

HYPERALLERGIC

Alison Hall's Hypnotic Paintings Invite Slow Looking

John Yau

June 23, 2022

Hall makes no attempt to entice the viewer to begin looking and to look again, letting her methodical craft compel viewers to reflect upon their experience.



Alison Hall, *A Ballad (for this pain in my heart)*, (2022), oil, graphite, and plaster on panel; artist frame, Virginia maple and plaster, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches (all photos by Lacey Leonard, courtesy the artist and SOCO Gallery)

The artists who many critics cite when writing about Alison Hall's paintings are Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, and Ad Reinhardt. Hall is one of the few contemporary abstract painters that I know of whose highly formal paintings do not diminish in the company of such rigorous ascetics. This is because her slow, mesmerizing, monochromatic works provoke a state of exalted seeing that is unlike anyone else's, including the aforementioned artists. Working within her established limits, which she set early in her career, Hall keeps finding ways to pull willing viewers closer, to encourage them to get lost in looking as well as reflect upon this experience. This is one of the reasons that I have continued to follow her work.

Her current exhibition, *Alison Hall: Cold-Eyed and Mean*, in a new project space in Chinatown opened by SOCO Gallery (May 20–June 30), features 14 paintings divided into two groups: a suite of 11 intimately scaled ultramarine paintings collectively titled *A Ballad*, and four black paintings in three different sizes. The palette and grid of these two groups are derived, respectively, from the ceiling and floor of Giotto's Arena (Scrovegni) Chapel in Padua (c. 1305), which the artist has visited annually for more than 20 years.

The paintings in *A Ballad* measure 9 1/2 by 7 1/2 inches, between the size of a book and a standard sheet of paper. Each one contains an irregular rectangle filled by a grid of dots, some of which are drawn as linear stars. The grid and lines defining the stars are meticulously placed. Working in oil and graphite on a plaster surface that has been sanded until smooth and flawless, Hall makes the grid dot by dot, transforming some into stars by adding two to three lines. What distinguishes each of the paintings is Hall's framing of the grid with a dark blue band of thinly applied paint.



Alison Hall, "A Ballad (for the fretting)" (2022), oil, graphite, and plaster on panel; artist frame, Virginia maple and plaster, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 inches

As I looked at the 11 paintings in this suite, evenly spaced on one wall, I kept thinking about the disorder and partial obliteration of the grid caused by the loaded brushstroke, the trust the artist had in the mark. Later, when I learned the parenthetical titles that Hall gave each of the paintings (e.g., "for the lonely," "for the unforeseen," and "for this pain in my heart"), I saw the combination of disorder and disruptive brushstrokes through these phrases.

This turn toward the personal was unexpected. At the same time, Hall's loose brushstroke seemed to me to be about more than the personal. In 2015, Thomas Micchelli made this observation about Hall's work: "The artist's devotion to geometry appears to leave nothing to chance" In these paintings, Hall has introduced an element of chance, as she cannot control how the brushstroke's edges dissipate as it spreads over the surface. In "*A Ballad (for this pain in my heart)*" (2022), the color of the dark blue band on the left side changes, becoming a granular stain. The grid's sloped and uneven top edge is defined by the wide, slightly diagonal brushstroke.

The order implied by the grid of stars is always disrupted or infringed upon by the brushstroke. I see this as Hall's acknowledgment that life intrudes on art. In these paintings one sees precision and imprecision, order and dissipation, tonal shifts. In contrast to Martin, who claimed to have turned her back to the world, and Reinhardt, who believed in a division between art and everything else, Hall seems in these works to open herself to the vagaries of everyday life.

About Hall's black paintings, which are larger than the suite of blue ones, in one case substantially so, I again cite Micchelli:

The dualities in Hall's work are straightforward — color and line; geometry and nebulousness; graphite and paint — but, despite their often asymmetrical relationships, they interact within a network of correspondences where no one element dominates.



