

Don Voisine at McKenzie Fine Art – by Paul Corio

I'm a long time fan of painter Don Voisine, who's been working within a strictly limited selection of geometric shapes for well over thirty years. The thing that I've always been most impressed with is the variety he can coax from what, to the inattentive viewer, might seem like repetition or adherence to brand. The modulations of scale and of surface, the use of smart, sneaky bands of color in the framing edges, and the addition of wry spatial surprises insures that each subsequent show never seems like a rehash of the previous. It's a real feat, not only because of Voisine's Spartan playpen, but also because of all the historical baggage attached to geometric abstraction. His current solo outing at McKenzie Fine Art is, for me, his best show to date.

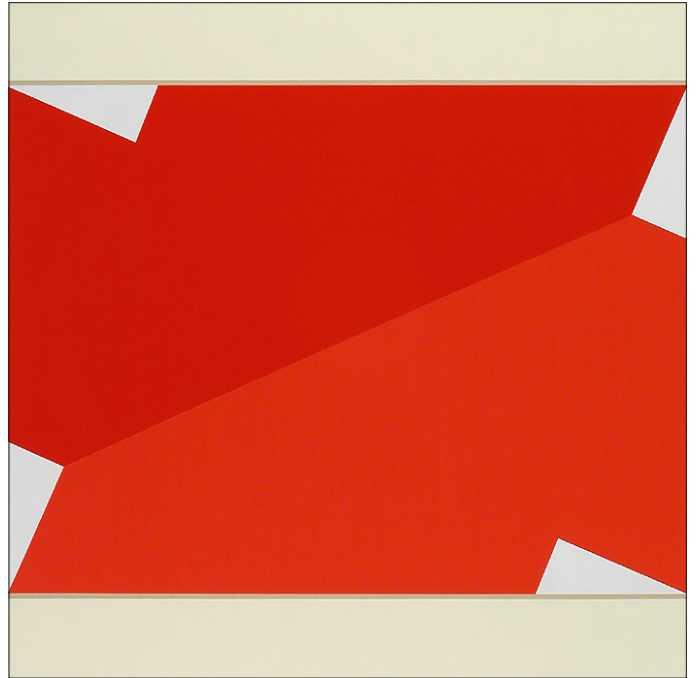
For me, his real strength resides in his embrace of the motifs of Russian and European modernism, but without the rhetoric of purity that ultimately weighed them down. Voisine's pictures are sometimes canonically flat and non-referential, but other times suggest perspectival space in cartoonishly humorous terms. Other paintings unmistakably conjure letterforms and the reading skews toward Pop or the proto-Pop pictures of Stuart Davis. He uses the shifting figure-ground relationship

most closely associated with Op, and that is one of the key features of the current exhibition. Also prominent in the McKenzie show is a new understanding of color – there are some paintings that have no black whatsoever, which has always been as much of a signature as his geometric figuration.

