



## Ann Pibal MEULENSTEEN

Abstract painters usually give their works titles after the fact, and often quite arbitrarily, so trying to draw out connections between these verbal handles and the real content of the art is a dangerous game. But the way Ann Pibal titles her paintings really does correspond to an important aspect of the paintings, namely a sort of agnosticism about whether abstraction should be strictly nonobjective, a self-contained construct eschewing all reference to the outside world, or should instead evoke aspects of reality but in an indirect way. The titles of paintings in this show, “DRMN,” are, but for a few exceptions, composed of sequences of capital letters, and most of the time only consonants. The lack of vowels means, of course, that the titles can’t be words in English—can’t straightforwardly signify. And yet some of them do tempt one to read them as familiar words: I can’t help but read *HNGRS*, 2011, as either “hungers” or “hangers,” and *CRMB*, 2010, as “crumb,” even if I try not to. Other titles, though, resolutely resist any attempt to find an accordion-folded word inside them: *HMLP* and *SPLK* (both 2011) invite no interpretation, at least from me. Finally, there are titles that neither invite nor repulse my reading. My brain doesn’t automatically fill in the supposedly missing letters in *SPLD*, 2011, but if I decide to make the effort to read it as “spilled” or “spoiled,” the four consonants put up no resistance.

Pibal’s paintings are elegant, compact, highly refined abstractions with family resemblances to those of such contemporaries as Tomma Abts and Ruth Root. They are clean-lined but not finicky, geometrical but not didactic. Some of them, like some of her titles, invite reading as highly stripped-down or decontextualized bits of representation—*HTMT*, 2011, at least when I saw it just after Hurricane Irene had made its way up the Eastern Seaboard, distinctly brought to mind a bank of windows with streaks of rain blowing in from some unseen opening between the lower sash and the window-sill—whereas others seem quite strictly to resist reference (*LSHT*, 2010, for instance). But just like the titles that allow you to fill them in as words if you so desire yet don’t importune you to do so, many of the paintings themselves seem neither to demand nor disclaim reference. I can see the horizontal line about two-thirds of the way down *APLN*, 2011, as an invitation to see this painting as an abstraction of landscape space if I want to—or just let the idea drop. (If it is a landscape, it’s more like the one I see in my GPS than the one out the window—the graphic, linear appearance of the paintings is part of their contemporaneity.) And the same is true if I think of reading the ascending lines in *FLFM*, 2011, as evoking architecture.

Since I’m a viewer with a bias toward finding paraphrasable meaning, this puts me in a position that reminds me of that of the suitor in a famous passage from Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. As you may recall, the fellow doesn’t know whether the girl means to accept or resist his advances—and neither does she. He puts his hand on hers, hoping to find out whether she will accept the caress or push it away. Instead, she simply leaves her hand there inert, not acknowledging his gesture at all. Sartre (taking the side of the suitor) defines the girl’s position as one of bad faith, but that’s probably unfair. Yes, she estranges her hand from her consciousness, secretly enjoying her companion’s desire at the price of self-alienation, and maintaining in him a state of mere “sentimental speculation.” But in painting, at least, this tactical separation between the mental and physical may be the opposite of bad faith: One’s painting, after all, really is a separate thing in a way one’s hand isn’t. If anything is capable of bringing me face-to-face with my own condition, torn between facticity and transcendence, it’s an abstract painting.

—Barry Schwabsky

Ann Pibal, *FLFM*, 2011,  
acrylic on aluminum,  
16½ x 12¾".