Alison Hall, "*I've Been A Fool*" (2022), oil, graphite, and plaster on panel; artist frame, Virginia maple, oil and plaster, 40 x 32 1/2 inches

The interaction between the graphite dots and the black ground changes constantly throughout the painting. The effect is hypnotic. You have to slow down your looking, to shift your focus from whole to part. Along the upper quarter of *"I've Been A Fool"* (2022), the black ground is divided into interlocking scalene triangles composed, alternately, of dark gray orbs, surrounded by graphite dots, and of hexagons of dots. There is something maddeningly beautiful about the visual state she achieves in this painting. I kept looking for some underlying pattern that would anchor everything, but I didn't find one. Was I seeing what was there or was I beginning to hallucinate? That state of seeing but not quite knowing suggests one possible explanation for the painting's title. Or it could be the artist's commentary on her meticulous devotion to making this painting, and the degree of minute concentration it requires. The beguiling geometry of this painting is simultaneously stable and shifting.

Amid the constant barrage of media images, Hall refuses to accommodate herself to society's voracious demand for entertainment, distraction, and immediate comprehension. She makes no attempt to entice the viewer to begin looking and — as happens with her work — to look again, letting her methodical craft compel viewers to reflect upon their experience. That is a rare and laudable position for an artist to take.

Alison Hall: Cold-Eyed and Mean continues at SOCO Gallery (75 East Broadway Street, Unit #203C, Chinatown, Manhattan) through June 30. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.

Westword

Four Solos Create a Beautiful Pattern at Robischon Gallery

By Michael Paglia

June 12, 2019

Barbara Takenaga, Linda Fleming, Jaq Chartier and Alison Hall are showcased.

No one else in town can put different artists together as adeptly and smoothly as Jennifer Doran. Co-director of Robischon Gallery with her husband, Jim Robischon, Doran is the eye behind the gallery's state-of-the-art exhibition design, including the current collection of four solos.



Installation view of *Alison Hall: Heirlooms*. Courtesy Of Robischon Gallery

The quartet of offerings concludes in the viewing room with an intimate show of Alison Hall's sublime, mostly small abstractions. With *Alison Hall: Heirlooms*, Hall is making her first appearance in Denver. At first I thought these pristine paintings were essentially nothing more than perfectly proportioned rectangles covered in monochrome finishes of black or blue with utterly smooth surfaces built up with plaster and oil on the underlying panels. If that had been all they were, that would have been enough...but there's much more to Hall's paintings. Some have painted compositions, including a tremendously engaging grid with a regular pattern of little circles done in two closely aligned shades of blue; in another are roughly formed shapes. The painted patterns and shapes are very subtle, since Hall employs similar colors to create them. A more striking departure from the minimalist aesthetic of the monochromes are the pencil marks: As you walk by the paintings, light hits tiny reflective bits in the patterns of graphite strokes marking up the grounds.

Though modern artists like Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martin come to mind, for the paint and the pencil, respectively, Hall notes that her sources also include artists from further back in history, in particular Giotto and Masolino. She's written about how moved she was by certain depictions of the Virgin she saw when she was in Italy, which she believes were based on the artists' mothers. Given the work's contemporary appearance, this Italianate aspect is completely unexpected, though one painting, the only monumental Hall in the show, hints at it. In the spectacular "Ancestral," a pattern of graphite dashes that can barely be made out suggests a ghosted scene of a church interior.

The tissue that links the works of these four artists is their use of patterning. While none go in for the expected geometric abstraction and they each take a different route, the patterns in their pieces become part of a broader vocabulary of expressions. As presented at Robischon, their work is so sensitively interrelated, the four solos read as a beautifully focused group show.

studio international

Barbara Takenaga, Linda Fleming, Jaq Chartier, Alison Hall at Robischon Gallery, Denver

Lilly Wei

6/27/2019

Although these four solo exhibitions – hosted side by side – are each distinctive, they all contain “slow” works that make you focus on them as they present ideas about abstraction, painting, sculpture and beauty



Alison Hall. *Chapel II (Lorenzetti)*. Oil, graphite and plaster on panel,
9 ½ x 7 ½ in. Image courtesy Robischon Gallery.

