

New
American
Paintings

JURIED EXHIBITIONS-IN-PRINT

Issue #90, 2010

In the Studio

David Aylsworth

[Edition #42] Speaks to Kelly Klaasmeyer



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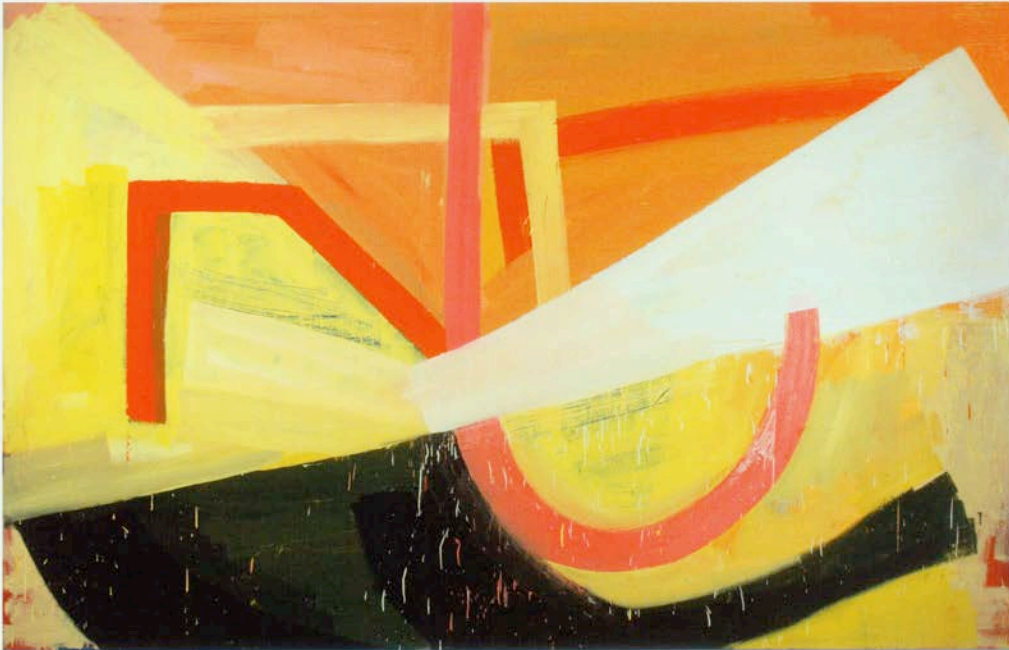
David Aylsworth isn't a quitter.

He's never given up on a painting, never thrown one out. At worst, he'll move it into storage, extracting and reworking it years later. The artist will even turn his critical eye to a painting that has already been exhibited and dive back into it, not just to add finicky touch-ups, but repainting the whole damn thing. The forms and gestures of this Houston-based artist's masterfully abstract paintings convey a witty exuberance that belies the struggle of their creation. The warm and genial Aylsworth isn't into wallowing in artistic angst.

In part, this is because the artist, at age 43, accepts and embraces the way he makes his paintings. He doesn't sketch, he doesn't plan—he works everything out on canvas. Sanding is an anathema to Aylsworth and where some painters might seek a textured surface solely for visual effect, the surfaces of Aylsworth's paintings are a record of their development. The edges of past brushstrokes create a network of lines and bumps. His canvases have a sense of history and chance, with color occasionally seeping from below to tint a newly laid hue.

"I used to feel really badly about the way I work," Aylsworth chuckles. "There's an Alex Katz quote where he





talks about how you should always work all your ideas out on the first canvas and then once you get your composition you should set that aside and paint it all fresh. But that always got me feeling really guilty about stuff, that maybe I was letting too much of the romance of the under layers show through. But gradually I guess I've come to terms with it and I realize that there is something more there than just the romance of it, there is something to that build-up that makes the final layer more substantial."

Aylsworth's process was on full view when I sat down to talk with the artist in his expansive studio in

an old storefront at the downtown end of Houston's rapidly gentrifying Washington Avenue. Pale, geometric stains of color appeared like ghosts of paintings past on a series of largely white canvases. Exuberant swirls and gestures of vibrant color covered a not-yet-complete canvas on an opposite wall. On a far wall was a large, goofy, almost super-graphic-like image in not-quite primary colors. Houston had just experienced a week and a half of torrential tropical rains and although the artist had lost a batch of work to the leaky roof, he was surprisingly upbeat.

The Sweet Honeydew of Wellbeing
2007
oil on canvas
75 x 118 inches



“...there is something more there than just the romance of it, there is something to that build-up that makes the final layer more substantial.”

As I talked with Aylsworth about his process, he explained why he doesn't tape off his forms. "I don't know how much of this is rationalization and how much is reality," he says "but there is something about trying to make something as straight as possible while knowing that it is never going to quite be perfect." And as careful as Aylsworth is, lines are just slightly wonky, forms just slightly off. It is this human touch, the layers of trying that make this work as engaging and satisfying as it is.

I asked about the painting on the far wall and Aylsworth brought out a big, leather-bound daily diary from 1999. He had pasted photographs of his paintings into the pages with notes, titles (taken from show tunes) and after-the-fact sketches. He turned to a page with a photograph of a Stuart Davis-like painting, a largely horizontal composition with a distorted violin-like form in a muddled blue surrounded by a torqued rectangle of black. Aylsworth pointed to the supergraphic-esque image on the far wall, explaining that

this photo was what that painting used to look like. He thought he had finished it, but the only thing that made into the current version was a section of the black, while a bit of a rusty hue from the old background bled into a cadmium red.

All of his paintings are like that, each containing archaeological strata of paintings past. Laughing, Aylsworth quips, "Surely another layer of paint can solve this!" ■

Kelly Klaasmeyer is an artist and writer based in Houston, Texas. She is the recipient of a 2009 Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for Short-Form writing and was a 2009 USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Program Fellow.