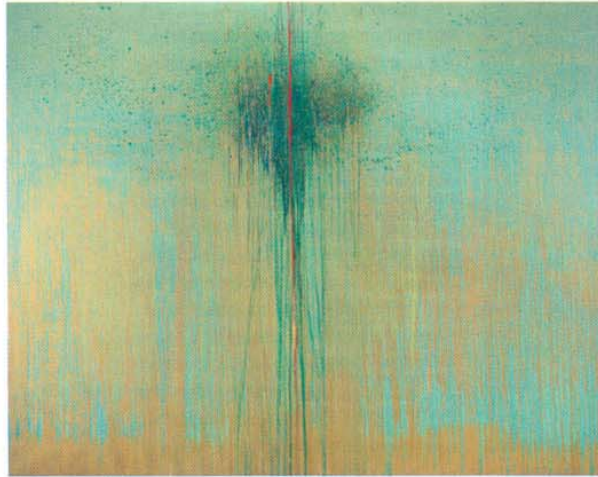


CHEIM & READ

MODERN PAINTERS

July August 2005



Pat Steir: Moons and a River

Cheim & Read

31 MARCH - 7 MAY

Pat Steir's vocabulary of splashes, splatters and rivulets has always generated a paradoxical response. Up close, her handling of paint appears haphazard, rash and uncontrolled. But at a remove, those same loose, aqueous marks resolve into precisely depicted and coherent images. With these six oil-on-canvas paintings – five large and one mural-size – Steir introduces quasi-mystical motives and nature references into abstract works that nonetheless preserve her signature, watery world.

At first pass, the eleven-by-thirty-seven-foot *Blue River* (all works 2005) is a massive painting that brightly dominates the show's darker moods. Columnar washes of blue and white (slightly tapered into gentle curves at the top of the canvas) compose the picture's central, Niagara Falls-like expanse. This vast area is flanked and foregrounded by opposing swathes of thicker paint – hot red on the left-hand edge and icy silver on the right.

Like visual onomatopoeia, Steir's painterly gestures feel at one with what they depict. We've come to take this effect for granted, but it's extraordinary how Steir translates a physical flinging of paint into a representation of splashing water. That shift from physical action to illusionistic space is so direct and uncomplicated that it feels magical, even a little spooky. As usual, Steir's new work makes this transforming leap appear instant and effortless.

The other five paintings have a hushed quality that fairly drips with gravitas. The liquid effects in the *Moon* pictures variously suggest dripping wax, flowing or splattered blood, and, as the titles of the works promise, even the pour of moonlight. In *Summer Moon*, a mottled, dark green form hovers in the upper centre of the canvas. It is further obscured by a shimmering, streaky veil of gold and pale green paint. The form and the entire image are gashed, top to bottom, with a bright, bisecting streak of red paint.

Black Moon and *Sun Moon* feature the same general forms hovering in the same upper-centre location – simple, incomplete circles suggested by arcs of heavily daubed paint with trailing drips. The first canvas, black on black, has a green undercoat that emerges almost imperceptibly in thin, slicing marks. The second canvas, white on white, sports a red- and a yellow-painted support edge on either side, which bounce faintly glowing colour onto the gallery wall.

Ghost Moon and *Moon Beam* are curiously sublime works. In the first, the moon form is a gloppy lobe of white paint, bathed in a dense, striated shower of the palest greens, greys and blues. The second picture repeats the earlier top-to-bottom bisecting gash, but this time it's a thick spike of gold on a sparkling silver field. Around it gathers a gossamer shroud-like effect that is actually mostly blank canvas and faint traces of pale green paint scraped from the surface. As we've come to expect from Steir, the pictorial and the physical are inextricable. JE

Pat Steir *Summer Moon*,
2005, oil on canvas,
278 x 348 cm
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