

INFERNAL CHEMISTRY

Derval Tubridy's "Inferno" begins with a painterly gesture: the paint is thrown and poured into place. Catch these works in progress in the studio and one may see a strong slash of colour on white canvas recalling a Motherwell or Cy Twombly; but then Tubridy gives gravity and chemistry a chance. "Something is taking its course," Samuel Beckett wrote, and here that thing is the thing itself. In some of her recent work, British painter Rachel Howard has separated the pigment from the gloss in her paints to create a luscious field of colour that is then sealed off behind a slick reflective surface. Tubridy also displays an intimate mastery of her materials, but to opposite effect. Working in layers of alkyd gloss and resin paints, Tubridy sets the chemical properties of the resin and alkyds against each other and makes art out of bad chemistry. Where Callum Innes, for instance, works through a process of subtraction by erasing paint, Tubridy piles it on, burying the earlier gesture and breaking the line. A coating normally used to seal and protect against rust and decay rips open and exposes an otherwise immaculate plane of red or white. The resin paint flows over and collides with the under layer. The result puckers to the surface. The scabs of gloss paint in "Rip Tide (Phlegethon)" – Dante's river of murderous blood – curdle up through a mass of dark resinous colour punctuated with silver or gold and veins of bright copper.

Dante's Inferno is an allegory where meanings are implied but never directly expressed; it demands interpretation from its readers and its artistic collaborators. Botticelli illustrated the Inferno, while Robert Rauschenberg made it his own, transforming photographs into a blurred collage of images. In Tubridy's "Inferno", the large triptych that dominates the show, surfaces seem to flow upwards, cinders etch trails across a red sky, bolts of black slash past each other in diagonals trailing chaos in their wake and yet in all this sulphurous energy the paintings retain an architecture of lines that builds from the single line on the left through the collapsing, asymmetric cross at the center and ends with the trilateral figure at right. The emaciated cruciform figure of "Acheron" has stretched and shattered into floes of black matte floating on a shining sea of white. This is just paint, shaped by human hands before taking its course and hardening into an image; but then again it also appears vaguely humanoid, and this ambiguity is typical of Tubridy's method. It could be the boatman Charon crossing the Acheron, the river at the boundary of Dante's hell. Both Tubridy's images and titles sample allusions and even modes and play them off against each other. The work is resolutely abstract, and yet trades on landscape and figurative modes, tempting and teasing the viewer with possible horizons or human forms that dissolve before one's eyes, a fate resembling that of so many of Dante's unfortunate souls. The other white canvas is "Styx", and like the river Styx in Dante, it is a messier affair, more marsh than river, where the angry sinners roil in the mire. Even here a rhythmic grid emerges from the delicate chaos of paint.

If there is a story to be surmised in the images of Tubridy's INFERNNO, it is the limitations of human agency and intention. These paintings both work within and question the traditions and modes of abstract painting. By engineering the meticulous beauty of a surface and rupturing it, Tubridy fuses painterly gesture with chemical reaction and extends abstract expressionism into process painting.

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