Hall's rich, velvety blue and black monochromes (depending on how rigorously that term is defined), from 2017-19, are variously scaled, discreet, densely concentrated works, her treatment of those colours very different from Takenaga's. Ad Reinhardt inevitably comes to mind, as well as others, but Hall's project is worlds apart from the (predominantly male) minimalist ideologies of that earlier period. Constellated by the glint of graphite marks and other details that hint at imagery and memory, her show is called *Heirlooms*, her paintings frequently inspired by the art and architecture of Renaissance chapels and their frescoes and mosaics.



Alison Hall. *Heirlooms*. installation view, Robischon Gallery 2019. Left to right: *Ancestral*, oil, graphite and plaster on panel, 91 x 71 in; *Arena*, gouache and graphite on paper, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 in; *Annunciation*, gouache and graphite on paper, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 in.

Image courtesy Robischon Gallery.

For instance, in *Ancestral* (2017), the elusive figure of the Virgin Mary might be tantalisingly glimpsed before it melts into the painting's indeterminate, cloaking darkness, only to emerge again, depending on external conditions. Incidents appear and disappear, are lost and found like treasures from an archaeological dig, to be gradually excavated by a patient, attentive eye. You sense the weight of the paintings and how much they have absorbed, how much care has been lavished in their making, from the smoothing and refining of a traditional plaster ground to the countless repetitive, meditative, ritualistic markings out of which they are constituted. Hall's process and narratives are sourced in painting's own storied history, but what is included also feels deeply personal, encrypted and folded secretly into the painting like talismans or prayers, visible and not.

These are "slow" works that make you focus on them as they present a spectrum of ideas about abstraction, painting, sculpture and beauty. Above all, it is evident that they share an inclination for aesthetic pleasure, which they provide in abundant, absorbing measure.

HYPERALLERGIC

When a Painter Enacts a Ritual

John Yau

November 26, 2017

There is a ceremonial aspect to the way Alison Hall makes these works, from the sanding of the plaster to the painting of the surface, to the drawing of the dots, to whatever she does next.



Alison Hall, "Soffitto I" (2017), oil, graphite and plaster on panel, 13 x 11 inches (all images courtesy TOTAH)

Recently, I have been thinking about the word "liturgy" in relationship to art-making. Historically, liturgy has been defined as "a public service, duty, or ceremony." This unlikely word has come up because Philip Taaffe – the subject of a monographic essay I'm writing – defined his painting practice as a form of "liturgical enactment." This led me to consider other artists who might be seen through the lens of repetition and ceremony.

The most obvious historical figures are Agnes Martin and Roman Opalka, and the lesser-known might include Porfirio DiDonna (1942-1986), particularly for the dot paintings he did in the 1970s. To this group, I would add Xylor Jane and Shirazeh Houshiary. Despite Taaffe's maximalism and Martin's minimalism, all of these artists use a grid or a pattern. They are invested in an exalted state of seeing and thinking and weren't put off by the idea of infinity.

Another artist who belongs with this distinguished group is Alison Hall, whose exhibition *Alison Hall: unannounced* is currently at TOTAH on the Lower East Side (October 11 – December 17, 2017). For nearly 20 years, Hall has made annual visits to Italy, specifically to visit Assisi and Padua, where the works of Giotto can be seen in the Basilica di San Francesco and the Scrovegni Chapel.

Hall is after a light-absorbing matte surface. She paints on wood panels coated with plaster, which is sanded down until smooth. She then covers these surfaces with either blue or black paint. The coating is not necessarily tight or uniform. Twenty-two of the 24 paintings in the exhibition are on small panels in one of three sizes (9 ½ by 7 ½ inches, 13 by 11 inches, or 18 by 14 inches), while the remaining two, one blue and the other black, are much larger, each measuring 91 by 71 inches.

