

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Rick Briggs, "RJ Messineo: Existential Magic", Two Coats of Paint. December 3, 2021. Online. <https://www.twocoatsofpaint.com/2021/12/rj-messineo-existential-magic.html>.

RJ Messineo: Existential Magic



RJ Messineo, *Plane Tree*, 2021, plywood and rare earth magnets on canvas, 65 x 41 x 2 inches

Contributed by Rick Briggs / "Gold Gold," RJ Messineo's second solo exhibition at CANADA, is both a cohesive and a dynamically exciting effort. They make abstract paintings, often irregularly shaped, with plywood panels that are attached to the canvas with strong, rare-earth magnets. The magnets allow the artist the flexibility to adjust the composition by moving the panels around. The panels, in turn, are attached to larger canvases in loosely formed grids. At first glance, their generally vertical orientation reminded me of the loose array of icons on my messy computer desktop. The grids formed by these panels are not fixed and repeated in painting after painting but rather mutable, perpetually changing like life itself. Rowdy and active, the grids are in the process of becoming. They push against one another in a friendly scrum, jostling for position, searching for a resting spot in rhythmic constellations, and in some cases flexing outside the edges of the canvases.

Overall, Messineo's paintings have an organic feel and embody an openness to shape-shifting. They are all different sizes and configurations, and, although they brandish a funky awkwardness, they appear comfortable in their own skin. They embrace a sense of adventure in their making that stands in stark contrast to so much contemporary painting. The artist appears to have found the sweet

spot between doing just enough but not one thing more.

With titles like *Bloom*, *Plane Tree*, and *Trees hang their branches*, Messineo is connecting with a tradition in abstraction, including Willem de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, that looks to nature, not for the sake of mere representation but for inspiration stemming from the quality of light. The paint handling bears a particular resemblance to Mitchell's in its rough-hewn, staccato attacks of thick, choppy strokes mixed with thinned-out drippy passages. Messineo's brushwork implies confident searching: the artist is not afraid to showcase their process, even if that means appearing unwieldy in finding beauty.

In *Plane Tree*, the panels are densely packed and extend beyond the boundaries of the canvas, destabilizing its rectangular support. In what could be considered a Color Field painting, curved shapes smartly cut a sloping diagonal, countering the wonky grid of joints and raised round magnets. The slender, 12-foot tall *Light House* ascends like a high-rise in the gallery, the attached panels reflecting various shades of sky blue that read as windowpanes. The canvas' grid-like ground is composed of a patchwork of browns, and the play of burnt sienna with sage green and sky blue is especially satisfying. In *Gold Gold Red Gold Yellow Gold*, white panels seem to migrate across the canvas, as though the yellow-green ones on the right were calling to the red and coral ones on the left. It is this play between figure and ground that establishes tension in the painting. Panels appear to line up in neat horizontal rows but are in fact slightly askew or differently sized. Further upsetting expectations, the canvases themselves do not line up on their bottom edge, and three panels on the left side of the canvas hang down below its bottom edge like an architectural detail.

For me, the showstopper is *Trees hang their branches* – an impressionistic take on viewing a tree through a window, possibly from multiple vantages. Panels notionally once present are referenced only by a build-up of paint to indicate where their edges were. The ghost panel shapes and the loosely painted grid that surrounds them buoy the composition. A wide variety of light blue, green, warm pastel, and delicate umber brushstrokes create a fleeting quality of spring light. In combination, the ebullient brushstrokes and missing panels impart the sense that the painting could fly apart at any moment. Yet it majestically holds together, leaving the quality of flickering on the edge of being as a kind of existential magic. This painting, and the exhibition as a whole, embrace – indeed celebrate – flux and fragility as natural conditions of being alive.

In the past couple of years, the New York art world has lost four pre-eminent abstract painters: Louise Fishman, Ron Gorchov, Thomas Nozkowski, and Jackie Saccoccio. It's gratifying to see Messineo, a member of a younger generation, take the baton and bolster the tradition of abstract painting.