

BROOKLYN RAIL

Rhodes, David. "Denzil Hurley: To Be Pained Is to Have Lived through Feeling." *The Brooklyn Rail*, 1 July 2023, brooklynrail.org/2023/07/artseen/Denzil-Hurley-To-be-pained-is-to-have-lived-through-feeling.

Denzil Hurley: To be pained is to have lived through feeling

To be pained is to have lived through feeling is Barbados-born American artist Denzil Hurley's (1949–2021) third exhibition at Canada and represents a selection of works from over thirty years. The exhibition is expertly curated by Gervais Marsh, and, concurrently, in an adjacent gallery space is an excellent contextualizing exhibition, *Is and Isn't: A Context for Denzil Hurley*, curated by Melissa E. Feldman, which is worthy of its own review and includes the artists David Diao, Nikita Gale, Harmony Hammond, Nancy Haynes, Harriet Korman, James Little, Helen Mirra, and John Zurier. This constellation of artists reflects on the discourse and trajectory of abstraction as it developed during, and in the case of the younger Mirra and Gale, after Hurley's career, while also referencing particular aspects of his work.

Hurley's paintings are patently part of the world at large, and yet also manage to remain both assertive and reticent. This is one of their strengths—there is no grandiosity, no affectation. They are clear and present, and yet articulate absence. Take *J2#1, Portal*, (2015–17) a narrow, vertical black oil on linen painting that is propped on a block of wood which itself also bears a trace of black oil paint. It recalls at a distance some of Barnett Newman's vertical paintings, MoMA's *Abraham* (1949) for example. Newman said that encountering paintings of this format and size was like meeting a person head on, and there are distinctly anthropomorphic identifications in Hurley's paintings, from their proportions to the incorporation of an object of use, such as a broom handle. The facing plane has a low sheen and attracts the viewer as if to an opening, only to invite touch. The surfaces of these paintings are very beautiful, the product of many layers of thinned paint. They also recall the painted wall surfaces of Roman villas in Pompeii. The sides of this painting and other black paintings here, such as *Variant C* (2004–2005), *ZB2, Notch Glyph* (2015–17), *Strip Glyph #1* (2019), and *Glyph Strips #2* (2019), are also painted, and subtly abraded as if from wear, adding to a workman-like directness that only enhances the elusive and restrained quality of standing in front of the painting—there is no image to translate.



Denzil Hurley, *Glyph in 5 parts #3*, 2017–18. Oil on linen with stick attachment, 98 × 40 × 2 3/4 inches. Courtesy Juretta Hurley and Canada, New York.

As the title of the exhibition, taken from notes made by Hurley, indicates, lived experience involves pain as well as beauty, and this passage through time saturates his work.

Ad Reinhardt might also come to mind, but for Reinhardt making paintings was a pure and disinterested practice; they were objects distanced from everyday life. Not so for Hurley. Sticks—broom handles brought from Barbados, the kind that Hurley saw his mother use—and metal tubes are attached to the lower edge of paintings, sometimes reaching the floor like measures; the paintings levitate with or lean on the sticks or tubes, thus establishing different relations to the room. When they do reach the floor, it establishes their presence in the shared ground where we stand to view them.

Variant D (2005–2006) is a field of tan colored oil in which an irregular grid of orange dabs has been manipulated and changed until a singularly exquisite surface is achieved. The color is solid and radiant. The movement of the brush is visible as the painting catches light. It is yet another example of how Hurley establishes a surface that is quietly compelling, waiting to be engaged by the viewer who is then caught in its complexity. Again Hurley works into what French painters call the *tableaux*—the object and surface of painting interrogated to discover pictorial possibilities.

Meyer Schapiro said of Newman's paintings that they lacked "object matter," meaning recognizable images. Hurley's paintings too have no recognizable images, but "object matter" in fact does much of the work. In eschewing traditional compositional methods but not "subject matter," what is communicated is in the painting itself—its shape, size, choice of material used, and how the paint was applied. It is the studio or workshop that is at hand, inclusive with and not divorced from the general world of objects still connected to quotidian circumstance. Here such materials are transformed with the understated skill and intelligence of a supremely sensitive painter.