

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

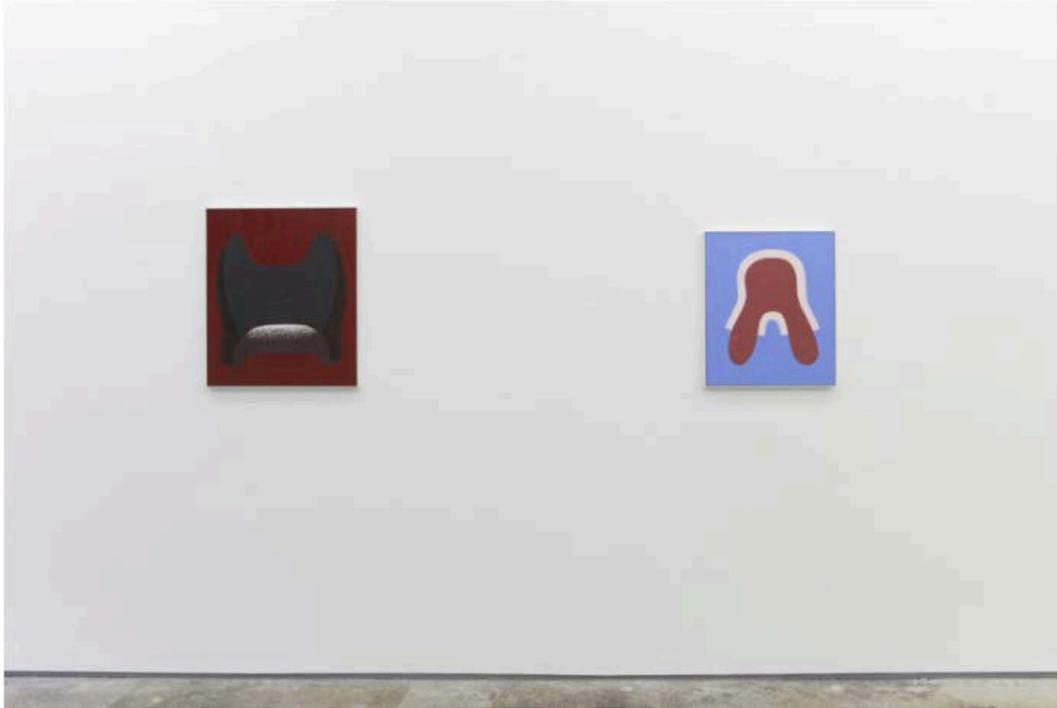
83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

## HYPERALLERGIC

### *Lui Shtini's Enigmatic Paintings*

John Yau

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Installation view of "Lui Shtini, *Jinn Skin*" (2016), Kate Werble Gallery, New York (all photos by Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York)

I imagine that Lui Shtini has a growing group of admirers — many of them painters — just as Myron Stout, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, and Thomas Nozkowski did before him. Shtini works on a modest scale while reinventing his sources, whatever they may be, into memorable concatenations. For someone who draws and paints, this is no small feat to pull off, especially during an age looking for the next artist to lower the bar in pursuit of the efficient gesture, copying, and appropriation.

Shtini's current exhibition, *Lui Shtini, Jinn Skin*, at Kate Werble Gallery (April 23–June 4, 2016) deftly undermines the two or three stacked, eyeless forms that populated the work in *Face Paintings*, the exhibition he held at this same gallery in 2013. In contrast to this imagery, the floating, emblematic forms in his current show do not resolve themselves into heads, shoulders and torsos. To be sure they are evocative of human anatomy, but they rigorously resist any literal reading. By continuing to work within what the gallery press release identifies as "a recognizable portrait format," while simultaneously subverting its conventions, Shtini has opened up a realm of possibility for himself and his work.

Shtini makes redolent forms by fitting together precisely delineated areas of imaginatively veneered paint. Once you notice how the paint surface changes from one area to another, it is evident that the artist does not have a formula. Instead, it seems as if each painting becomes the occasion for him to develop a new surface or fresh combination to sabotage the constraints he has established for himself. In the strongest paintings we experience a lively tension between the desire to interpret and therefore understand the relatively simple, portrait-like configuration before us, and the arrangement's rigorous subversion of whatever literal reading we might bring to bear upon it.

