

A HISTORY OF COLOR AND ABSTRACTION WITH BETH LETAIN

Pace London recently opened an exhibition of new works on canvas by Canadian artist **Beth Letain**. The title of the exhibition, *Signal Hill*, references a rocky cliff on the east coast of Canada, in New Newfoundland and Labrador. It earned its name in the 18th century, during the Seven Years War, because of the flag masts upon its summit, which enabled signaling during battle. Nearly a century and a half later, the name was reinforced when the first transatlantic wireless signal was sent from Cornwall, England, to a radio station on Signal Hill. That is the event Letain references in her explanation of why she chose the phrase for the title of the show. She said she likes the “un-grandiose” sound of the words, like a simple, unassuming location where one might go to send and receive information. She compares that idea to how she feels about the act of painting. In reality, un-grandiose is the last word most people who have been there would use to describe the actual Signal Hill. The site is rather stunning, with dramatic cliffs rising 143 meters above the sea. But un-grandiose is exactly the perfect adjective to describe the work Letain debuts in this exhibition. Her paintings are succinct and relaxed: visual meditations on the power of composition. Letain has crafted a restrained body of work in which color, form, space and brushwork combine to create what, if we were to extend the metaphor of the title further, could be perceived as flags. The messages we might read in them are varied, yet all speak to something timeless: the enduring power of paint to teach us the value of looking.



Beth Letain - Signal Hill, installation view at Pace Gallery, London, 2018. Photo Courtesy Pace Gallery

A System To Her Method

Each of the paintings in *Signal Hill* has a confident, steady presence. Their strength at first seems to have something to do with their scale—for example the 350-centimeter-tall painting “To be titled” (2018), a red, white and blue striped composition that towers over viewers. Its size alone might make it one of the most memorable works in the show. But the more one looks at this painting, the more scale recedes as the cause of its resonance. Something else is at work giving this painting its sense of conviction. It possesses a hidden message related to the method of its making. Like each of the works in this show, it began its life on a much smaller scale. Letain starts with sketches and drawings. She seeks out compositions that declare something intrinsic. Only when their confidence asserts itself on a sketch-board does she reproduce the composition large, on canvas. So if not scale, what else about “To be titled” lends it such vitality? Is it its color relationships? Letain uses bold, solid tones of red, white and blue, a combination that speaks to many different cultures and histories that are loaded with meaning. But even

these powerful colors soon fade as the most important aspect of the work the longer one looks, especially as the brushwork gradually reveals itself. Letain has used her brush to coax out ranges in the luminosity and transparency of the paint. These shapes are not the monochromatic color fields they at first seem to be. They are nuanced and at times elaborate in their palette. Which means ultimately, the true power of these images is not in their individual elements but instead can be traced to their structure. They are perfectly balanced between scale, color, shape, and space. Letain mobilizes these aspects in such a structured way that her pictures seem familiar despite being abstract; they are unrecognizable, and yet also somehow commonplace.



Beth Letain - Signal Hill, installation view at Pace Gallery, London, 2018. Photo Courtesy Pace Gallery

A New Language of Place

When considered purely as visual meditations on structure, the paintings in Signal Hill offer a new range of interpretational diversions. They even start to resemble a sort of visual sentence. A blue minimalist painting that looks a bit like a bullet-pointed list of eight items, each consisting of a blue square next to a blue rectangle, starts to look as if it relates back to the history of the actual Signal Hill. If the squares were changed to dots this could be Morse code for the letter A, repeated eight times. Another painting showing six vertical rectangles, which create between them three vertical white voids, echoes the three white flag poles of Cabot Tower, the fortress atop Signal Hill from which messages can be flown in times of distress. Another painting showing six almost clumsily painted blue squares, irregularly shaped and weathered looking, begins to look something like the imperfect structure of the stone blocks from which Cabot Tower is built.

In fact, those stone blocks are also echoed in several other paintings in the show. One simply shows an oddly configured blue square, its lines meandering beyond its geometric borders. This pleasantly off-balance composition is a reverse image of the white linear voids created in two other paintings: one showing stacked red blocks, and the other showing stacked blue blocks. Whether it was intended by Letain or not, all of these paintings work together to formulate a distinctive visual language that tells the story of the place for which her exhibition is named. They speak to the geography, architecture, and history of Signal Hill. Their messages are subtle, and whatever their meaning might be to viewers depends so much on whether they have been initiated into the various layers of thought that led to their creation. To one viewer these might be simple geometric abstract paintings with nothing at all to say. To another they might be a trip down memory lane to a place once visited on the Labrador coast. To me they are meaningful for many reasons, not the least of which is because they are an example of the enduring value of abstraction, and the multi-layered potential painting has to convey complexities, if we are only willing to take the time to look.

By Phillip Barcio