

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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Robert Janitz: Reverie over reality



Robert Janitz, *Mauna Loa*, 2021, Oil, wax and flour on linen, 80 x 60 inches

Contributed by Sharon Butler / “Library of a Dream,” Robert Janitz’s elegantly installed exhibition, on view at Canada through January 21, is a knockout. Janitz spent years in intense meditation communities, making paintings that seemed **primarily about the physical experience** of making the object, reflecting palpable focus and presence. Now he appears compelled to turn his attention gingerly outward and explore a somewhat more playful approach.

The showstopper is *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg 1-5*, referencing the landmark **1964 Jacques Demy musical romance** that sublimely combines the mundane with the epic in sweet irony. The series consists of five vertical paintings hung close to the ground and side-by-side so that they look like a long, low-hanging mural. The backgrounds of the canvases are painted in a ROYGBIV vertical rainbow of gradients, suggesting a full range of emotions. Together they recall 1950s cardboard posters for jazz and blues clubs that used split fountain printing techniques to capture several colors in one pass. Each canvas features an elongated shape, resembling a pipe or a large unfolded paper clip, pulled with a squeegee-type tool from top to bottom with carefully turned curves to keep the lines going around the bend. Each pass snakes over the previous one, laden with quirky personality, ending with a shallow black ellipse that gives the meandering but muscular line the illusion of three-dimensionality. Paint drools from the

edges of the squeegee’s path, amplifying the absence of the paint that has been scraped away.

The tool-dragging continues in *Mauna Loa*, named for the volcano on the Big Island in Hawaii that still spews burning lava and is in fact the largest active volcano in the world. In purely visual terms, the piece harks back to Janitz’s previous work, which depicts the backs of **human heads**. In this age of rage, it’s fitting that Janitz’s relatively stable imagery, which he developed by observing riders on the elevated subway lines in New York and lifting stills from cinema, has morphed into something new. To kindred effect, a painting centered on the adjacent wall features two twisted rectangles from a bird’s-eye view. Janitz has called the forms, iterated in other paintings, “sushi,” but the image here, smaller than the others in the show, might remind New Yorkers of the Twin Towers. Janitz reuses imagery from year to year, but his ideas and intent seem constantly in flux.

In the side gallery, Janitz includes one of the plant-like floor sculptures that he said in a **2014 interview with Noah Dillon** simulated the vase shape water makes when spurting out of traditional public fountain. The object is painted the same pink that appears in the gradient blend of the painting on the opposite wall, *Tijuana Moods*, and together the two create what feels like a groovy gathering place, 1970s-mellow, in the small space. With “Library of a Dream,” Janitz seems to be circling the notion of refuge, embracing the power of daydreaming, reverie, and imagination.