Onto her pristine, monochromatic surfaces, Hall makes a pattern of dots using a sharp pencil, which differ according to color of the ground. On the black grounds she forms a pattern in which all the dots are integral to the corners of two hexagons. On the blue grounds she makes a diamond pattern of four dots, one at each corner, with each dot part of two structures. The inspiration for these patterns is the Scrovegni Chapel: the black paintings refer to the floor tiles and the blue paintings evoke the ceiling.



Alison Hall, "Arena" (2017), gouache and graphite on paper
13 x 11 in (33.02 x 27.94 cm)

In one group of blue paintings, collectively titled “soffitto” (which means “ceiling”), Hall might add a second layer of blue, creating a smaller rectangle within the larger one, which starts at the painting’s top edge and extends most of the way down the surface. The other group of blue paintings, collectively titled “Shroud,” is characterized by one or more small blue rectangles within the painting. In both groups, the graphite dots occur inside the smaller rectangles. There is a tension between the pattern, which extends in every direction, and the borders or edges holding it in. Despite the uniformity of concept, materials, colors, and drawing instrument, the paintings are never the same, and that is part of their meaning. The other part of their meaning comes from the fact that the paintings are impossible to photograph, and in that they share something with the work of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Rauschenberg. In the age of digital images and selfies, Hall’s paintings are an admirable anomaly for their insistence on the primacy of direct experience.

These are slow, mesmerizing paintings that you should optimally stand a few inches away from, becoming lost to whatever is outside your focus. I found myself concentrating on the visual dance between repetition and difference, closely gazing at a series of minute dots made with the point of the

In the black paintings, each bearing the name of a person, including one titled “Bridget (Bardot)” (2017), Hall might fill in some of the hexagons created by the pattern of dots with dark red oxide, or draw lines connecting the dots to make a schematic rectangle. The addition of another color brings light to the black ground, but it is hushed and elusive, less than flicker. In the blue paintings, Hall pares the light down to the reflection in the graphite dots, a faint dark glint.



Alison Hall, “Maiden” (2017), oil, graphite and plaster on panel, 91 x 71 inches

Within the rigorousness of her approach Hall keeps finding ways to be improvisational, which is what keeps the paintings alive and the viewer alert. There is a ceremonial aspect to the way Hall makes these works, from the sanding of the plaster to the painting of the surface, to the drawing of the dots, to whatever she does next.

“Maiden” (2017), one of the two large paintings in the exhibition, was completely hypnotic. In this painting, after making the dots that are arranged in diamond patterns, she went back into the work and made mostly horizontal lines – clouds of them, with some slightly darker than others due to the pressure of the hand pressing the graphite against the plaster-coated surface. At various points in the painting she will make a diagonal line, seemingly guided by the dots of the hexagons.

The closest natural phenomenon that *“Maiden”* calls up is a murmuration of starlings at dusk. In Hall’s painting, the subtly activated field is both spellbinding and changing throughout, a paradox in which the taut bond between difference and sameness is stretched about as far as it can go without snapping. There is nothing ironic or fashionable about Hall’s paintings. Mounted on a wall in a gallery, they establish a bond between looking at repeated marks and making them. This bond – which can be seen as a kind of public ritual that is rare in contemporary art – sets Hall’s work apart from those of her contemporaries. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about artists who neither fit in nor have a shtick. What drives these artists is the work, their belief in it and wherever it takes them. Hall is part of that group.

artnet

Here Are 25 New York Gallery Shows That You Need to See This October Another month of great gallery shows in New York

Sarah Cascone

October 4, 2017

The editors at artnet News searched New York City high and low for the most exciting, bizarre, and thought-provoking gallery exhibitions this October. From Chelsea to the Lower East Side, we've got you covered.



Alison Hall, Shroud VIII (2017). Courtesy of TOTAH.

8. Alison Hall: unannounced at TOTAH

In her labor-intensive paintings, made on a layered and sanded plaster surface and overlaid with intricate graphite patterns, Alison Hall explores ritual and repetition. She says she is inspired both by Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel, a masterpiece of the early Renaissance, and the necessity of hard work in rural Virginia, where she grew up.

