

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artforum
February 2013

ARTFORUM

“...but the clouds...”

ROOM EAST
41 Orchard Street
January 13-March 3

Samuel Beckett, both the paragon and the undertaker of high modernism, has held the attention of artists for decades—as seen in exhibitions from the Vancouver Art Gallery’s “Teleplays” in 1988 to MCA Chicago’s 2006 “Not I” and the Centre Pompidou’s blockbuster “Beckett” in 2007. He’s the sentinel, too, of the nine artists included in this sensitive, melancholy, uncommonly unified group exhibition, whose title is drawn from a Beckett television play. The art here, from painting and drawing to photography and one video, speaks quietly, with modest gestures and sparing use of color. But the formal economy only amplifies its keen.

A largely gray painting by Ara Dymond (*Memories, Landscapes and Other Lies...*, 2012) and an even sparser one by N. Dash (*To Be Titled*, 2012) approach abstraction with a brooding resignation: If they use vacancy to signify some existential emptiness, they also recognize that abstraction itself has been drained of any signifying power. Something similar occurs in a large drawing by Tony Lewis (*Role*, 2012), in which a wash of white graphite is interrupted only by a few lowercase letters, some misoriented, that have been sapped of linguistic substance. One of the most haunting works on show is *Diatomaceous Earth*, 2010, a black-and-white photograph by Matthew Booth depicting sedimentary rock as barren and infinite as the Martian landscape. You could imagine Winnie from *Happy Days* buried to her neck there.

Propped against the wall of one gallery is a 2012 painting by Davina Semo, a three-foot-square abstraction whose allover brushwork, a hazy forest of gray-green lines, recalls the Informel painting that Beckett would have seen in 1950s Paris. A closer look, however, reveals that the painting is done not on canvas but on something more baleful: a one-way mirror of the type you’d find at a prison or a check-cashing shop. It’s called *THE FIRST TIME I HAD MY HEART BROKEN I THOUGHT IT WAS THE END OF THE WORLD*—a very Beckettian title. In love as in art, her work attests, all that’s to be done is to try again, fail again, and fail better.

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