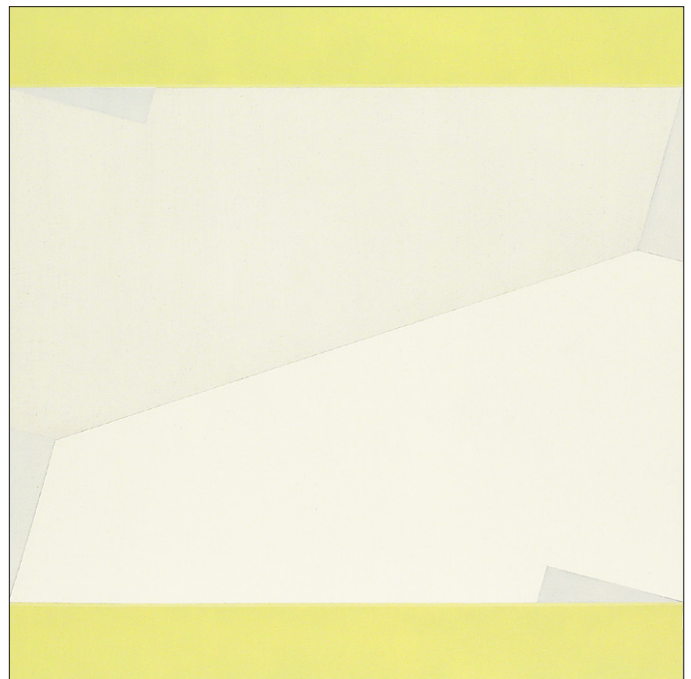
The pictures that had no black were among my favorites in the show. "Fold" has a central X-shape in red, but the value change between the Coca-Cola red-orange on the lower half and the cadmium red medium on the top visually accomplishes exactly what the title suggests – the sharp crease describes an interior space. But as the eye travels to the white triangles at the right and left which are created by the negative spaces left over by the X, the former shapes zoom back up to the picture plane, flattening the painting at the sides and upsetting the figure-ground reading. The framing elements at the top and bottom are of a buff color; they flatten the space along with the triangles, but also talk about canvas and masking tape, which are some of the key materials from the tradition wherein Voisine draws inspiration.

"Staple" is smaller than "Fold," but nearly identical in proportion and composition. This painting, along with "Duane," were perhaps the biggest surprises for me as someone familiar with Voisine's work. Not only does black play no role in these pictures, but the central forms in which Voisine would commonly place his blacks were instead painted in nuanced whites. The effect was as though one were looking at a color negative of the artist's more familiar output, and the paintings were in strong dialog with Malevich. Reinhardt is another name which comes up quite often in the discussion of Voisine's work, and paradoxically these white pictures reference the former quite strongly in spite of the fact that they don't have a trace of the color that both painters are most closely associated with. What "Staple" and "Duane" have in common with Reinhardt is that if you don't spend enough time looking you quite literally will not see them. I imagine they're hell to photograph, too.

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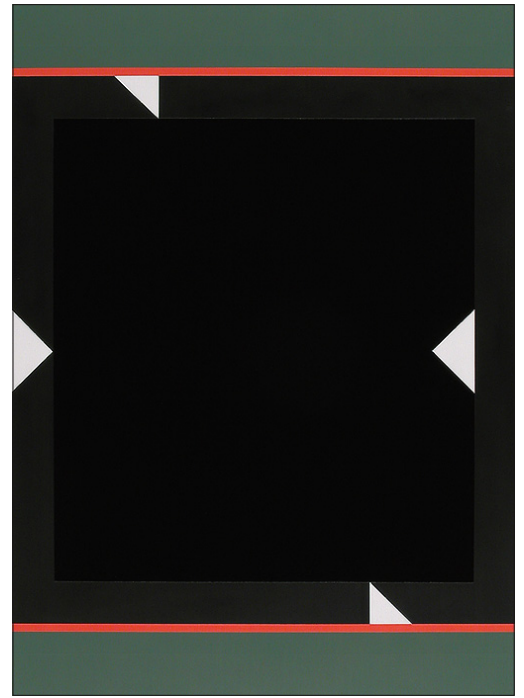


Fold, 2015. Oil on wood panel, 32 x 32 inches



Staple, 2015. Oil on wood panel, 24 x 24 inches

For those who prefer Voisine's signature palette, there's still plenty of black in the show. As in previous exhibitions, the painter articulates subtle spaces by using the contrast of glossy and matte black paint. The gloss generally proceeds up toward the viewer and the matte recedes, but this spatial reading is often destabilized by the positioning of the white negative spaces within the central black figure. This latter quality is prominent in "Flank" and "K," both of which at first glance appear to have a gloss black rectangle laid on top of a matte black italic X. But a more careful examination shows that in each, only three of these negative spaces are positioned so as to comport with the above reading – one is moved away from the edge and within the confines of the glossy rectangle, and this small gesture casts the entire spatial organization into a state of flux. Of the two, I prefer "Flank." The vertical orientation allowed it to breathe a bit more than the compressed, horizontal "K." I also liked the former painting's framing device: An olive bar top and bottom which is separated from the central figure by a slim band of a close value red, which is as tight and musical as a guitar string.



