

Michael Berryhill and Evan Nesbit Are the Warp and Woof of Miro's Thread
David Ambrose
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Michael Berryhill
a window, adore
September 9 - October 28, 2017
Kate Werble Gallery
New York, New York

Evan Nesbit
Cellophane Grip
September 13 - October 28, 2017
Van Doren Waxter Gallery
New York, New York

"A piece of thread can unleash a world."

-Joan Miro in conversation with Yvon Taillandier, 1959

With their current exhibitions in New York, the painters Michael Berryhill and Evan Nesbit test the flexibility of that simple Miro dictum, as each artist tries to thread the needle of contemporary painting: Berryhill working diligently on top of the threads, while Nesbit works from behind in the spaces between them.



Michael Berryhill, *Pop-up Shepherd*, 2017, Oil on linen, 38 x 30 inches

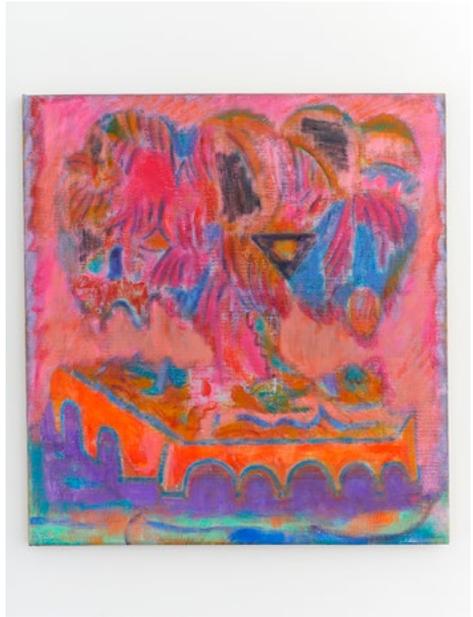
In the case of Michael Berryhill (b. 1972 in El Paso, Texas), that thread, metaphorically speaking, is a very long one indeed, one that stretches back to the Italian Renaissance and is tied to the image bank of the Catholic Church. For his first solo show at the Kate Werble Gallery, Berryhill exhibits fourteen paintings, all completed in 2017. They range in size from the modest, easel-sized picture *Silent Spring* (16" x 12"), to the monumental *In Memory, Fading Memory* (84" x 66"). No matter their sizes, all of these works present a connection not so much to the easel, but rather directly to the wall itself and to the art fresco painting. This linkage becomes even more apparent as you study the soft edges around the perimeter of his canvases. They seem to seep their way into our memory, and in the process soften the certainty of our view. Raw linen is visible on the painting sides that begin to feel more liked rescued frescos from a damaged chapel.

But the connection to fresco ends inside those hazy borders with the artist's choice of palette. The searing brightness of the colors feels more like the result of a trip to an Indian spice market; the lightfastness of the pigment is balanced by its slow burn into our visual memory banks. Add to that Berryhill's technique, one where he virtually cauterizes his paint to the canvas by pushing so hard on the surface (both with a brush or a straightedge razor scraper) that it feels like the striking of a match head on a coarse surface. He pushes, abrades, glazes and dusts his marks into the ground, creating memories that surround each form like a mist.

For all their painterly brio, Berryhill's marks appear exhausted--out of gas on the image highway

and a little short of their destination. Bristle marks, like skeletal brushstrokes, leave ghostly impressions gasping for more pigment. The paint is so chalky in some cases it barely feels diluted. I kept thinking that the artist might have poured his color on his palette from straws as if they were made from Pixy Stix powdered candy, rather than squeezed from a tube. The garish color combinations create an afterimage that lingers in the eye sockets, and it is almost matched in intensity by an aftertaste these paintings deposit in your mouth.

In *Isle*, a psychedelic, patchwork palm tree that conjures Pierre Bonnard's *The Palm*--as well as a bit of the late French artist's chromatic indecisiveness--is planted atop a floating, incandescent colonnade that radiates a bright orange that is prevented from confrontation with the purple shadow of the water by a springing viridian line of arches. In the foreground, butted up to the picture plane, a semi-transparent, multicolored gondola anchors the whole composition. Venice may still be the city of two lights, but now those lights are back light and a black light.



