

PETER SHEAR *Recording*

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FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE

21 East 3rd St. NYC

Peter Shear's Determination and Openness by John Yau

Peter Shear is an artist whose intimately scaled abstract paintings held my attention from the very first moment I saw his exhibition, *Peter Shear: Editions of You*, at Devening Projects in Chicago on February 12, 2017, the day after it closed. In that exhibition, Shear, a self-taught painter who lives in Bloomington, Indiana, showed around thirty abstract paintings that measured 8 by 10 inches, a scale he continues to explore even as he moves on to canvases as large as 20 by 22 inches. A few months later, Shear had his New York debut exhibition, *Magnolias All at Once*, at the Fortnight Institute (June 15 - July 16, 2017), which I reviewed. In my review, I wrote:

The exhibition takes its title from the book of the same name by Buddhist monk and poet Norman Fisher, which is a collage-commentary on the poetry of Leslie Scalapino. Fisher's poetics have likely influenced Shear. Here is something he stated about his poetry: "There's no self or person, just what arises [...] writing is words, how they sound, how they look lying on the page."

Thinking about Shear's recent paintings and the breadth of what he accomplishes with them, I am reminded of Forrest Bess (1911-1977), who lived most of his life in Bay City, Texas. In 1951, in an article he published in a local newspaper, Bess wrote:

I term myself a visionary artist for lack of a better word. Something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight. I can close my eyes in a dark room and if there is no outside noise or attraction, plus, if there is no conscious effort on my part – then I can see color, lines, patterns, and forms that make up my canvases. I have always copied these arrangements without elaboration.

In a letter he wrote to his friend and fellow artist, Rosalie Berkowitz, Bess stated: "Elaboration and concoction are not my assets." Bess was a painter who made his living as a bait fisherman, but he shares the belief of a poet, who is also a Buddhist monk, that their work comes from, to use Fisher's term, "what arises." This is the tradition that Shear has inherited: he seems to exert "no conscious effort" to make a painting. Of course, I have no idea if this is true or not, but what he paints seems not to have been fussed over. That there is no sense of struggle might simply be a consequence of the artist's refusal to make his difficulties the focal point of his paintings. Moreover, he shows no interest in developing a signature style, nor does he appear to maintain an allegiance to a particular palette or group of colors. Each painting stands or falls on its own. Occasionally, the paintings, which can be oriented either vertically or horizontally, evoke a landscape or a figural presence. But others seem to have been inspired by an invisible phenomenon, as in the beautifully choreographed *Spring Wind* (2020), with its green ground of vertical paint strokes over which Shear has laid a few arabesques of red and largely horizontal swaths of pale blue and white mixed together. Defined by their color, each of the brushstrokes is made differently. None seem to have been wiped down and repainted. The

resulting image occupies a liminal space: it seems to be a picture of something while steadfastly remaining an abstract painting.

All of Shear's works resist any literal reading. When he titles a painting *Meeting* (2021), the two seemingly partially submerged elliptical forms extending from the left and right sides, touching each other nose-to-nose, may bring dolphins to mind, but they also remain anonymous abstract forms. Given the distinct palette he used in *Spring Wind* and in *Meeting*, with their two different blues, the viewer might be led to ask, which came first? Did the choice of colors determine the subject or was it the other way around? And just when you think that events in the natural world might provide a key to Shear's work, his gray and pink *Cathedral* (2019) explodes your theory.

A dirty pink, brush-stroked form spans *Cathedral*, edge to edge, with the lowest point of its gentle downward curve floating just above the midline. Above this form we see five pink daubs of paint, while below it, and sequestered on the right side between the rise of the curve and the canvas's border, we see another three pink daubs. Are they celestial presences? What does the curve, a kind of inverted arc, represent? Below the inverted arc, in the lower half of the painting, Shear has drawn a dry, dirty pink line, made of two brushstrokes, across the gray surface. Just below this line, he has made a thinner, more porous line in a single paint stroke. And beneath these two horizontal lines, we see three short, similarly oriented lines. Finally, along the bottom edge, we see traces of copper green peeking through the gray field, as they do elsewhere in the painting. Despite their scale, Shear's paintings reward slow looking. In *Meeting*, his attention to the two dominant hues infuses the composition with a feeling of a night scene. Given that it was made during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, is Shear commenting on the need to social distance and the sense of isolation it imposes on us? If so, he certainly is not didactic about it. Rather, there is a deep, soft-spoken tenderness to *Meeting*, which I find to be true of all of his paintings.

Working during a time rife with expensive, attention-getting artistic gestures, Shear's decision to follow a humbler path marked by intimately scaled works without a signature style or brand is radical. He may not display any signs of an overt self, but there is nothing indecisive about these paintings. Since I first saw his work almost five years ago, Shear has grown in confidence, as evidenced by the increase in the scale of his works. True to his early commitment, he has continued to explore paint's materiality, moving easily from viscous brushstrokes to diaphanous shapes. Early on, I thought of Shear as a self-taught painter who is single-mindedly working his way through the history of abstract painting, from the gestural to the geometric, and from thick, luscious strokes to dry markers and thinned-down surfaces. What is remarkable about this undertaking is that I never feel that Shear is derivative: each painting has something going for it. They are the work of an artist who can make them where he lives, which is to say he does not seem to need a huge studio, assistants, or a fabricator standing by. He has rejected grandiosity and that false equivalence between masculinity and post-easel painting. I am not even sure he needs an easel. Shear's fiercely modest paintings are mysterious and refreshing. They are beautiful manifestations of the meeting of eye, hand, memory, and imagination.