The New York Times

15 Group Shows Not to Miss

By Roberta Smith

Jan. 29, 2015

GROUP SHOW AS TRIAL BALLOON

Group shows are often a chance for art galleries to expand or redirect their focus. This happens subtly at the Kate Werble Gallery in SoHo. In the well-named show “Quiet Tremors,” the gallery’s somewhat Minimalist aesthetic is maintained, but this is the first time in its six-year history that the gallery has featured paintings. Just as subtly, the show makes a good case for that understated, overtouted abstract painting based on unusual materials or processes. William Latta uses painting and polymer to form dark, bulging surfaces that are muscular and lavalike. Ulrike Müller fashions her small, gleaming geometries from baked enamel on steel. Davide Balula makes textured tondos by alternately soaking in water and drying out factory-primed linen until its white coating starts flaking off. Alison Hall, Kristen Van Deventer and David Schutter further enlarge the gallery’s purview. (83 Vandam Street, near Hudson Street, through Feb. 21)

The New York Times

Museum & Gallery Listings for Feb. 13-19

By Roberta Smith

Feb. 13, 2015

Galleries: SoHo

'Quiet Tremors' (through Feb. 21) The Kate Werble Gallery's somewhat Minimalist aesthetic is maintained by this svelte group show, which is nonetheless the first in its six-year history to feature paintings. Its six artists make a good case for an understated, and these days often overtouted, style of abstract painting based on unusual materials or processes, while also expanding the Werble worldview in promising ways.

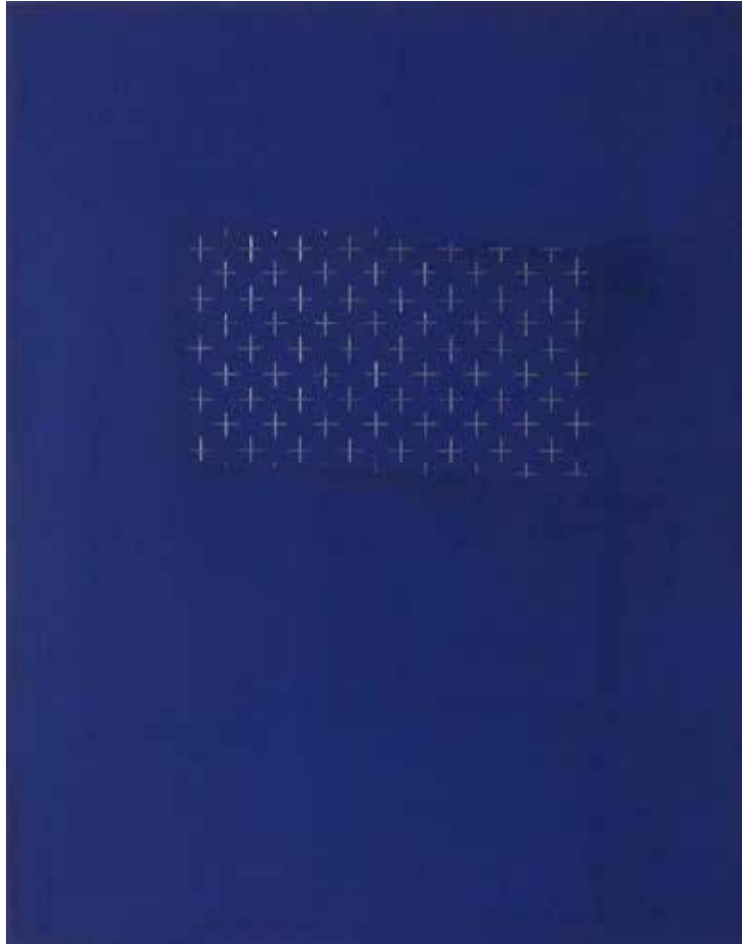
Kate Werble Gallery, 83 Van Dam Street, SoHo, 212-352-9700, katewerblegallery.com. (Smith)

HYPERALLERGIC

Earned Magic: Alison Hall's Deceptive Monochromes

Thomas Micchelli

June 27, 2015



Alison Hall, "Brooklyn Nocturne XI, Smiling" (2015), oil, graphite and Venetian plaster on panel, 9 ½ x 7 ½ inches (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

Alison Hall's small, smart, monochromatic panels are clear, compact and not at all what they seem. The artist's devotion to geometry appears to leave nothing to chance; barely discernible gridded patterns lock down the composition, and the uniform darkness of the blue or black surfaces does little to lure you in. But if you stop and count to ten — which should give the paintings enough time to work on you — everything changes.

