HYPERALLERGIC

When a Painter Enacts a Ritual

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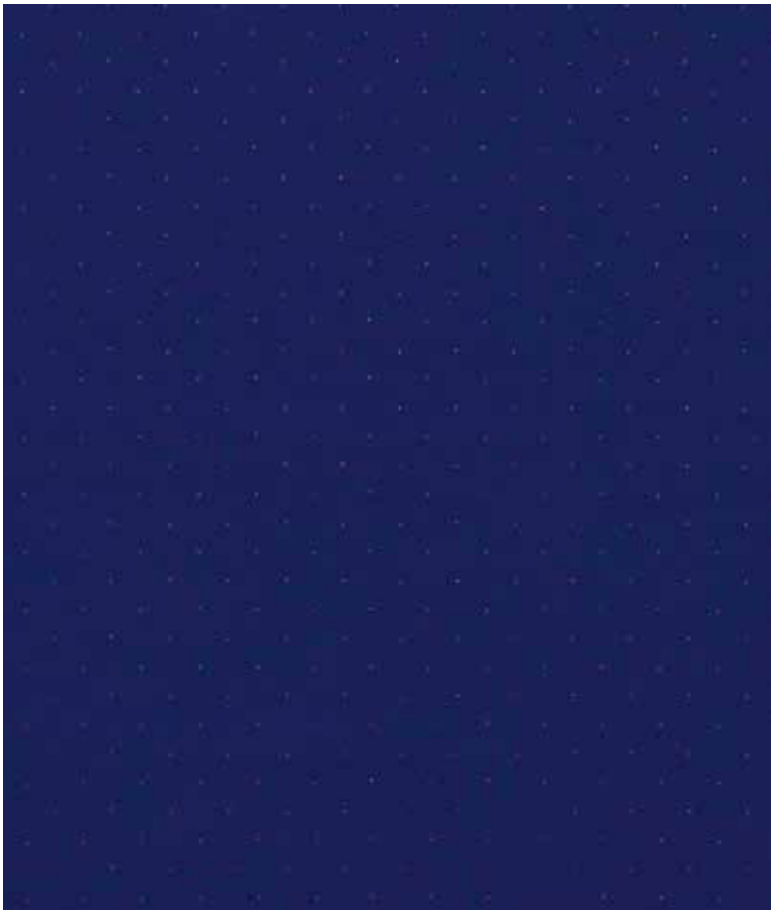
There is a ceremonial aspect to the way Alison Hall makes these works, from the sanding of the plaster to the painting of the surface, to the drawing of the dots, to whatever she does next.



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

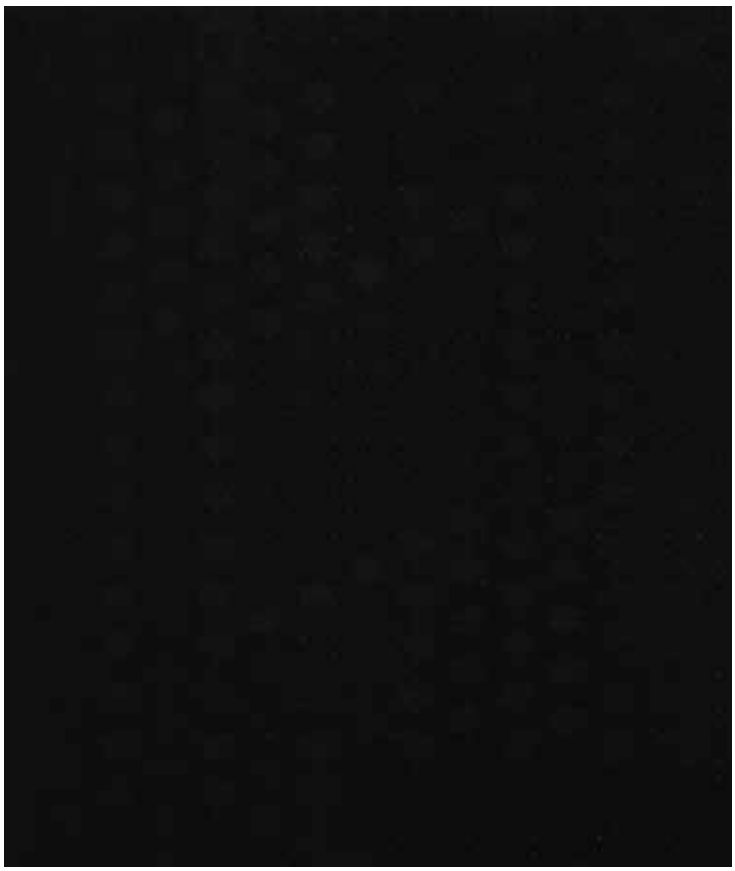
Recently, I have been thinking about the word "liturgy" in relationship to art-making. Historically, liturgy has been defined as "a public service, duty, or ceremony." This unlikely word has come up because Philip Taaffe – the subject of a monographic essay I'm writing – defined his painting practice 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 by14 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), oil, graphite and plaster on panel, 13 x 11 inches

In one group of blue paintings, collectively titled "*soffito*" (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 theyt share something with the work of Ad Reinhardt and Robert Ryman. 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 incontemporary 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.