

ARTslant



Improving Your Squash

Patrick Howlett

G Gallery

134 Ossington Street, Toronto, Ontario M6J 2Z5, Canada

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What Is and What Is Not: Patrick Howlett at G Gallery

by Brad Phillips

The following is a review of paintings by Patrick Howlett, currently on view at G Gallery in Toronto, in which one third of the writing describes what is not on display in the gallery, which is worth valorizing through indicating its absences. The remaining text describes what is.

The work in this show is not design oriented.

The work in this show is not grey.

The work in this show contains no new, modern, iridescent, or futuristic paint or materials.

The work in this show is not fey, twee, or apparently made with one handed ease.

The work in this show is not quotational.

The work in this show is not monochromatic.

The work in this show is not yearning for a modernist effect.

The work in this show is not easily scanned and dismissed.

The work in this show is not splattered, sprayed, weathered, bleached, or burned.

The work in this show does not resemble Matisse.

The work in this show does not indicate a desire for stardom.

The work in this show does not easily offer answers, entrances, or exits.

The work in this show does not look like it would fit in at an art fair.

The work in this show does not look like paintings in *Artforum* (advertisements).

The work in this show does not contain gimmicks, schticks, one liners, or appeasements.

The work in this show does not resemble the work in other shows up right now in Toronto.

The work in this show does not look popular or populist.

The work in this show does not indicate so much as a passing interest in appeasing its audience or the market.

The work in this show is blessedly free of standard art language.



Patrick Howlett, *Know the Rules: If You See Her Say Hello*, 2013, Egg tempera, colored pencil on panel, acrylic on wood, silverpoint (frame), 16 3/4 x 14 3/4 inches; Courtesy of the artist and G Gallery, Toronto

Press releases for exhibitions far too often result in the loss of our freedom to enjoy the work; the document itself is easily characterized as the enemy of the audience—it is both the crutch, and error of the gallery. Howlett's release, on the other hand, is an excerpt from a manual designed to teach its readers how to improve their squash game. I like this. That Howlett instead uses written material apparently unrelated to the exhibition is a welcomed relief, but also offers a soothing confusion to complicate viewers' interactions with his paintings. When art is confusing, art is powerful. Our experience of the work in this exhibition resists being instructive; the work is neither submissive nor bathetic. The power of the work is that it remains forever impenetrable, and forever changing—the viewer is forever grasping. These paintings recall Vladimir Nabokov's agenda, in that there are only two schools of art: those of talent, and those without talent. Howlett is a talented artist.

What *is* in this show are complex compositional gestures. Also on display is an obvious knowledge of the history of abstraction and sly evasions met with bold gestures. Upon walking into the gallery, there is the overwhelming happiness of seeing *color*. Howlett is a very sensitive and talented colorist. In this space, the large paintings smell like paint. Uncomfortable colors lay side-by-side, but work alchemically together to produce pleasing effects.

The largest paintings in the exhibition, perhaps six feet tall, are the most successful. Orange and pink! Large scumbled areas of grey are interrupted by delicate geometric marks, suggesting form but denying structure. A painting that suggests an opening or other space—a Prussian blue bordered canvas, with grey, blue, white, yellow, and orange—resembles an entrance or a tunnel. This sense of comfort and placidity is interrupted by small lines cut across the surface of the painting. Perhaps a better affect is “denial.” Many of the paintings suggest beauty, and are in fact very attractive, but this beauty—interrupted by the small marks—is instead the elegance of the painting, which lives inside the interruption of our expectations, and what the forms and colors propose to offer.

The smaller paintings are pleasant, and successful enough—certainly much better than the majority of painting being shown today. The sides of the stretchers are painted, which is facile at times. But this is okay! The word “Hello” is written on the side of four of the paintings. How kind that is. That the only recognizable linguistic or figurative element in these paintings is a salutation is at once lovely and sweet. Were this show to have exclusively comprised the smaller works it would be successful; however, in sharing space with larger, more complex, and sophisticated paintings, they suffer only through the power of the other work by the same maker.



Patrick Howlett, *Coaching: Introductory Analysis of a Still Life*, 2014, Distemper on linen, 96 x 72 inches; Courtesy of the artist and G Gallery, Toronto

Painting *is* a game. All of art is. It is a game with no clear winners, losers, rules, or rewards and it is a beautiful game nonetheless. My knowledge of squash is limited, except in that I imagine one must be in very good shape to play. In the end, attributing the source of the work to a sports manual is an instructive and thoughtful comparison—in that painting, writing, and all unsolicited creative endeavors, are games we create and play for ourselves, in the hopes that others might want to watch, figure out the rules, practice, get better, or see who fails and see who wins. Howlett is quite good at this game, and “plays painting” very well.