The façade of self-discipline and asceticism, which calls to mind Sol Lewitt and Ad Reinhardt, slowly dissipates into lush, translucent washes and softly opaque patches of paint. Ruled graphite lines, arranged in short vertical intervals, in crosses, or in the illusionistic "tumbling blocks" design (also known as "cubework" or "boxes") found on 19th-century American quilts, anchor the picture plane, but in quirky groupings that provide an enlivening, silvery counterpoint to the monochromatic fields.

Alison Hall: East of Blue at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects is the artist's first solo exhibition in New York City. According to the gallery's press release, these graphite marks derive "from Giotto's star covered ceiling and the diamond patterned floor of the Arena Chapel," but identifying their specific reference points isn't necessary to sense that Hall's abstractions, rigorous as they are, reach beyond the formal interaction of line, color and space.

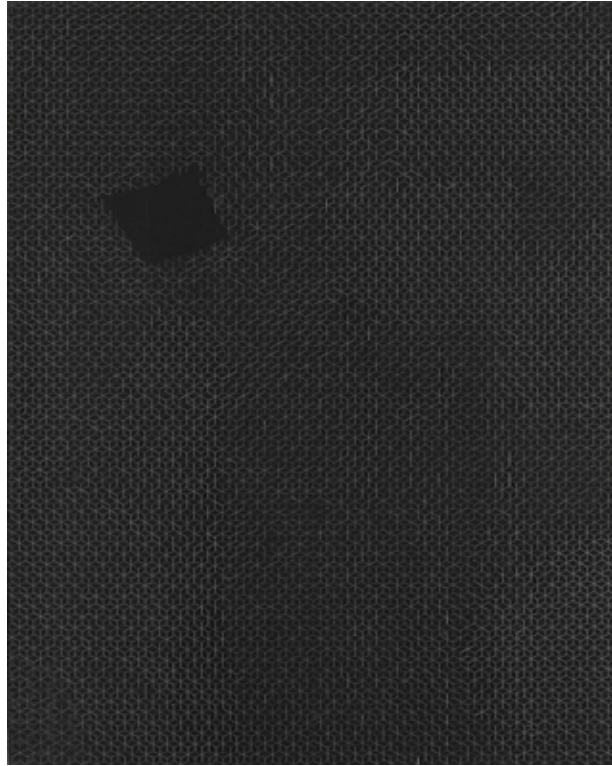
The depth of their engagement with history, however, is communicated solely through formal means. The vertical lines and crosses are allusions to the eight-pointed asterisks signifying stars on the Arena Chapel's ceiling, but their emphasis is placed not on Giotto's stars in themselves, but on the diamond-shaped grid in which the stars are set, thus substituting a geometric system for the iconography of heaven or sky.

Similarly, the chapel floor, which is made up of six-pointed stars composed of diamond shapes and parallelograms — itself quilt-like in its design — is reinterpreted as the tumbling blocks motif, which is also composed of diamond shapes and parallelograms, but to a very different effect. Your perception of the stars on the floor remains twodimensional, while the tumbling blocks conjure an ever-ascending stepwise progression.

The gallery statement refers to the graphite lines as "stitch-like structures," which, along with the allusions to quilting, bring into the conversation the assertively feminist (or queasily essentialist, depending on your point of view) term "women's work," though I don't believe that the connection is intended. Still, there is something unquestionably demystifying about the scale and simplicity of Hall's work in comparison with its myth-making source.

