



SUSAN ENGLISH

*Vertical Landscape*

Essay by Carter Ratcliff

Susan English made the most recent works in this exhibition by assembling small painted panels in wide, horizontal sequences. Some of these panels are dark and absorbent. Others catch the light and modulate it with subtle interplays of color and tone. All her panels, even the most luminous, have the solid presence of palpable facts; and each painting's procession has an air of inevitability, like the events in the sort of narrative that advances confidently to a satisfying conclusion. These works possess, in a word, unity. Moreover, their unity has an origin—one could even say, an ancestry—for English's panels are up-to-the-moment descendants of the monochrome paintings that epitomize early modernism's ideal of unified form.

In 1915, Kasimir Malevich painted *Black Square*, following it three years later with *Suprematist Composition White on White*. In the following decade, Władysław Strzemiński painted all-white canvases under the banner of Unism. The British avant-gardist Ben Nicholson made white-on-white reliefs in the 1930s and two decades later, when Ad Reinhardt painted the first of his black canvases, the monochrome canvas had become a well-established option: a genre of abstract painting. English contributes to this history with the paintings in her *Aequora: Poured* series, several of which are on view here.

Malevich's *Black Square* presents a single, uninflected expanse of black. In Reinhardt's black paintings, there are always four shades of the prevailing hue, one in each of the four quadrants of the canvas. The image is thus tightly enclosed within the geometry of the rectangular surface. English, by contrast, opens that geometry to the allusions she produces by pouring paint over tilted surfaces. As she says in a statement from 2010, the flow and eventual solidification of her colors resembles that

of water freezing to ice or mud hardening to stable ground. Yet there is nothing muddy about her imagery. Mixing pigment into a transparent acrylic medium, she shows us physical things interacting with the light that renders them visible. Following the modulations of hue across the surface of a painting in the *Aequora*

series, we see light condensed into something almost tangible. Yet these panels also feel expansive, for their scale is infinitely flexible. Some of them look like vast portions of sky.

Despite her monochrome roots, English was never devoted to the stark oneness Strzemiński celebrated with the word “Unism.” Perhaps she saw oneness as an ideal not to be cultivated but overcome.

Monochrome appears in her paintings as a kind of memory, a premise left behind as its possibilities are realized—as, for example, pigment accumulates along the edge of a poured panel and darkens to the point where it almost seems as if a new color has emerged. Geographies of cracks and fissures give certain panels the feel of landscapes. Each panel is rife with implications and when English combines them into larger works, she multiplies their multiplicities. In addition, she creates a puzzle with “vertical landscape,” a phrase that recurs often in the titles of her multi-paneled works. Why attach the word “vertical” to paintings that are so emphatically horizontal?

The answer lies in the buildups of pigment mentioned earlier. Reminders of the part gravity plays in the artist’s method, these areas of intensified color appear first along the lower edges of her panels—then along the upper edges, as she rotates the panels one-hundred and eighty degrees for inclusion in the *Aequora* series. In the more recent, multi-paneled paintings, the pigment buildups run along the sides of the panels, for English rotates them by only ninety degrees before joining them together. Thus, horizontal reminders of her process become vertical markers in intricately inflected compositions; and they inspire echoes: vertical color-strips the artist adds after the original surfaces have dried. With monochrome as her premise, English has found her way to a style of abstraction rich with implication and alive with drama.

*Blue*, 2014, begins on an ambiguous note. The leftmost panel looks dark against the airily blue one just to its right, and yet it looks light in contrast to the blackish strip that comes next. With these tonal shifts as her theme, English plays a series of variations that evoke a particularly complex and engaging episode in the life of the color blue. Because that life is strictly visual, we make more sense of this painting by looking than by talking. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the impact of the two dark panels, their surfaces freighted with heavy streaks of pigment, that appear two-thirds of the way to the right. Coming after the flickering delicacy of earlier passages, they feel monumental — and possibly ominous. As the painting moves to its conclusion, lighter tones reappear. This reprise is optimistic and yet shadowed, perhaps, by the visually massive presence of the dark panels.

The danger built into English's multi-paneled paintings is that they will turn out to be too wide for their height: the center will sag. Yet this never happens. Whether we view these works quickly or at a slow, contemplative tempo, they are sustained by the cogency of their pictorial logic, the coherence of what I have been calling their narratives. Of course, a painting's panels are not words in a sentence. Nonetheless, we usually read them left to right. Reading them the other way, we find that coherence remains and everything else changes. As it happens, one of the artist's statements tells of walking through the woods on the same path, repeatedly, and then reversing her direction and seeing her surroundings with new eyes.

A moment comes, however, when metaphors of narrative direction and logical progression fall away. It's a moment anticipated by one of her titles: *The middle is everywhere and everything*, which suggests that, ultimately, English's paintings have no beginnings and no endings. Everything in them, everything they mean, is present simultaneously. For she has not simply rejected the obvious unity of the monochrome surface. Embracing that obviousness, she has induced it to generate unities of a more elusive—and more challenging—kind.