Michael Berryhill, *Isle*, 2017, Oil on linen, 38 x 36 inches

In *Coral Corral*, a checkered tablecloth produces an open latticework that supports a bouquet of herringbone patterned coral. The coral comes in hot pink, lime green and luminous orange that hang like unwanted Father's Day ties on a rack, each one resembling a tongue after an encounter with a different colored Popsicle. Cobalt violet seeps up from the background; a smoky, one inch band of wide diagonal stripes frames the entire composition.

Artistic influences flutter around the show like a bird from one of Georges Braque's postwar heroic late studios. In *The Interrogation*, the buoyancy of the hothouse color rescues the subject from its imposing Max Beckmannesque title. The slight bird's eye view of the scene presents a painter--a self-portrait--seated at a fuchsia table that tilts violently forward as if it has had its two front legs sawed off, but miraculously manages to hold in place the colored shapes that double as still-life objects. The artist holds a glass aloft in his right hand, saluting his interrogators. A wall-hung palette doubles as a French beret above his head, revealing intention, and perhaps a little pretension, in a single painted form.

A bird of spiritual nature, the Holy Spirit, turns up in a group of paintings whose titles provide us hints to their faith based meaning. In *Fam*, the family is the Holy Trinity that has been reduced to three simple shapes resting on an altar: a radiating orb, and two ornamental finials. Streaky light blue brushstrokes appear like a garbled transmission of the voice of God on a television screen. In *Jerome*, based on a painting by Piero Della Francesca, the genuflecting saint is barely visible behind a curtain of melting orange. In *Pop-up Shepherd*, the holy protagonist is cloaked in an oversized robe that looks as if it were designed by Jasper Johns with its all-over pattern of hatched red lines. Only a glimmer of the shepherd's head is seen from inside the hood as he rises to his feet.

While the Berryhill show at Kate Werble might have left you parched and reaching for a bottle

of water, Evan Nesbit's exhibition *Cellophane Grip* at the Van Doren Waxter Gallery might find you soaked in theory and searching for a fresh towel. The younger of the two artists, Nesbit (b. 1985 in Sacramento, California) exhibits ten new paintings completed in 2017 from two concurrent series: *The Porosity Series*, made with acrylic on assembled sections of pre-dyed burlap, and the *Manifold Series* made also with acrylic, but on a support of inkjet print photographs screened on perforated vinyl. In each series Nesbit explores the viscosity of his paint in a manner completely counter to Berryhill's approach. Nesbit avoids the direct contact with his forward facing painting surface. He works instead in reverse, on the verso side of his material using a squeegee--and in the *Manifold Series* using masking fluid--to control the liquefied pigment from escaping through the holes or pores onto the front of his canvases, like a silkscreen where the paper has been replaced by a sheet of air.



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

Whether using organic and synthetic material as a support, Nesbit works horizontally, suspending the fabric which in turn allows for the suspension of the paint. In most cases, it will travel untouched through the weave of his canvas with no manipulated surface blending. Paint oozes forward like the threads of a towel--albeit, in some cases, like a worn towel with bald patches as the result of the masked areas. Simply put, the material is painted first and then hung out to dry. In a way, Nesbit's forward push is a mirror reflection or parallel phrase to the dusty exhaust fumes of Berryhill's brushstrokes. While Berryhill's tattered edges flatten out and hug the canvas surface, Nesbit's suspended forms leach forward, looking for gravity to offer an escape route.

