

Review

Patrick Howlett: Possibly Real

SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY, TORONTO SEP 8 TO OCT 16 2010

by RICHARD RHODES



Patrick Howlett is one of the more interesting painters to emerge over the past few years. His practice is careful and deliberate, and it results in compact paintings that are dense and intense to see. Focused on abstraction, Howlett works with traditions of surface treatment and brushwork that go back to the Renaissance. At the same time, he doesn't hesitate to generate Google image searches for source material that he can distill into colour, shape and form for his pictures. In his current show at Susan Hobbs, "the possible and the real," he presents more than a dozen paintings made since his move to London, Ontario, and some remarkable wood panels that showed briefly at last year's Toronto International Art Fair.

For his show, Howlett borrows a title from an essay by French philosopher Henri Bergson, as well as some of Bergson's concepts that relate the "possible" and the "real" to fluid exchanges between pasts, presents and futures. Howlett explains, "It struck me as an interesting way to try to understand my paintings and maybe painting in general—or at least many of the usages of abstraction that I am seeing in the last little while."

This might be why Howlett's paintings register as conversations in paint that think seriously about both the history of painting and the oceanic facts of the contemporary information landscape. What's interesting is that each painting grounds itself in a precisionist mood and a developing fragmentary structure. Sometimes the compositional effect (or abstract image) is an elusive matter of contingent colours, edges and layers, but these passing, unstable elements are articulated in detailed brushwork that stabilizes the surface to deliver both a fixed object and a considered view. The pictures are delightfully slow in letting a viewer trace their construction. The wood-panel paintings from last year (an homage, perhaps, to his move to "the forest city") offer impressive integrations of found patterns and painted inhabitations rendered in rich, royal colours.

This is abstraction that knows its history, for sure, but it's also abstraction voyaging into a new century and looking for new formal shores for painting.