

# BROOKLYN RAIL

**Michael Berryhill: A Window, Adore**

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Walking down the slot canyon of Vandam Street and into the mini-cavern of the Kate Werble Gallery and Michael Berryhill's show of recent paintings can have the effect of discovering a fecund microclimate of crystalline flora and fauna nestled among the bleached, late summer-bones of lower Manhattan. Berryhill's paintings hit you first with a kind of mescaline-misty haze of granular color, the kind one experiences in a firsthand encounter with an Odilon Redon pastel, or in the pebbly impressionism of Pissarro. Vuillard and Bonnard also come to mind as progenitors of the artist's approach to gestural optics. Yet these paintings also bump up the atmospherics quite a few keys with a just-under-shrill palette of counterpoised neon hues. Berryhill's practice of periodically scraping down the canvas and then reapplying successive layers of dry-brushed pigment on top of ghost layers of previous hues lends the surfaces of his paintings a contradictory airy-but-sanded, plasmatic aura. The combined effect of vaguely symbolic imagery surrounded by associated hue climates lends the overall show a smoldering, hallucinogenic quality. The works are generally brought back to earth, however, by the painter's robust regard for the gravitational substance of paint and how it can overcome the fleeting opacity of figurative allegory. Berryhill purposely over-determines his scumbling and hue relationships and under-determines his symbolic structures toward this end. His symbolism is constructed as a weak vessel to allow his painterly flourish to leak out.



Michael Berryhill, *The Interrogation*, 2017. Oil on linen, 77" x 60".

The show's thematic consistency, particularly in some of the large works, such as *The Interrogation* (2017) is pinioned upon a loose allegorical frame-work that never quite holds together. One can discern certain items in this painting that are loaded with art historical import such as a palette, a pipe, and a seated figure with a landscape view behind, yet the purpose of the puzzle remains purposely unresolved. This symbolic irresolution allows blotched daubs of deeply saturated hues to float freely over the dominant violet and light red-orange of the wall and table in the "interior" of the painting. The effect is reminiscent of Rothko's similarly plasmatic color compositions that comprised his transitional works between what might be termed his "aquatic surrealism" phase and his signature horizontal blocks of closely valued hues. Like the unstable morphology of the middle-Rothko's, Berryhill's painting explores the analogical potential of phenomenal color interaction as a spontaneously-generated subject in itself, a kind of genetic soup of painterly potential that the viewer witnesses forming before their eyes. Yet these works also have a mildly cynical sensibility that would be foreign to an artist like Rothko. Within the painting's shaky symbolic structure, one can make out a pairing of raised glasses, which puts any "interrogation" into the context of a toast. Considering the term "interrogation" is a cliché of modernist capture—for example, the artist "interrogates the picture plane," or the painting "interrogates the viewer's preconceptions"—one has to smile at the artist's witty aside placed front and center, an ironic

self-consciousness the artist exhibits throughout the show. The title of the show, a window, adore, reinforces the idea that Berryhill's allegorical content is not to be taken literally but as a more malleable substance of meaning. The artist's playful critique of painterly subjectivity is further extended in another large painting, *Skeptic & Sun* (2017), in which a yellow hound with a violet reflected shadow stares out at the viewer while a symbolic sun rises behind in a landscape that seems as if it could be a collaboration between Raoul Dufy, Milton Avery, and Howard Hodgkin. The "dogmatic" symbolism of the painting becomes ungrounded by an authorial contingency.

Besides these high stakes games of "hide-and-go-in-terrogate" in the larger works, Berryhill offers an array of smaller paintings here that are less-obviously forthcoming in their critical content. Works such as the delicate *Notes on Spring* or the more muscular *Coral Corral* (both 2017) are evident of the artist's prioritization of color and gesture to animate his works. His wit at creating figurative tensions in the symbolic content of the larger allegories discretely steps aside to allow for his greater painterly literalness to flourish in these more diminutive works. One exception to this tendency is the lyrical *In Memory, Fading Memory* (2017), a large composition of simply presented garlands and flowers that achieves a level of painterly presence that the artist might usefully hold as an aspirational model of light subject/heavy being.



Michael Berryhill, *Skeptic & Sun*, 2017. Oil on linen, 77" x 65".



Michael Berryhill, *In Memory, Fading Memory*, 2017. Oil on linen, 84" x 66".