

Abstraction's Exhaustion and Renewal

Bernard Piffaretti is an artist who recognizes painting as an act of inquiry and skepticism

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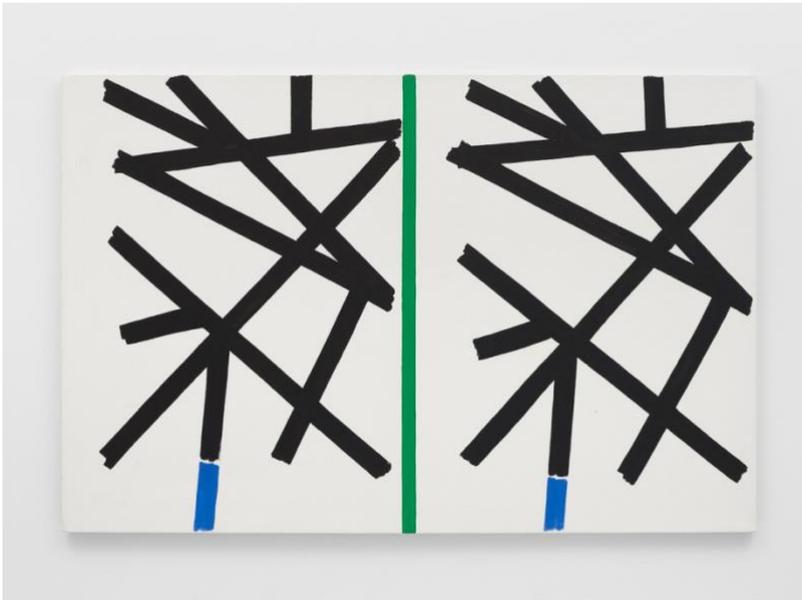


Bernard Piffaretti, "Untitled" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 47 1/8 x 31 1/2 x 7/8 inches, © Bernard Piffaretti (all images courtesy Lisson Gallery)

The current solo exhibition of Paris-based artist Bernard Piffaretti at Lisson Gallery charts the familiar territory he has trodden since the mid-1980s. Piffaretti came of age after the innovations of the French artist groups BMPT (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni) and Support/Surface, whose work, in contrast to the almost purely aesthetic interpretation it receives today, held radical, political intentions

Formally, the serialization and repetition practiced by the two groups would appear to have had the greatest effect on Piffaretti's work, but herein lies a major difference in postwar thinking about painting.

The Americans, in an effort to avoid any residual subjectivity from the Abstract Expressionists, careened toward serialization *and* the fetishization of surface, evidenced by the machine aesthetic present in the works of Donald Judd.



Bernard Piffaretti, "Untitled" (2005), acrylic on canvas, 38 1/8 x 57 3/8 x 7/8 inches, © Bernard Piffaretti

Piffaretti, along with French peers like Bernard Frize and Jérôme Bouutterin, were not engaged in simple stylistic endeavors, but sought out new possibilities for abstraction, and went on to discover a provincial form of idiosyncratic painting; Piffaretti's twelve modest-sized paintings on view at Lisson present themselves as an altogether humbler, yet exacting project.

The artist divides his canvas into halves, bisecting each half with a central vertical strip of paint; one side is then painted in crisp, graphic lines, color patterns, and gestural swipes, which are painstakingly mimicked on the other half.

Or so one thinks. These works are nothing if not contradictory. The occasional drip, mark, or line on the second half doesn't always square up with the original, begging the viewer to look now and look again. Asking for sustained attention is not an easy get, but these works do not disappoint. The artist doesn't repeat any singular motif; rather he sets up a series of problems to be resolved by doubling the image.

The left half of the hot-colored "Untitled" (2016), one of the largest paintings in the show, is nearly covered by a thin, drippy, fuchsia pink field that stops a few inches short of the bottom. A solid white line zigzags on top of the pink, where a cobalt blue band breaks near the upper edge to form a hook.



Bernard Piffaretti, "Untitled" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 59 x 59 x 7/8 inches, © Bernard Piffaretti

Cadmium red and bright orange bands alternate behind and beside the blue, obscuring the pink field and the zigzagging line, but painted thinly enough to reveal their ghosts. Drips appear on each half of the canvas that do not match the locations of their counterparts. There is in fact a greenish-blue drip emerging from the bottom left orange band, a color seen nowhere else in the painting, while the right half features more drips in pink. These incidental marks defy the notion that Piffaretti's process is about execution rather than chance, intuition, and intentionality.

More recent works, like "Untitled" (2019), offer a convincing case for the artist's off-handed, casual approach to mark-making. Here, Piffaretti leaves much of the canvas bare, establishing a relationship to the irresolution employed by American counterparts like Matt Connors, Mary Heilmann, Joe Fyfe, and Patricia Treib. The paint is thin, like ceramic glaze. The mark-making is unembellished, matter of fact. The resulting images are by turns comical, serious, contradictory, playful, and searching — all very human. In the end, all the viewer has left to go on are the inconsistencies and variations between the two halves.

This is how Piffaretti doubles down on how we see. His mirroring of image and surface illuminates the act of perception, highlighting the emotional and philosophical relationships present in a response to a given set of conditions. Despite rapid changes in contemporary art, the conditions of painting remain essentially problems of scale, facture, color, and content. The artist establishes mirroring as a simple, yet significant approach to the continuance of abstraction after many of its forms and solutions have reached exhaustion.



Bernard Piffaretti, "Untitled" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 66 7/8 x 66 7/8 inches, © Bernard Piffaretti

Major galleries may boast rosters of highly skilled technicians who know how to make slick, dressed-up paintings that are optical, painterly, and luminous, yet few painters have a practice that recognizes painting as an act of inquiry and skepticism. In a world of image overconsumption, it is rare for an artist to make work that questions the status of authenticity in mark-making, and highlights discrepancies between image and painting.

Piffaretti's paintings are objects created with a certain kind of syntactical structure that evinces a snappy relationship to the ideas they represent, and demands to be perceived in a specific way.



Bernard Piffaretti, "Untitled" (2019), acrylic on canvas, 94 3/8 x 55 x 1 inches, © Bernard Piffaretti

First, there are acts of negation. The artist avoids style. He paints in a number of manners and vocabularies, and in doing so, he resists subjective readings based on related motifs and a consistent painterly approach. Second, he avoids surface fetishization. The fetish object conceals the work that went into producing it, while luxury goods foreground the quality of the handiwork that went into them. Piffaretti is undertaking one of painting's roles today, which is to wedge space between these two ways of addressing an object.

When we scroll through social media, we often occupy the position of the passive spectator, who takes pleasure in images while ignoring their production, ideology, or value. It is a mode of viewing that is insulated from a concrete relationship to objects in the world.

By doubling his imagery, the artist implicates the spectator within the space of the painting. The inconsistencies and variations in these paintings challenge our dulled gaze. By creating an animated space of play through the presentation of inexact repetitions, Piffaretti foregrounds the importance of the shared space of viewership, and requires that we actively look and interpret the work. Beneath the formal apparatus of these paintings, there runs an unexpected current of egalitarianism. These works are about sensate pleasure. With 40 years of painting behind it, Piffaretti's project points toward endless discovery. There are no retreads in his oeuvre, but rather a series of colorful, dynamic one-offs. These are works which call us back to painting as a space of immeasurable possibility, reveling in the enlivened exchange between artist and observer.