



ABOVE: Installation views of Shirley Wiitasalo's exhibition at Goodwater 2008

**Shirley Wiitasalo**  
GOODWATER, TORONTO

Many would agree that the evolution of colour-field painting was partly indebted to the invention of acrylic paint. In the 1950s, Clement Greenberg's favoured artists, among them Helen Frankenthaler and Jules Olitski, established symbiotic relationships with companies such as Bocour Artist Colors (now known as Golden Artist Colors) in order to develop custom-made formulas for the studio. For these artists, acrylic opened up new avenues of possibility in terms of staining and spraying techniques that were not attainable with solvent-based mediums, hence expanding ideas of what abstract painting could be. In further response to this desire for optical titillation, interference pigments, intended to imitate the nacreous characteristics of mother-of-pearl and butterfly wings, were introduced commercially three decades later.

Four new paintings by Shirley Wiitasalo exploit the properties of this material and in doing so make her project far more than a rehashed experiment in post-painterly abstraction. *Gold* (2008) is coated with a diaphanous layer of paint in the eponymous colour, broken up by vertical striations created by a serrated trowel. Amorphous bleeds of paint layered both over and under brisk explosions of fan-like strokes made with an evergreen branch accumulate in a fluid S-curve in *Red Blue* (2007). Long fills flood the

ground of *Green Black* (2007), its surface punctuated by dry, scratchy marks that neither float nor recede. The long wavering lines of *Orange* (2007) work a colour-shifting pattern that dissipates as they travel up the canvas.

It is clear that Wiitasalo's project, which is arranged on one wall in the gallery, is all about surface. She uses interference pigments that break up the figure-ground relationship, flattening the picture plane; builds up an image using a plastic material that literally "skins" a surface; and paints directly on unstretched canvases that are pinned to the wall, then mounts them on stretchers that barely register a shadow. Instead of offering a window onto depicted space, the paintings reflect back on us, asserting their metaphysical presences. As the colours shift from gold to purple and pink to green according to the viewer's movement and changes in natural light, we shift too, from being self-conscious—a body in front of a painting—to being fixed in a transcendental gaze.

Goodwater likes to work collaboratively with artists, and Wiitasalo rose to the occasion, abandoning her usual oils to arrive at unexpected and pleasing results. Although her subjects remain elusive, these curious shape-shifters dazzle the eye and provide a durational experience to revel in, recalling what the critic Barry Schwabsky called the "ineffability effect." We should thank Wiitasalo for reminding us that sometimes it is okay to just look. **JEN HUTTON**