

## ARTFORUM

## Beth Letain

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The eight paintings in Beth Letain's first London show, "Signal Hill," came as a breath of fresh air to those of us caught between the hectic chaos of the Royal Academy of Arts's ever-popular salon-style summer exhibition and the London art world's dominant ethos of post-YBA knowingness. The appeal of the Berlin-based Canadian's stripped-back abstractions lies in their breezy sense of touch and rhythm delivered on a majestic scale.

Letain constructed these large works—the smallest measures more than six by five and a half feet, while the biggest is about eleven and a half by ten feet—by laying down numerous layers of custom-made gesso, followed by what appear to be relatively few quick lashings of oil paint, high in pigment. That combination—dense gesso ground and thin liquid paint—sped up the absorption of the chromatically rich oil and probably reified the brushstrokes in some cases. For instance, *The Soma Root* (all works 2018) consisted of two uneven, vertical bands of orange on each side, with a white gap in the center; the narrower left side is a deeper shade than the right. The bands are composed of stacked horizontal strokes from middle to edge. Made with an unevenly loaded brush, these marks create a haptic sense of each gesture, and one felt that each touch might have stretched well beyond the framing edge. That is, what remains is a residue of the artist's actions. The overall result, as in Letain's other paintings, is a sense of resonant color and painterly immediacy.

Letain's paintings also create a rhythmic pattern via the repetition of simple forms, marks, and colors. The works' large scale and bold simplicity mean we catch the totality all in an instant, yet subtler aspects emerge over time. For instance, *Concrete Costume* consisted of seven rectangles of varying sizes, all in ultramarine blue; each of these forms, constructed with a flurry of gestures, could itself be a little painting. Arranged loosely in a grid, the rectangles appear at the canvas's edges, moving the eye around and leaving a larger white gap in the middle. In contrast, the six squarish forms of *Winkles*, in cerulean and cobalt blues, were closely bunched or stacked together. Their composition and seemingly hasty facture convey an altogether lighter sensibility than that of the elegiac *Concrete Costume*.

Despite their deadpan formal assurance, their seeming certainty that "what you see is what you see," as Frank Stella said, Letain's paintings also feel open to reference and metaphor. *The Soma Root* could be construed as a close-up of, say, some fabric with a tear in it, or of the bare canvas peeking out between color areas in a Clyfford Still painting, while its title connects it to an idea of intoxication. Several paintings with stripes hint at fabric patterns or flags. The latter interpretation—which suggests paint-ing as a means of signaling—received support from the show's title, "Signal Hill," which refers to a place in Newfoundland, Canada, known for its raw landscape and also as the site where the first wireless transatlantic Morse code transmission was received. In *Except the Run of Rivers*, however, the squarish dots and dashes, made with a wide, flat brush, seemed as much about measuring touch and tempo as about sending messages. That very openness could be the point.

– Sam Sherman