

Stephen Westfall
Susan English's Material Sublime

Maine and Southern California bookend the lower 48 states and both have been home to distinctive, if antipodal movements in postwar American art. The Light and Space artists in and around Los Angeles abstracted the evanescent light-drenched effects of Southern California skies, horizons and architectures while Maine has hosted successive generations of painters devoted to a representation of landscape that is more tactile, while remaining invested in the play of light over the ocean, rocks, and lakes. Susan English revisits her family's home in Maine every summer and is subject to the same inspiration of watching the light play on the tumbled rocks of the Maine coast and the more elemental division of sea and sky beyond the coastal islands. Most of the year, however, she resides north of New York City, not too far from Dia Beacon, where she first encountered the work of the quintessential Light and Space artist, Robert Irwin, who before the installation of his walk-thru *Homage to the Square*³ in 2015 was everywhere and nowhere throughout the huge factory plant and grounds of Dia Beacon as a consultant to the architects Rice+Lipka in the renovation of the building and the lighting from the windows; and as the principal designer of the landscaping. English has been drawn to the Light and Space artists ever since, but as a painter she sought the means of converting light back into matter, the material of paint.

A few years ago English figured out how to construct a movable barrier to hold successive pours of nearly transparent polymer medium imbued with pigment. The support structure is rigid—aluminum sheeting on wood panel—so she can lift the structure and let one translucent color sag into the still drying body of another. She then assembles the panels into complete paintings as a stack of two or three horizontals, but sometimes as a horizontal “frieze” of verticals or even a single monochrome panel. As physically engaging as her process is, the effect is that of luminous, windless, hovering veils imbued with daylight. The horizontal compositions immediately bring us to the landscapes of barren places: open water, the desert, and polar ice floes. The dilutions of her color are uncanny in their gradations, so that most of the time we have the initial impression that we are looking at light as atmosphere . . . *most of the time*. It's at the edges that the materiality of the paint asserts itself in buildups of deeper darks and in some cases lights, as the paint builds up where it met a barrier. In those moments we can have the distinct feeling that we are looking less at a depiction of a natural phenomenon than we are at film.

A brief but important digression that will inform where we're headed: English's paintings invoke a lineage of Abstract Expressionist ties to the Romantic landscape painters, particularly Friedrich and, later, Turner, which the great art historian Robert Rosenblum first connected to the work of Newman, Still, Rothko, and Pollock.¹ Following the artists Rosenblum cites, a case could certainly be made for Agnes Martin's post-grid paintings of horizontal intervals, which can be seen partly as essentializations of her Canadian prairie childhood and her vistas in northern New Mexico. And for Brice Marden's early encaustic monochromes, particularly the *Grove Group* (1972-73) and *Nebraska* (1966). But I think film is the wild card analogy for an even closer looking at English's paintings. For even as they extend the evanescent atmospheres of

the Romantic sublime, they do so as a polymer material that we can sink our teeth into. "Film," here, has at least two connotations: film as material, including a residual "filminess" that can go so far as to suggest organic fluids; and the light projected through film which has been given an abstract structure by Stan Brakhage and Paul Sharits, among other experimental filmmakers. English's coaxing of a blood-orange cerise craquelure to rise above its own dark staining into the pungent green below the central horizon of *Glance* feels like an act of languorous violence worthy of a Mallarme sunset, but it also recalls the textures of a Brakhage film still. At the same time, the multiple horizontal or vertical breaks in her multi-panel paintings induce a stilled, painting version of the shutter stammer of colors that Sharits induced into his film projections. A stammer that goes back to Muybridge's breakdowns of animal and human motion. In English's work the motion is in our own shifting aspects as we move around the paintings while seeking to gaze into them to find their making and see if the light really is changing out of the corner of our eye. Paintings *are* still after all. They work on us slowly, which allows us the luxury of the kind of time it takes to remind us that Marden used a still from Godard's *Alphaville*, of Lemy Caution on one side of an open door and Anna Karina on the other, for an exhibition announcement of his early diptychs. As the Godard image intimates and English's paintings make fact in our own time, paintings are also bodies. Like the rest of us, they do better housed in architecture. Get back on English's paintings and then come close. They have stories to tell and presences to disclose.

1. Rosenblum, Robert *The Abstract Sublime*, ArtNews, New York, February 1961.