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Lui Shtini, "Skin I" (2016)

The exhibition title, *Jinn Skin*, clues us in on the move that Shtini has made in his work. Jinn are supernatural creatures (or genies) in Islamic mythology and theology, physical inhabitants of an invisible universe beyond this one. The Semitic root of this Arabic collective noun roughly translates as "to hide." In his recent paintings, the artist explores the contradiction inherent in this paradox between something physical and hidden, tactile and enigmatic. I was reminded — while I was reviewing *Angela Dufresne: Pleasure Tips; drawings and videos, 2003–2016* at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects — of Emmanuel Levinas's descriptions of the encounter with another person, as well as the first axiom in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's groundbreaking study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick's axiom ends with the observation that no matter how much other individuals share with us, they "may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species."

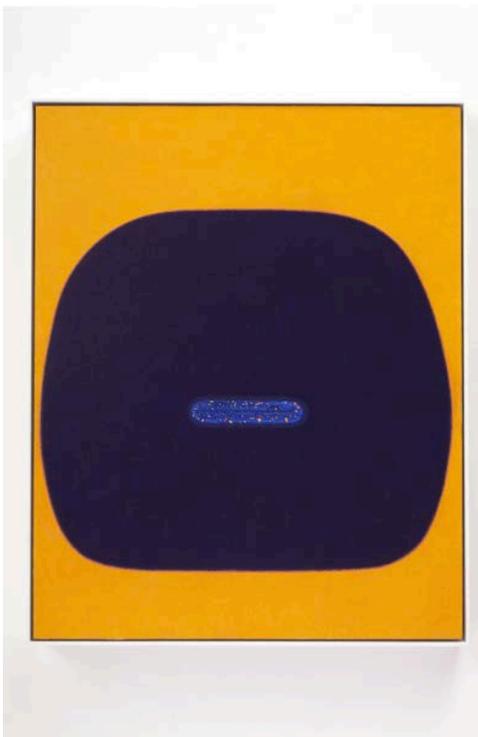
While the symmetrical blue form in "Skin VII" (2016) suggests a wig, everything about its grooved surface and the fuzzy black area between its two conjoined halves denies that interpretation. In fact, the fuzzy black surface introduces a weird erotic component to our experience of the painting. This reading is further complicated by the variegated surfaces, which invite physical intimacy, while the seemingly familiar form remains remote. The textured surfaces suggest skin, but the creature it belongs to remains incomprehensible.

By carefully choreographing the relationship between the obvious and the occult, Shtini animates his paintings with considerable mystery. The viewer is both hooked and perplexed, an interesting condition to dwell in and reflect upon. Shtini seems to be revising Willem de Kooning's famous assertion: "Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented." His variegated surfaces are reminiscent of reptilian skin, desiccated surfaces, hair or fur of an unknown creature. They embody an otherness that refuses to be domesticated by language, that renders categories moot.

In "Skin IX" (2016), the viewer is likely ask: Am I looking at a headless torso placed in front of an aperture (or casement window), or is this the back of a large head? Can it be both head and torso? If it is neither, what is it? The form's ridged surface could be read as hair, as scarred skin, as the hide of a fantastic being. Since no satisfactory answer is forthcoming, viewers are left to speculate. The gap between language and thing is unbridgeable.

Shtini's art refuses to succumb to language and the desire to give things a name and place them in categories. This resistance resonates in the art world, which still embraces the legacy of Frank Stella's dictum, "What you see is what you see." More importantly, though less obviously, it resonates in the larger context of everyday life, particularly the recent passing of House Bill 2, the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act in North Carolina, which bans individuals from using public bathrooms that do not correspond to their biological sex.

By making paintings in which the figural presences never fully reveal their identity, even as they invite and seemingly welcome close looking, Shtini reminds us that art does not have to tolerate domestication by language, that it can go on to achieve and maintain its otherness. His determination to make resistant forms offers an alternative understanding of what painting can attain. By advancing this alternative, Shtini aligns himself with abstract artists whose work emerges out of encounters with everyday experience — I am thinking of Thomas Nozkowski and Tom Burckhardt. These artists have found ways to put content back into painting without accommodating the critics who believe everything should either be spelled out or made ironic.



Lui Shtini, "Skin VII" (2016)