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Paint Layered Over Poetry

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The paintings of Shawn Dulaney might be compared with clouds, since a viewer can read almost anything into them. This doesn't mean, however, that they are not carefully composed; Ms. Dulaney is deliberately out for grandeur. But she is also out for intimacy.

The kind of painting to which Ms. Dulaney's work is most closely related, at least superficially, is the Mark Rothko branch of Abstract Expressionism, in which a sense of deep space is sought. Since almost all abstract painting seems to be out of the spotlight now, if one goes by what's covered in the art magazines, it might seem that this is an artist who is skilled in an old idiom, not the most enviable position. But the 20 paintings she shows at Weber Fine Art here take advantage of their innate ambiguity and declare themselves to be very current in the thinking that lies behind them.

It doesn't take long before the viewer realizes that the paintings are less pure abstractions than landscapes -- there's always a horizon line -- and that they belong to a very strong tradition, that of 19th-century Northern European Romanticism in which nature was seen as corresponding to human emotional states. Ms. Dulaney makes it clear that her inner life is very much a part of each painting, and this alone distinguishes it from most abstraction.

Hers is the kind of art that has properties that don't show up very well, if at all, in reproduction, and someone seeing Ms. Dulaney's work only secondhand misses all the handwriting that is in them. A viewer might guess that it is fragments of poetry, and Lee Weber, the gallery owner, will confirm that this is true. Ms. Dulaney mostly includes the writing of friends of hers, but a famous poet who frequently puts in an appearance is Rainer Maria Rilke who, although he wrote in the early 20th century, is a kindred spirit to the Northern Romantic painters.

Adding writing, not to convey a message but to signal that the artist is personalizing his or her art, not willing to relinquish control over its meaning, is a common practice nowadays and one of its potential hazards is that it can seem pompous.

After all, it is writing hung on the wall, like a public announcement, demanding to be read. But this feeling is absent from Ms. Dulaney's work: the writing is informally scrawled either with a pencil or the end of a brush and often the penmanship breaks away from being specific words and becomes short arabesques, which, in the nature context, resemble birds high in the sky.

A viewer might still wonder what significance the writing, or more particularly, the need to write, has for the artist. Ms. Weber said that Ms. Dulaney considers the writing a distraction. This is an unexpected term but an interesting one because it reveals something about the act of painting. Artists can get carried away by the ambition they have for their work, so using the canvas as a writing tablet is a way of grounding that ambition.

In Ms. Dulaney's case, the works' overall airiness is even more compelling, because it has to compete with the distraction and win out over it. In an interview given in conjunction with a show she had last year in New Mexico (Ms. Dulaney lives in Brooklyn but was raised in Colorado), she said: "I find that going into that other medium takes me out of my head. The poetry is random. It's more a tool I use to not get caught up in what the paint is going to do when I put it on."

In that same interview, she said: "I don't actually use paint. I put pigment in acrylic medium and do lots and lots of layers of transparent glazes. There is a translucency where you see colors through each other." The use of acrylic medium, sometimes combined with marble dust, is another surprise the show provides. Such rich results are usually achieved with oil paint, but acrylic medium, essentially a plastic, is favored by artists who want versatility over richness. Ms. Dulaney is able to have both.

A device common to most of the paintings, which range from 12 by 12 inches to five feet in length, is an area of darkness bordering the imagery in each painting. It seems to emphasize Ms. Dulaney's acknowledgment of the truism that a painting is a window onto the world. One painting, in fact, is titled "The Open Window."

When an artist has mastered an idiom, it can make viewers nervous; they might wonder if the work is going to develop or stay in a groove. The largest painting in the show, "Soaked With Dawn," does away with the containing dark edge and is a large expanse of pearly white, enveloping the viewer.

Ms. Dulaney's immersion in poetry extends to her titles, which reveal parts of her intentions. They include "The Voice I Wear," "The Sky's Pale Wing," "Blithe on the Surface" and "Evidence." These are clues. But she shows that she is capable of further distraction, by mysteriously adding collage, a photograph of a ballet class, mostly masked by paint, in "Weather Invention."