

Jim Waters: Kiang Gallery - Atlanta

Philip Auslander

Jim Waters paints in series: Each group of works on shaped panels explores a single form, such as a star burst. In this case, all the panels are shaped like the letter O, in many colors and sizes but always in the same font (narrower on the top and bottom). The front and sides of each O are generally painted in a single color mixed with glitter, while the back is coated with a contrasting color. The repetition of the scheme makes slight variations rather dramatic, as when the painted outer rim of a work provides a flat counterpart to the glitter on its front. The paintings are mounted a few inches from the wall, allowing the color on the back to reflect a kind of ghost O on the white surface.

Waters's practice of painting the backs of his panels is part of a layered inquiry into the nature of paintings as objects. The reflected colors on the wall remind us that paintings have backs; the picture plane may be flat, but paintings themselves are three-dimensional objects. Set off from the wall, Waters's Os also cast shadows, yielding a third optical presence. The glitter on the front of each panel enters into the game, too: Both the paintings and the walls behind them are surfaces for the play of bouncing light. In most cases, the reflected color seems like an afterimage, an ethereal supplement to the object hovering on the wall. Because of their ringlike shape, the paintings also function as framing devices for these afterimages and shadows. And occasionally the reflected hue is more saturated than the color on the painting's surface; in those cases the color on the wall comes to be the main image while the painting itself seems to be there primarily to generate that image--it becomes more of a frame than an image, more pretext than text.

Two freestanding pieces widened the dialogue between painting and object to include sculpture. *Untitled, Green* (all works 2001), with its glittery light green exterior and pink inner rim, is like a cross between a watermelon slice and a Feberge egg. At three inches thick, the piece is wide enough to be displayed upright on a pedestal. Waters seems to suggest here that the difference between a painting and a sculpture comes down to little more than the question of whether the object can stand on its own. *Untitled, Rust*, the most overtly ironic piece in the show, is a standing O four feet in diameter, whose outer surface is painted to look just like the patina on a Serra sculpture, though its sparking inner rim gives it away. Monumental in its own fashion, *Untitled, Rust* is also an effective parody of Minimalist machismo.

Although Waters's investigations of the formal aspects of painting and the conditions that contribute to an object's identity as painting or sculpture align his sensibility with sober Minimalist and Conceptualist concerns, he eschews austerity in favor of humor and play, especially in his use of color and glitter. The repetition of the familiar typographic form in a variety of presentations makes it possible to see it as an abstraction and draws attention to formal issues. But Waters also makes room for muted but sly cultural commentary. The afterimages on the walls give some of the pieces the feel of letters from a neon sign that have struck out on their own; one large blue oval strongly evokes the CBS eye logo. Without sacrificing the formal rigor of his work, Waters reminds us that typographic design and branding are central constituents of our commercialized cultural landscape.

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