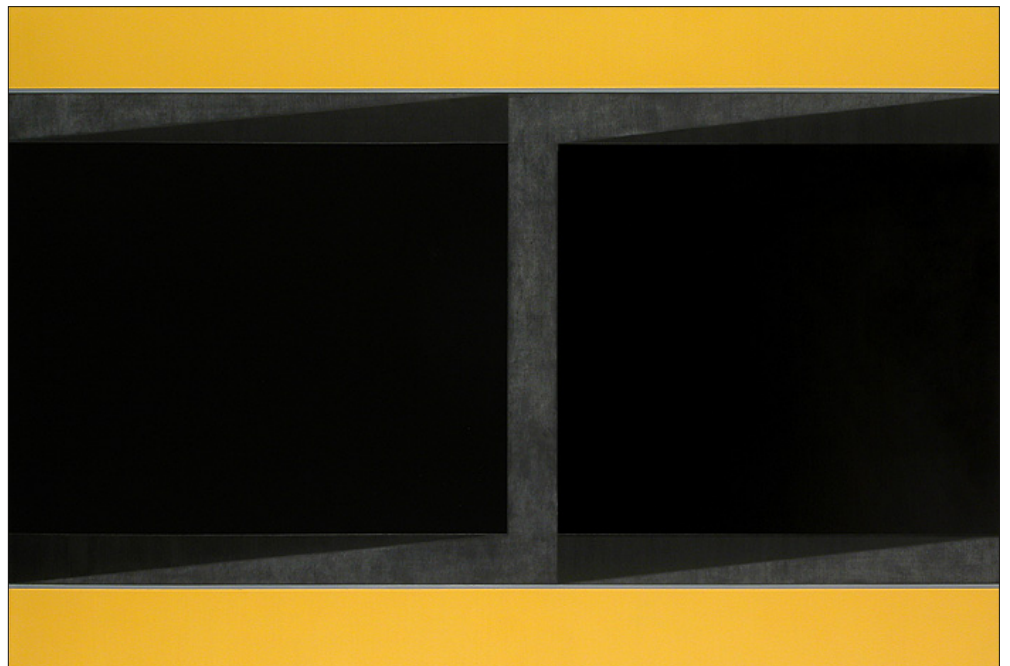
Flank, 2015. Oil on wood panel, 33 x 24 inches

Another new device in these pictures is a particular grey which is not mixed but would appear to be produced by applying black paint over a white ground then scraping or sanding back to partially reveal the underlying color. The resulting atmosphere moves these paintings further away from

formal readings, and far more into the realm of the poetic, possibly even romantic (although I shouldn't get too carried away). In "Landscape Into Art," the venerable Kenneth Clark suggests that the most difficult thing to accomplish in landscape painting is a convincing evocation of night. In "Narrows," the largest picture in the show, two gloss-black spectral rectangles, like giant robotic eyes, emerge from the grey described above, each bordered by a pair of attenuated matte black triangles. The latter shapes act as a bridging color, completing the illusion that the dominant shapes are rising from a spooky, nighttime mist. So as not to let the picture become too much of a ghost story, however, Voisine borders the picture top and bottom with bands of incredibly cheerful sunflower yellow.

There's an awful lot of abstract painting in New York at present, more than there has been in decades. Needless to say, this means that the variance in quality is broad. Don Voisine is at the top of his game right now, and I would place him in the upper echelons of the category, even if he's not being flipped at Christie's. McKenzie Fine Art is located at 55 Orchard St. and the show stays up until June 14.

Paul Corio



Narrows, 2015. Oil on wood panel, 40 x 60 inches