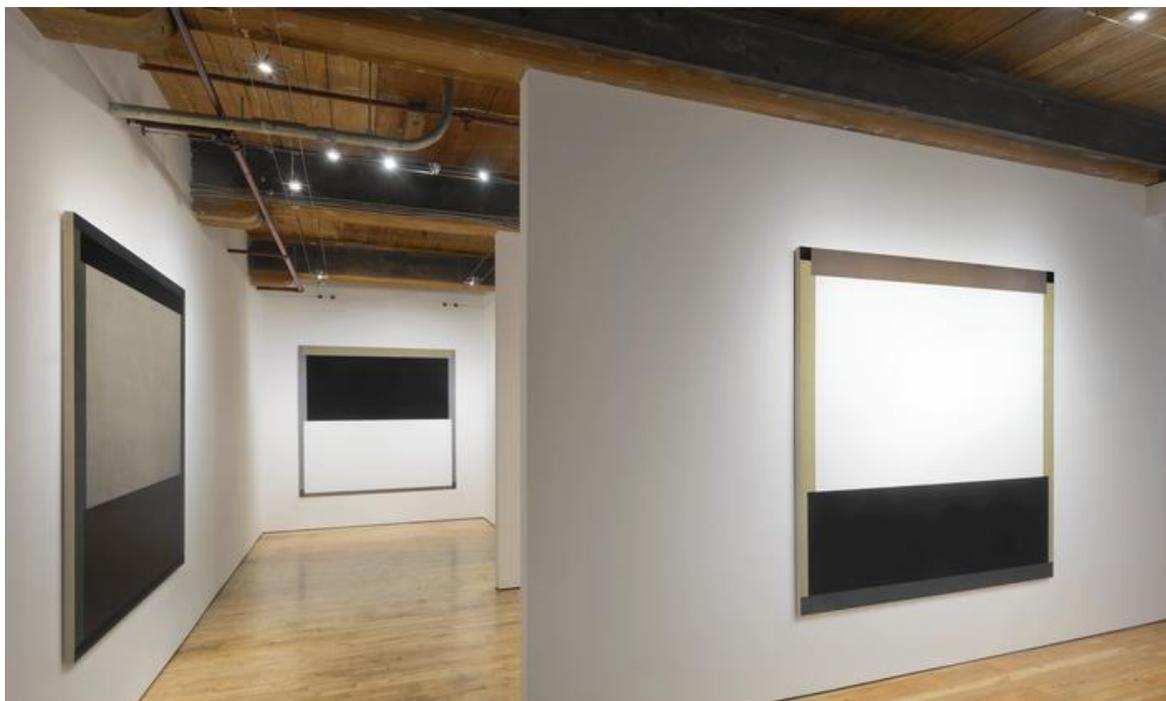


NEWS. ARTS. CULTURE. EVENTS. MARKETPLACE. BALTIMORE
CITY PAPER

The Ineffable: with subtle variations of form and color, Timothy App's paintings evoke music



Timothy App's show "Recent Paintings" at Goya Contemporary, Baltimore, MD

By: Bret McCabe
October 20, 2015

Two large geometric abstractions greet visitors to Goya Contemporary's new exhibition of painter Timothy App's work. They're titled 'Tuonela' and 'Precipice,' and their placement in the gallery's front room invites you to deal with them first. Don't. As an introduction to the six works offered in "Recent Paintings," they're too much—too stately, too confident, too refined. 'Tuonela' and 'Precipice' intoxicate the eye to a soothing fullness, like gorging on a main course. They're the exhibition's obvious showpieces, but if you consume them first you might not want to explore the almost musical variations App explores here.

Instead, seek out the darker-hued 'Elegy,' which hangs on one of the gallery's west walls. It closely resembles 'Tuonela' and 'Precipice' but it doesn't overpower at first glance. 'Elegy's' colors—burgundy, desert sand, black, off-white, gray—invite the eye to dissect the composition into its elemental parts, where it's possible to begin dissecting what App is doing in this series of works.

All six paintings are variations on a fairly simple design: Each canvas is a 72-by-72-inch or 66-by-66-inch square, which has been divided into a number of rectangular regions by a series of stacked

rectangles. Each rectangular space is painted a single hue in acrylic, resulting in compositions that look kinda-sorta the same: skinny horizontal rectangles on the top and bottom of the work (sometimes the top one is thicker, sometimes the bottom one is), two larger horizontal rectangles in the middle (sometimes the top one is bigger, sometimes the bottom one is), and pairs of vertical rectangles running like margins on each side of the canvas. It's a formally deceptive constraint, and a quick scan of the paintings can mistakenly lead the eye to assume they're all the same composition in different color configurations. They're not, and the subtle and not-so-subtle ways App alters his forms (the sizes of the rectangles change canvas to canvas) and color choices give the works their tonal range, much in the way that what Bach chooses to repeat in altered forms through the Goldberg Variations yields a wide world of emotions.

App has worked with the muted earth-tones palette and compositional variation displayed in "Recent Paintings" for some time. His 45-year retrospective at American University's Katzen Art Center in 2013 provided a chance to see what led to his recent body of work, similar to the "Threshold" series that Goya exhibited in 2012. In that 2012 show App appeared to revisit some of the ideas of his earlier career, such as the repetitive minimalism of his paintings of the 1970s and the austere sense of time in the Zone paintings of the late 1970s and 1980s. What's carried over from "Threshold's" vocabulary is a sacred element—not in the sense of religious theatricality but more like spirituality's fugitive grace, that sense of something that exists outside our ken and time as we experience it.

He comes closest to reaching that realm with 'Tuonela' and 'Precipice,' where his color choices reinforce the compositions' bold serenity. 'Tuonela'—the name for the underworld in Finnish folklore—is mounted directly opposite 'Precipice,' and the paintings feel like portals to other dimensions. 'Tuonela's' stacked blocks—which move from light gray at the bottom up through blue gray and black at the top—suggest a coolness that isn't cold, a seriousness that isn't somber, a stillness that isn't death. The overall mood is of somewhere a little frightening to enter because you're not sure you're able to come back. 'Precipice' sandwiches a radiant white rectangle between a black (bottom) and a chestnut (top) rectangle, and that white space glows with the intensity of gold leaf haloing icons in religious paintings. It's a forbidding space to enter because you're not sure that you're worthy.

They're gorgeous, but—and perhaps it's the recovering Catholic in me—two more modest works feel more approachable and, in their own imperfectly quiet ways, sublime. 'Centralis' reads like the variation that sets up 'Precipice': A large white space dominates 'Centralis,' but it's a big square rather than a rectangle, and the large surface area gives it a more restless intensity. It's framed by vertical black rectangles on the sides and rectangular slivers of sand (bottom) and chestnut (top), making that central white space a hot, bright void—the exact opposite of a black hole.

While that's a curious physics problem to wrap the brain around, 'Penitencia' is the most metaphysically satisfying work here. The painting articulates the supplicating mood suggested by the title through its color scheme: muted blue grays, dusty beiges, olive. But spend a few minutes with it and you start to suspect that these hues aren't simply subdued, they feel faded and worn, as if they achieved their dullness by refusing to yield to entropy. That blue gray is like the color of river stones polished by centuries of current, that dusty beige more the color of resilient unwashed linen that survived a sandstorm, that drab olive a military uniform's faded camouflage. In this painting, it isn't the act of seeking forgiveness that absolves sin but merely time's disinterested slouch—as if it's not that only g-d forgives, but that everything else forgets.

"Timothy App: Recent Paintings" is at Goya Contemporary through Oct. 24.