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Christopher Willard "IT ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK" at Herringer Kiss Gallery, March 7 - 28, 2009. REVIEWED by Laurel Smith.

Eight easel-sized, vibrantly patterned paintings float and flicker on the walls at Herringer Kiss Gallery. These dynamic, super-saturated works by Christopher Willard demand a closer reading.

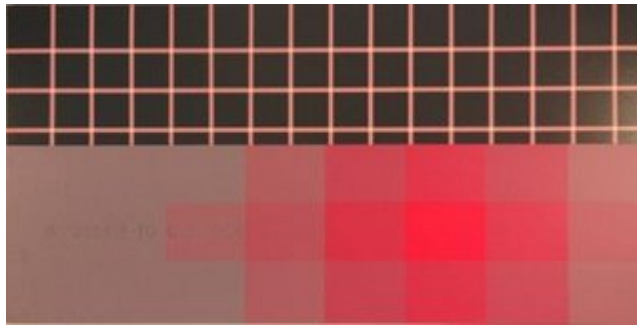


Image credit: Christopher Willard "IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERLOOK" 2009. Courtesy of Herringer Kiss Gallery.

A meticulous two-colour grid of squares appears along the top horizon of each acrylic painting. Small dots of white paint are precisely positioned at each intersection of overlapping lines. The grid shifts with a blink: its painted dots momentarily vanish and then reappear as the complement, or opposite colour of the adjacent grid. Blink again, they return to white; blink once more, the cycle repeats. These small dots fleetingly taunt and titillate the eye. They signal the experience of seeing. They create an over-abundance of visual stimuli, fatiguing the eye-brain system and causing perceptions to seemingly disintegrate and regenerate before our eyes. Whether the science of visual phenomena is clearly understood or not, Willard reminds us that “it isn’t what you think”.

His work functions as what Gianni Vattimo calls a novum, a common horizon in which two interlocutors (paint and word) present themselves as something new. Willard approaches Contemporary Geometric Abstraction by expanding on a long and rich lineage. Recall the early 20C paintings by Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian; the mid-century Op-Art and Hard-Edge works by Victor Vasarely; the Neo-Geo movement of the 1980s with contributions by Peter Halley, and the witty Conceptual paintings of the late 1990s by Richard Prince.

Willard employs essential elements from Optical Art to achieve the effects seen in his fluctuating grid patterns. His structural, or presentational approach is located at the lower portion of each painting where he arranges larger coloured squares. In some compositions the hard-edged squares grow progressively more colourful as they head toward the middle of the painting. In others the colouration of squares is less intense but deliberately lead the eye across the picture plane toward the edges. All squares are surrounded by a background of contrasting colour that emphasize the overall rectilinear format of painting. In contrast to the precise applications of paint on the surfaces, the edges around the outside margins of the paintings are over-spilled with bits of paint. This shows the hand made quality of his painting process, evidence that these works are not repetitions of the industrially fabricated art of the mid-20 century.

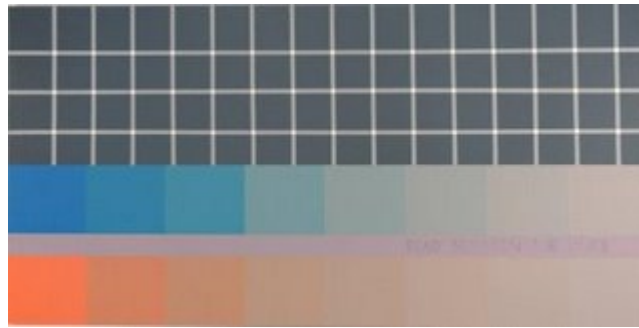


Image credit: Christopher Willard "READ BETWEEN THE LINES" 2009. Courtesy of Herringer Kiss Gallery.

His final touch are aphorisms neatly engraved into the surface of each painting. The inscribed words expose the raw Plexiglas panel that is the substrate of the painting. These captions are both literal and visual impressions. "IT ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK", "READ BETWEEN THE LINES", "SOMETHING TO LOOK INTO", prompt double entendre readings. Multiple interpretations are made possible. It is clear that Christopher Willard articulates fresh contemporary painting at its best, transforming how we read works of art.

- L.S. Calgary