the relationship between the curious blue form holding center stage and the surrounding ochre and gray backdrop. Trimmed in red, the main "figure" morphs from tabletop sculpture to miniature altar to Cubist still-life without ever settling into one identity. Berryhill's titles—goofy and self-conscious—feel contemporary, and act to temper what would otherwise be characterized as a serious love fest with mid-20th-century painting.

Berryhill's surprising and truly particular color scheme and paint handling push these canvases to a distinctive level of sophistication and finesse. Reminiscent of vintage apparel and housewares of the 1930s and '40s, the light palette combines soft grays and yellows with vibrant pinks, blues and greens, domesticating the grand historical themes and "masters" so central to a painter's education. The paint application, too, has a decorative edge: using small brushes, Berryhill drags his colors over one another, creating a dry, optical mix on the textured linen surface. The joy in these paintings comes from the bon-vivant spirit of Berryhill's homage—more Raoul Dufy than Pablo Picasso.