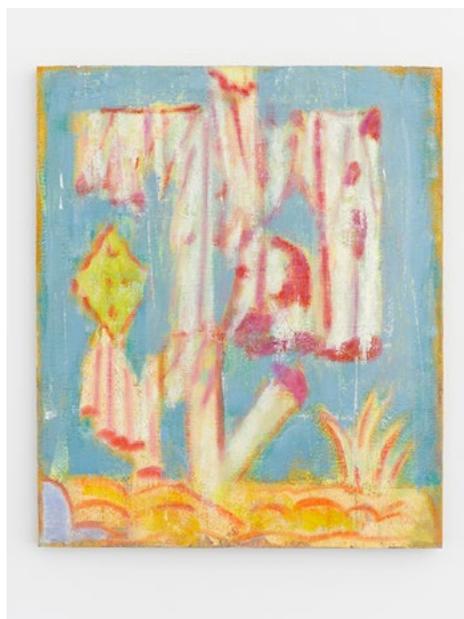
In the diptych *Porosity (New Dissonant Realities)*, overall 84" x 84" and the largest work in the show, Nesbit's fluorescent pinks and yellows gather like beads of sweat or condensation on a pair of gigantic, tie-dyed Easter eggs. Each burlap canvas of the diptych has been dyed with two colors: an inky indigo and either the hot pink or the cool yellow, as this tripartite palette hints at the primaries. The third member, left out of the original dye soak cycle, is then squeezed forward from the back gathering like rows of cascading papillae on a giant tongue. The whole display has the feel of late night collaboration between Alan Shields and Alberto Burri.

In *Manifold Painting (Automatt)*, the smallest work in show coming in at 30" x 18", the artist screens a monochromatic gray photograph of a Laundromat floor on vinyl (his drawing process). He then composes the subsequent painting by blocking out sections on the back (possibly the only place he uses a brush). Nesbit doubles down on the actual tile floor's linear grid pattern by protecting it with the masking fluid. The resulting recto surface leaves the axes of the grid intact. The paint surface of the vinyl canvas almost appears to have unintended alligatoring cracks, giving me a sense this was one of the first paintings in the *Manifold Series*. The foreign nature of the material and the proper viscosity to travel pigment through the pores seems to have the artist a little at a loss. Adding to the surface disruption is what appears to be

a curious fingertip--like a doubting Thomas--that took a swipe at the paint beads before they were completely dry. The painting is propped on a shelf, leaning against the wall rather than hung as if needing additional support to carry its wound.

More successful is the raucous diptych *Manifold Painting (Cat Atlas)*, where what appears to be an artist's studio is buried in a colorful array of acrylic paint, including aerosol. The work evokes a studio *Battle of San Romano*, where color and its temperature step into the role of soldiers on the battlefield. In *Manifold Painting (Manifold 1)*, rows of blue and red PEX hoses for distributing hot and cold water are held in place by pipe straps, and look a little like a circulatory system or a rib cage. The photographed hoses are screwed down to two visible wooden supports, hinting at the paintings actual stretcher bars that are hidden from view. The story of the wood mirrors the story of the screened photograph that is obstructed by the tiny, delicate beads of paint bleeding through small openings in the vinyl. A mist engulfs the entire painting surface and creates a colorful, confusing, condensed, claustrophobic space; one very much in line with a Michael Berryhill.

But if one painting symbolizes the bond shared by these two artists' best, it would have to be Berryhill's *Post*. In this work, a cloth is draped over a wooden cruciform post hammered into the ground like a shrouded cross, a powerful symbol of Christ's Resurrection. But this painting is not simply meant to represent a Biblical event; it is far more universal, like Miro's thread. The post could also be seen as a road sign or sign post, but one whose instructions have been obscured by the cloth or canvas that is covered in red lines, blotches, and stains, like dried blood; still, the post helps to give definition to the form of the cloth and its cast shadows. The painting can also be seen as a symbolic representation of the act of painting itself: wood for stretchers, canvas, a white ground, and some painted lines, shapes, and forms.



Michael Berryhill, *Post*, 2017, Oil on linen, 27 x 23 ½ inches

While one can only speculate on much of the meaning that hovers over this painting, one thing is certain: while both Michael Berryhill and Evan Nesbit may take different paths to get there, their destination is the same: the surface of a painting, or as I like to call it, heaven on earth. The two artists are like two threads of a woven fabric--a warp and woof. Each needs the other to complete the grid and to give the other a foundation.