

HYPERALLERGIC

Alison Hall's Hypnotic Paintings Invite Slow Looking

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.

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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

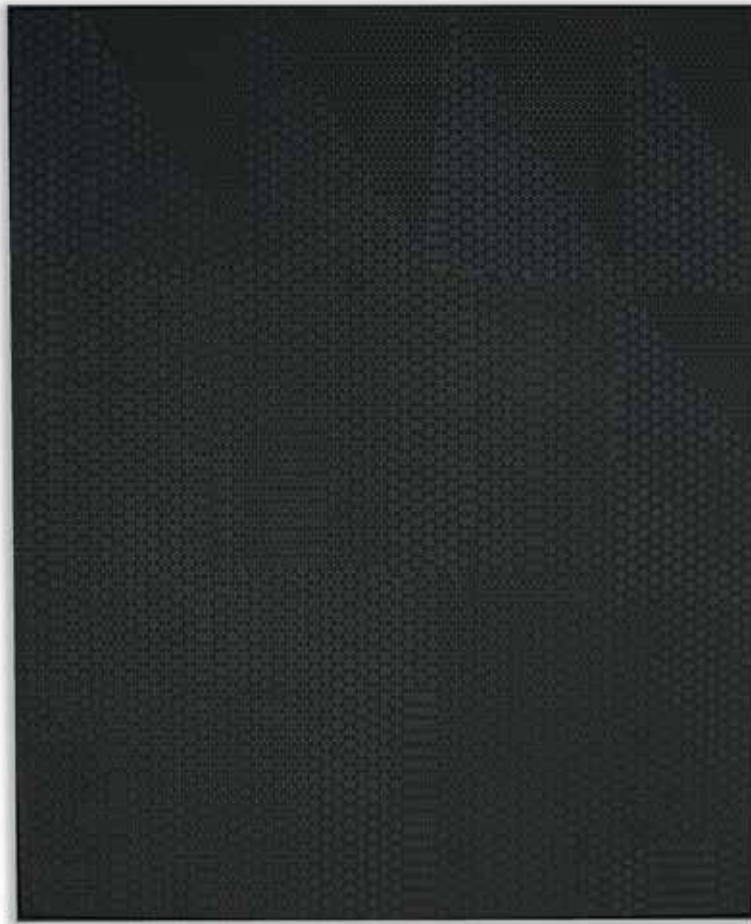
As I looked at the 11 paintings in this suite, evenly spaced on one wall, I kept thinking about the disorder and partial obliteration of the grid caused by the loaded brushstroke, the trust the artist had in the mark. Later, when I learned the parenthetical titles that Hall gave each of the paintings (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.