

Matt Magee

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Matt Magee at Bill Maynes

By Robert Berling

Matt Magee's beautiful paintings might seem merely decorative were it not for their finely tuned optical and, one feels, spiritual intensity. He achieves an overall luminosity with horizontal rows of tiny disks, 1/2 inch across and smaller, set against larger, horizontal zones of color. (In some less convincing works these disks cluster within concentrically nesting rectangles.) The dot-based modularity of the paintings suggests a curious and contradictory range of correspondences: weaving, fields of pixels, molecular configurations, Aboriginal "dreamings."

Each of Magee's units is composed of two colors and ranges in configuration from a dot with a thin outline to a round field with a small dot at the center. Seen close up, the paintings are like a world of finely considered Albersian color interactions or so many miniature Nolands, with each set of center, periphery and ground colors yielding its own subtle pleasure. A disk may recede into the ground or advance toward the viewer, expand or contract, establish a continuity with its neighbors in a line dance or become part of an arcane, glyph-like configuration across several lines.

Close inspection also reveals that the disks are not laid out on an underpainted field, as efficiency would dictate; rather, figures and grounds have been painted together, one disk at a time, often with subsequent adjustments. Magee's protracted, meditative process corresponds to the dreamy, even hypnotic quality of the paintings. There is clearly an obsessive side to this work, but without the numb, mechanical quality of much obsessively produced art. To discover the paintings' intimate, nuanced facture is to experience the integral relation of process to meaning in his work. No computer program could have produced these.

The alternate readings—from close up and from several feet away, where optical color mixtures begin to occur and other configurations emerge—recall Chuck Close's double viewing option, but we are far, here, from the essentially rationalist and public world of those portraits. In spirit, Magee's oil-on-panel paintings feel closer to Fred Tomaselli's psychedelic designs, except that Magee's units are not preceded by any encompassing, symmetrical plan, nor are they so conceptually succinct. More pertinently, Magee has acknowledged two strong influences, Myron Stout and Forrest Bess. Although this may at first seem an odd pairing of formalist and fantasist, both (like Magee) were Texans who worked at a modest scale, with utmost devotion to their peculiar, unfashionable, exigent visions. He is in good company.



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