There's certainly a deeply felt relationship between them — the luminous indigo paintings in the show, all from a series called *Brooklyn Nocturne*, are especially evocative of Giotto's ceiling — but as the title of the series suggests, Hall's celestial clouds of pigment are equally part of the present moment, resulting in a simultaneity that twins then and now — the artist's historical awareness interlaced with Giotto's modernity — which speaks to an uncommon understanding of how abstract painting can be used.

The gallery statement cites Agnes Martin, Stanley Lewis, James Bishop and Blinky Palermo as other influences, a roster that "reflects her interest in the poetic notions of opposing dualities that weave time together in the history of painting." The dualities in Hall's work are straightforward — color and line; geometry and nebulousness; graphite and paint — but, despite their often asymmetrical relationships, they interact within a network of correspondences where no one element dominates.



Alison Hall, "East of Blue" (2015), oil, graphite and Venetian plaster on panel, 27 ½ x 22 inches

This is especially remarkable given the filament-like character of the graphite, which is able to hold its own against dense fields of color that, in a number of pieces, squeeze the linear clusters into the center of the panel or shove them to the sides.

In "*Brooklyn Nocturne XIV, Dear Miss Emily*" (all the paintings are dated 2015), the short graphite verticals occupy squarish shapes in each of the four corners, and in "*Brooklyn Nocturne XI, Smiling*," the lines, now forming crosses, float within a rectangular window just above the panel's midsection.

In each of these paintings, the oil and graphite sectors reinforce one another's physicality as they underscore their opposing approaches to mark making — the stroke versus the line — in a deliberate mismatch that generates a tensile state where the surface texture appears to quaver between the lithic and the vaporous.

In other works the areas of pure color are diminished but no less potent: in "*Brooklyn Nocturne XVII, Al and The D*," the vertical lines form a large X that takes over much of the panel's center, where V-shaped color fields confront it on four sides. The exhibition's title painting, "East of Blue" (which is, in fact, black, as well as the only composition to employ the tumbling blocks concept) features a swatch of flat black paint, tilted on a diagonal, in the upper left quadrant. The black paint breaks through the silvery graphite mesh like a hole in a screen door, but the opacity of the paint is such that the swatch, rather than recede into a void, clings to the picture plane just as tenaciously as the graphite lines.

The intricate balance achieved by these forces, which swap the traditional figure/ground relationship for a patchwork of simple and complex parcels of pigment, indirectly calls attention to the hierarchies between the pictorial and decorative elements in Giotto's work. By restricting her allusions to the floor and ceiling of the Arena Chapel, Hall would seem to disavow the heroic paradigm of Western painting even as she channels its living tissues through the work of an artist like Agnes Martin. The paintings in this show are neither appropriations nor homages; they are the sensitively discerned extractions of a specific formal essence. Their cool, understated magic isn't borrowed but earned.

Alison Hall: East of Blue continues at Stephen Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through July 31.

artcritical

the online magazine of art and ideas

ARTCRITICAL PICK: Alison Hall in “Repetitive Motion”, a group exhibition at PROJECTOR

by Chief, David Cohen
Friday, April 18th, 2014

Repetitive Motion, an exhibition curated by Jennifer Samet at PROJECTOR Gallery at 237 Eldridge Street, an ancillary space of Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, brings together eight artists working in a variety of styles ranging from psychedelia to serial minimalism to abstracted naturalism to quasi mystical representation. They are united, however, in fidelity to painstakingly methodical, rhythmically consistent mark and stroke strategies. The artists include Ross Bleckner, Glenn Goldberg, Tine Lundsryd, Amy Park, Barbara Takenaga and Michelle Grabner, curator of the most paint friendly segment of the Whitney Biennial. Alison Hall, whose *San Sebastiano, After Perugino*, 2011, derives her stitch-like monotone patterns from fragmented observations of old master paintings, claims dual kinship in her methodology with her farmer and factory worker forebears in Virginia on the one hand and Eastern meditation techniques on the other. Formerly a traditional realist painter, she also derives inspiration from the late Andrew Forge, the final artist in the show. Through Sunday. DAVID COHEN