

Andrea Belag

Sarah Schmerler

Andrea Belag's paintings have quite literally reached a critical mass of late. Of course, their origins lie squarely in the abstract canvases that the artist has been creating for more than 25 years. But there are some essential differences now, some more subtle, others more soulful. Previously, Belag restricted herself to the use solely of horizontal and vertical bands of color. Sometimes the bands would interlock; other times they'd overlap, like the warp and woof of fabric. It was a rather pared-down process, which she seemed to have perfected. Now, however, we might find, tucked within those ever-present bands, a few playful arabesques of indigo; or a radiating, palm frond-like pattern of green.

Look first to Belag's works in gouache on paper (as important a part of her oeuvre as her works in oil on canvas), for some honest, working clues to how "things" are starting to develop. Belag delights in working wet-into-wet and is allowing those color bands to bleed and merge into solids -- here mottled, there transparent. A deep red-blue surrounds a single, monolithic rectangle that looks like a fat letter "I" in "Pink Room" [2002]. A sea of neon-bright red holds a neat little package of cyan blue aloft like an unexpected gift in "Jalousie" [2002].

But it is in Belag's canvases that the shift of visual weight becomes most complete. The works themselves are smaller, more compact. And as for the bands of color, they have transformed from transparent latticeworks into chunkier, almost portal-like posts and lintels. True, there are plenty of areas of pure, clear, abstract space to be found. But she invites us to explore them more idiosyncratically, as if peering between the columns of an ancient ruin, or confronting a memory we've too long neglected. These canvases are more human in scale, more personal in their associations. They possess a power that is cathartic, and real.

Belag got the idea (or as she prefers to call it, the visual "information") for many of these works from photos she took of doorways and windows on a recent trip to Cuba. And indeed, there is a visual device common to both, what I like to call the "chunky step." Simply put, it's a rectangle that appears at or near the bottom of most every image, a threshold we need to step over in order to enter the picture space. In "Watch" it is thin and black; a single golden spot hovers way above it like a brass knocker on an open door. In "Blue Hour" it is thicker, a patinated grey-blue, like worn, porous stone. Often she renders it in a single, brushy gesture. But whether

you choose to focus on the gestural quality of its application, or on its solidity as a form, you simply must vault your eye up and over it. Why include it at all? Perhaps the artist wants to put us through our paces. Maybe she wants to make us work harder to read in the picture plane a sense of place that is as personal for us as it is for her. Or maybe she wants to slow us down, period. All the better to get our bearings in this strange new world of pure color and light.

It might seem a bit trivial to focus on the representational quality of this new work. After all, Belag has often pursued a dialectic between abstraction and representation. Its push-pull, waxing and waning, is part of what keeps the work interesting for the artist, interesting for us. That said, on a personal note, I hope she'll be able to crank out a lot more of these canvases before any new inspiration hits. Belying all the solidity we've just described, these pieces have a confident, translucent quality; their touch is as direct as a drawing with ink on paper.

And yet, one still must go back to their quirky, almost anthropomorphic presence. These little beasties of paintings afford us pleasures more sensual than intellectual. Soon enough, Belag will, as she must, move on to other things. But these works won't be tucked away so easily, won't budge so fast. They'll hang in her oeuvre as they do in our minds' eye, asserting themselves and their strange, flickering, light-filled bodies, demanding to be

counted a bit separately, from the others, demanding to be heard.

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