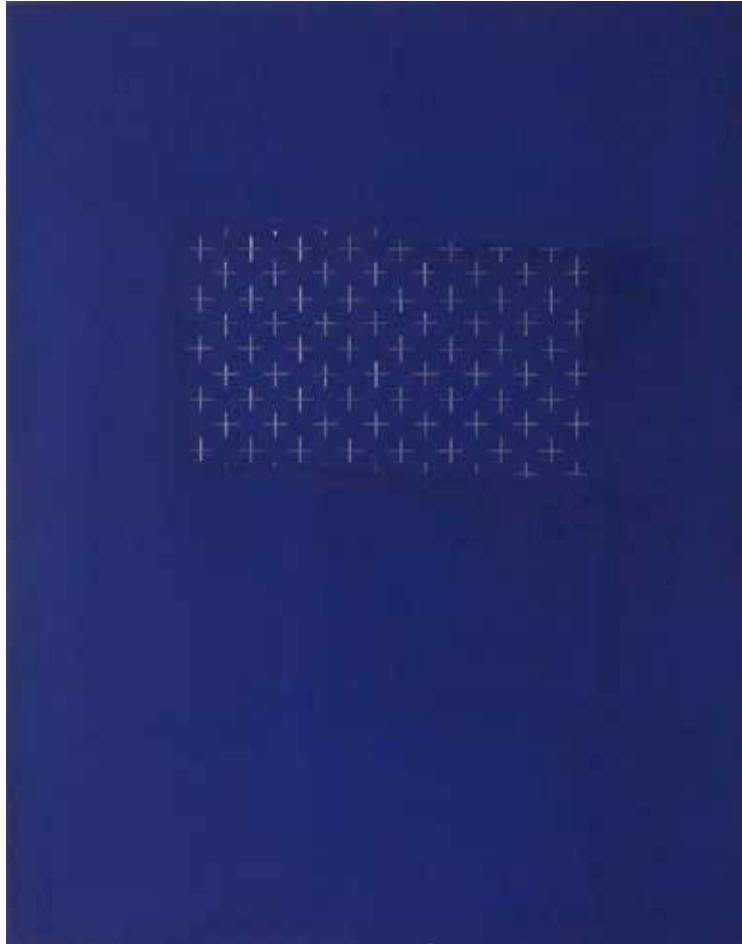


# HYPERALLERGIC

***Earned Magic: Alison Hall's Deceptive Monochromes***

**Thomas Micchelli**

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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.

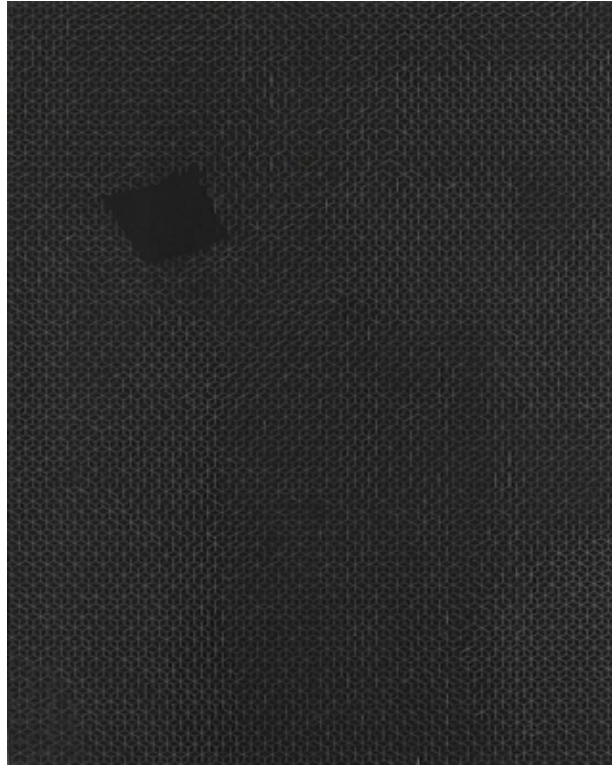
The depth of their engagement with history, however, is communicated solely through formal means. The vertical lines and crosses are allusions to the eight-pointed asterisks signifying stars on the Arena Chapel's ceiling, but their emphasis is placed not on Giotto's stars in themselves, but on the diamond-shaped 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 nebulosity; 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.*

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