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AROUND THE GALLERIES

By Leah Ollman

Painter Earning His Stripes

Stripe paintings have been in the repertoire since the '60s (think Kenneth Noland, Robert Irwin and many others), and the format, reductive as it is, still seems inexhaustible. Consider the work of Mark Harrington at Edward Cella. The California-born painter, who lives in Germany, has devised a complex process of building up and scraping away pigmented materials so that his canvases verge on the sculptural. They marry programmatic order and chance, the geometric and organic. Their layering hints at archaeological strata; the horizontal stripes suggest both a musical staff and audible rhythms. In other words, the paintings are more expansive than reductive, more intriguing than their category would suggest.



One fascinating effect that Harrington conjures is the evocation of the photographic. Unlike Richter's famous blur paintings, which translate one medium to another in a relatively straightforward manner, true and tedious, Harrington's scraping the surface of his discontinuous bands yields passages that look like grainy, elusive photographs – details, perhaps, of lunar landscapes. The palpable presentness of the canvas is interrupted by these peeks into another, distant dimension; abstraction gives way, briefly, to something strangely, accidentally, serendipitously, like representation. This happens most vividly in the nearly monochrome black and white paintings, titled "Depth of Field" in reference to the manipulability planes of focus in film and photography.

The multicolor paintings, bringing in reds and blues, are less engaging, and however much each streaky pull across the canvas differs from every other, Harrington's approach does get repetitive, mostly because of the sameness of intervals in this particular grouping. At its best, thought, the work has unusual textural resonance and strikes a deft balance between the recitative and meditative, the declamatory and reflective.

Image credit: Mark Harrington, Depth of Field #4, 2010, Acrylic on linen, 48 x 38 ¼ in.