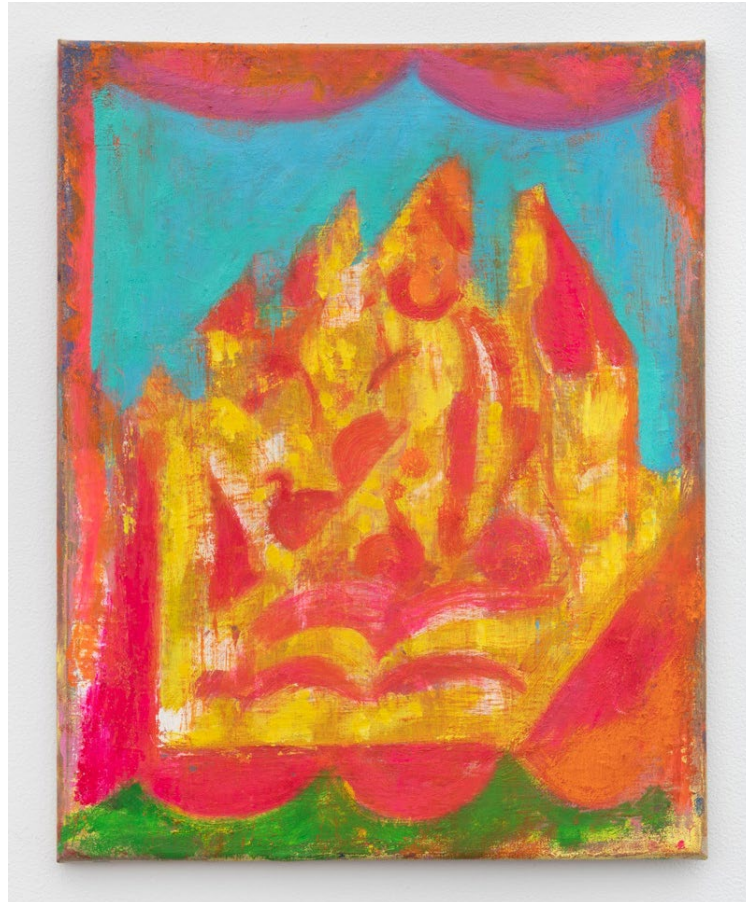


Michael Berryhill:

El Paso

By Jason Stopa



Michael Berryhill, *Hueco Tanks*, 2022. Oil on linen. 20 x 16 in. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

In the late nineteenth century, Édouard Vuillard retreated from the dominant themes of contemporary French painting—Parisian nightlife, portraiture, bathers, and the landscape—and focused instead on domestic scenes as a site of interiority. His paintings were populated by friends, lovers, patterned curtains, flowers and dining tables; all manners of personal life redrawn into shimmering, patterned space to hallucinatory effect. The paintings were not a window into the world, but rather a world unto themselves. Michael Berryhill's solo show, *El Paso*, currently on view at Derek Eller, starts from a similar desire for interiority but flirts with a window-like space wherein the drama plays out. Splitting the difference feels like a real sweet spot for Berryhill whose eleven works reference his childhood experiences growing up in Texas. Partially rendered cowboys, parrots, basketballs, books, lions, and suns set against hazy atmospheres appear in several works, yet he hinders our desire for narrative, putting him out of step with current painting trends. He's a smart painter; the latest trend is often just that. The artist is after a middle ground where meaning is derived by placement and association, something he shares with contemporaries like Ted Gahl and Tal R. The resulting paintings are quirky, ecstatic reveries, romantic and humorous.

NEW YORK

Derek Eller Gallery

Michael Berryhill: El Paso

November 17 – December 23, 2022



Michael Berryhill, *The Long Game*, 2022. Oil on linen. 62 x 48 in. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

Berryhill is interested in painting as patina, and he paints in thin layers using small, dry brushes to apply saturated paint. He then scrapes and wipes away paint to reveal previous layers. These ghost layers reveal incident and accident, and are often reanimated as they become contoured. Berryhill's interest in patina isn't aesthetic only; it's a desire for history rooted in grand narratives.

The American South embodies our messy, cultural past, our cowboy myths as well as our fascination with the desert. *Hueco Tanks* (2022) is one of the smaller paintings on view, but feels like the key to unlocking the others. The artist paints a bright, reddish-magenta border that envelops the perimeter of a turquoise background, which reads as blue sky. Berryhill leans on the capacity of paint to read as patina here, the border feels aged by way of scraping and opens up like a curtain inviting viewers to peer within. He paints a lemon-yellow crag-like form near the center that butts up against an emerald green wave at the bottom.

This crag-like form resembles a mountain top, yet is only partially rendered, and the scraping away of paint positions this form as ultimately indeterminate, lending it a poetic dimension. Sharp, cadmium red organic lines and triangles mark the yellow expanse, suggesting some rocky terrain. Though its specificity is difficult to parse, the atmosphere is palpable. It is a mesmerizing little world. The title gives us some context into what Berryhill is after. Hueco Tanks is a historic site in El Paso replete with low mountains and rock drawings dating back to nearly 8,000 years ago.

Other works like *The Long Game* (2022) nod to a phrase used often in the art world to discuss the stakes and progress of various aesthetic, cultural, and market driven discourse. In Berryhill's painting, a pale purple-magenta figure in a cowboy hat is down on bended knee, head bowed, as if about to propose. Wearing a tie and boots, he balances a basketball in his left hand and displays a palette near his knee.

A pale-blue window-like space framed with the curtain-border surrounds the figure, while a bright orange sun shines above his head, and the edges of the painting are flecked by floating, abstract forms. This cowboy is a humorous, yet sincere romantic conflating two dreams: professional basketball player and professional artist. Games have fascinated painters for nearly a century. In a speech to the New York Chess Association, Duchamp once stated, “I have come to the conclusion that while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists.” While the objective of painting is not to win, it still requires dedication; there are periods of incredible disappointment, and, if one is lucky, periods of great achievement. Berryhill’s painting is like a self-portrait by proxy and cautionary tale about the short game, one that only trades in short-term rewards and appearances.

Berryhill is highly aware of current trends in painting but he chooses to subvert them all at once. Giorgio Agamben once defined contemporaneity as just that. The artist’s anachronism serves him well. In contrast to the many painters engaged in never-ending storytelling, Berryhill aligns himself with the complexities of interiority, but he doesn’t dispense with a window-like world altogether. The economy of social media thrives on legibility and storytelling. This has produced a widespread cultural desire to cognize all images, and fast. It’s a visual culture of glances. Successful paintings complicate easy legibility by rewarding sustained looking. And they remind us that all storytelling is a work of fiction. Berryhill wants to avoid naming a thing or form, hovering just around specificity; it is one of the more difficult things to achieve in painting.

Contributor

Jason Stopa

JASON STOPA is a painter and writer living in Brooklyn, NY. He received his BFA from Indiana University and his MFA from Pratt Institute. He is a contributing writer to *Art in America* online, *Hyperallergic*, and the *Brooklyn Rail*. He teaches at the New Hampshire Institute of Art, Pratt Institute, and The School of Visual Arts.