

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

ArtCritical
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The Grammar of the Grid

by Eric Sutphin

Alex Olson: As a Verb, As a Noun, In Peach and Silver at Lisa Cooley

September 12 – October 17
34 Orchard Street, between Canal and Grand streets,
New York City, 212 680 0564



Alex Olson, *A Verb, A Noun*, 2010. Oil on linen, 41 x 29 inches. Courtesy of Lisa Cooley

Alex Olson's new paintings are geometric abstractions incorporating scribbled and scrawled text-like marks, controlled color and subtly textured, methodically plotted surfaces. Many works rely upon the grid in various permutations, which Olson squashes, muddies and buries only to excavate it once more and ultimately leave the surface threadbare displaying traces of the painting's past, its architecture, the insulation. In *Plot* (2010), for instance, a wonky self-conscious lattice is incised into the dusty mauve surface into and on top of which the artist glops slapdash bits of paint seemingly as a strategy to debase the geometric surface. A tiny dash of vermilion, a

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blob of ivory, buttery yellow, baby blue and black are suspended amongst a field of one inch squares.

Olson's generally non-descript palette vaguely recalls building materials like Tyvek siding, fibreglass insulation, primer and aluminum: there is peach, banal blues, an industrial orange, silver. These allusions help make the paintings feel less painted than constructed. Even in works which pose as expressive the underlying architecture and blueprint is evident.

In *A Verb, A Noun* (2010) we are interested in nonsensical characters scribbled into the Rose Madder surface. The indecipherable script begs for translation and understanding.. A dirty surface which has been raked over with a comb leaving a soft patterning across the pictorial surface. A field of macho orange lingers at the lower right portion of the canvas. The amorphous paint area does not poetically float or glow in a way that might recall Rothko but merely loiters, obscuring still more sgraffito.



Alex Olson, Plot, 2010. Oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches inches. Courtesy of Lisa Cooley

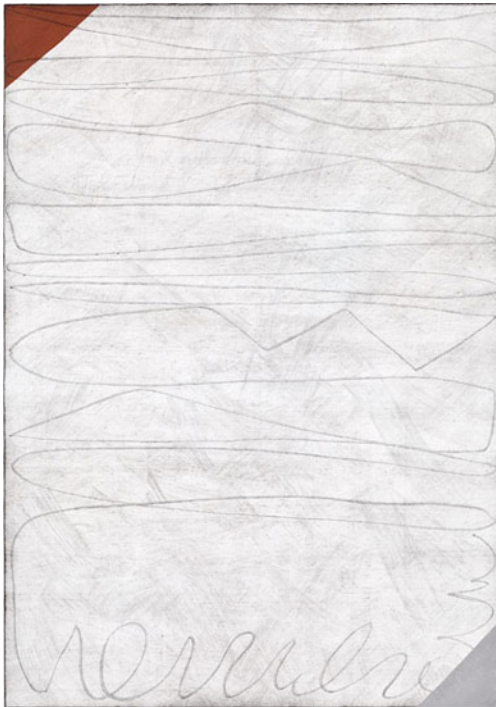
The most highly organized piece in the show is *Thread* (2010). Here Olson has laid out her bits of material in a diagrammatic essay on

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painting and handiwork. The title itself leads us to make associations to sewing, quilting or patchwork. The painting's elements include a continuous line in grease pencil which at times mimicks the gesture of a cross-stitch. The surface of the painting evokes coarse, wide-woven linen. At the upper left and lower right corners of the painting Olson has placed semi-opaque corners painted in rust and grey. These seem to have a purpose that goes beyond simply reminding us that this is a painting with four sides, to serve as signifiers of the craft aspect of making a painting.

Olson's deftly executed, methodical work constitutes a first-rate example of contemporary geometric abstraction. Initially icy and distant-seeming paintings, employing outdated tropes, reveal themselves, on closer inspection, as earnest, attentive signs of painterly history and narrative.



Alex Olson, Thread, 2010. Oil and grease pencil on linen 41 x 29 inches. Courtesy of Lisa Cooley

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