

BROOKLYN RAIL

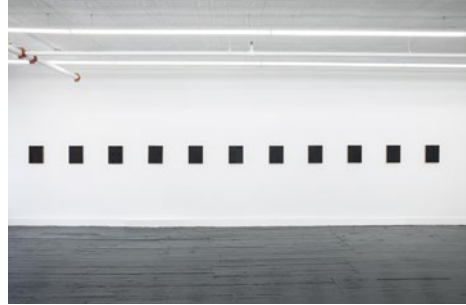
Alison Hall: *spirits (where the water tastes like wine)*

By Jillian Russo

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Alison Hall, *A Ballad (blue eyes)*, 2025. Oil, graphite, and plaster on panel; artist's frame, Virginia black walnut, 9 ¾ × 7 ½ inches (framed). Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.



Installation view: Alison Hall: *spirits (where the water tastes like wine)*, Kate Werble Gallery, New York, 2026. Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.



Alison Hall, *You Never Even Called Me by My Name (Eleanor)*, 2026. Oil, graphite, and plaster on panel; artist's frame, Virginia black walnut, 14 × 11 ¾ inches (framed). Courtesy the artist and Kate Werble Gallery, New York. Photo: Adam Reich.

For well over two decades, Alison Hall has been creating meticulously crafted paintings in shades of black and blue. From a distance, the works appear to be monochrome, but upon closer examination, shimmering patterns of graphite dots, subtle color variations, and muted brushwork become visible. In her new exhibition, *spirits (where the water tastes like wine)*, Hall incorporates deeper color into her compositions. In opposition to the rapid flow of images across digital screens, Hall's paintings require the viewer to slow down. The inspirations for her forms are eclectic, including the ceiling of the Scroveni Chapel, the view from a window, and the pattern of handwoven textiles.

The black works include eleven small paintings from the series “*You Never Even Called me by My Name*” (2022–26), which feature rectangular and triangular shapes floating on a black field. Linear strings of circles, outlined in graphite and filled with gradients of muted colors such as charcoal blue, olive green, and burnt orange, compose the shapes. Each circle is surrounded by six white dots, and the visual effect is a shimmering latticework that evokes a decorative metal screen, a patchwork quilt, or embroidery.

Although the geometric forms are hard to see at first glance, up close, the playful interaction between them becomes visible. In *You Never Even Called Me by Name (Annie Jayne)* (2026), triangles are defined both by the colored circle pattern and its removal, which creates a white dot triangle and a black triangle defined by negative space. *You Never Even Called Me by Name (Lilac)* (2026) features rectangles and triangles that collide with each other as if in a game of Tetris. It might not be Hall's intent, but the shapes, which almost appear to flicker as the light hits them, evoke more beautiful versions of the pixelated icons of early digital media.

The small black paintings, installed as a series that unfolds in a single horizontal strip, are paired with two larger, black compositions from the “*A Ballad*” series (2022–26). These employ a patchwork structure of jagged-edged rectangles of varying sizes that align to form a grid. While the smaller paintings are sprightly in their interplay of forms, the immersive optical effects that Hall is experimenting with are more dramatic in the larger canvases. In *A Ballad (the wild birds they warble)* and *A Ballad (between midnight and day)* (both 2026) the artist adds further texture to the shapes by manipulating the amount of space between each row of colored dots. This creates the slight color variations found in a piece of fabric or a weaving. Observing these nuances of construction and appreciating their effect is easier when the scale is enlarged. Small half circles, triangles, and squares carved out of the rectangles form graphic black cut-outs within the colored fields.

The “*A Ballad*” series also includes vivid lapis lazuli-toned paintings, including *A Ballad (where the water tastes like wine)* (2026) and *A Ballad (they love each other; Étretat, 1945)* (2026), both of which subtly evoke views through a window to a sparkling star-filled sky beyond. The hand drawn graphite starbursts reference Giotto's famous ceiling, but appear less heavenly and more intimate, our own treasured glimpses of nature's magic through the framework of a personal interior space, defined through a series of lattice-like brush strokes. Hall has been working on the black and blue paintings in the “*A Ballad*” series since at least 2022, and the new works seem to be a refinement rather than expansion on the previous ones.

Hall's works require sustained viewing from a variety of vantage points and in different light conditions. An initial impulse to interpret rather than experience them is precluded by their titles, which are typically poetic or personal references and not directly connected to form. The titles with natural references such as *the wild birds they warble* and *between midnight and day* are the most illuminating. They suggest approaching the paintings as one would observe nature: with a deliberate pause in activity and a shift of attention that demands effort.

During my visit to the gallery, Kate Werble graciously offered to turn off the overhead lights to make it easier to see the color in the paintings. This deliberate action also helped to create the defined moment of quiet that the paintings require. The colors became slightly more intense, the oranges brighter, the blues deeper. The natural light became more diffuse as it moved from the oversized loft windows through the gallery space, allowing the graphite to sparkle. Subtle colors became more vivid and the geometric shapes crisper. Three decades ago, it was common to view paintings in the distinct environment of Soho lofts, and now these spaces are more of a rare gem. I felt the slight breeze from the open doorway to the fire escape and savored just being in front of the paintings, watching them shimmer.