

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Plastic Musings*, an exhibition by Samuel Osherooff, at the Courthouse Gallery from June 1 — September 28, 2023. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Chris Lanier, who provided the following essay.

### What A Painting Is

This exhibition of paintings by Samuel Osherooff, *Plastic Musings*, is a collection of jabs and feints deployed, in good-natured combat, against the traditional idea of what a painting should be. Most of the paintings could be classified as abstraction, though Osherooff avoids the term: “I don’t like using the phrase ‘abstraction’ because I think it’s so saturated in the minds of people... and it doesn’t mean the same thing today that it did at one point.” He prefers the term “non-representational,” which seems, perhaps, a little more precise – you might find rendered hints of things that can be encountered in the physical world on his canvases, but he’s reluctant to give the whole game away.

### TEXTILES AS PAINTING ELEMENTS: *FANCY SQUARED*

One of his primary strategies of attacking the question of what a painting is, is the introduction of textiles onto (and sometimes as a substitute for) canvas. It’s a very direct way of neutralizing the idea that a painting has to be a representation of something else. Here is the thing itself (in this case, the textile), integrated onto the painting surface, which signals that you’re not witnessing a visual illusion – you’re witnessing a visual event, or a series of events. The patterned lines in the textiles aren’t vehicles for suggesting shapes, they are occurrences – which cause reactions and reverberations as they find counterpoint or echo in the lines and patterns made by Osherooff’s hand and paintbrush.

The use of textiles is connected to some family history – Osherooff’s grandmother was a professional seamstress, and he remembers hours spent in her workshop: “She had plastic bins everywhere full of every kind of fabric, every kind of material – things I don’t even know names for, like the little frills you put on the edge of a purse or around the collar of a dress. She’d go to the fabric store and just love the feel of something, and bring a bunch of it home and try to put it into something.” She made elaborate dresses, while



*Fancy Squared*, 17” x 17”, acrylic and sewn fabric on canvas, 2022.

Osheroff made pillows and decorated little wooden boxes. Using textiles in his work is a way of reconnecting to that childhood world of creative reverie.

The operation of using textiles to disrupt the idea of “painting” works most radically and simply in his small canvas *Fancy Squared*. It’s a painting that conjures a pocket from which you’d probably lose your most precious items – the keys that let you into your house, the ID card that keeps you out of jail, the sentimental item that most sharply recalls the presence of your deceased mother. In the center of a modest square canvas, Osheroff has sewn a small square of material, which in turn is patterned with squares – they connect corner to corner, in crossing stairsteps, each containing a smaller black square tilted 45 degrees. These are overlaid against a stand of vertical lines.

Osheroff didn’t sew this piece of cloth on top of the canvas – rather he cut a square hole in the canvas, and used the cloth to fill the gap, like a skin graft. The physical tension between the joined cloth and canvas pulls the cloth pattern away from its rigid grid-based arrangement. The patterned squares contort and arc, most dramatically at the lower edge, where the seam didn’t hold, and the cloth tore away from the canvas, leaving an eye-shaped hole. This tear wasn’t intended, and Osheroff was at first aggravated at the damage. Then he sat with it, and decided he liked it. He hit the canvas with a few strokes of Gesso, and then set it aside until he figured out what to do next. After living with it for a few months, he decided it was, in fact, done. In a few gestures and a few marks, it accomplished what it needed to accomplish.

## LAYERS AND MYSTERIES:

### *MATHEMATICAL SERENDIPITOUS TRUTH*

A more worked-over painting demonstrating the interplay between textile and paint is *Mathematical Serendipitous Truth*. The most eye-catching element here is the sharp black-and-white chevron pattern, cut in the shape of three steep peaks. Below that is a rectangular patch of black wool, where Osheroff has drawn his own white chevron lines – but far more loosely, as they swerve across the rough wooly surface. The rest of the canvas is built up from layers of paint – a yellowish field, some vivid red and black strokes, and on top of this some whitish-blue patches, with traces of blurred black outlines suggesting solid shapes (one cluster to the left resembles some



*A Mathematical and Serendipitous Truth*,  
30"x 42", acrylic, pastel, wool sewn on canvas, 2020.



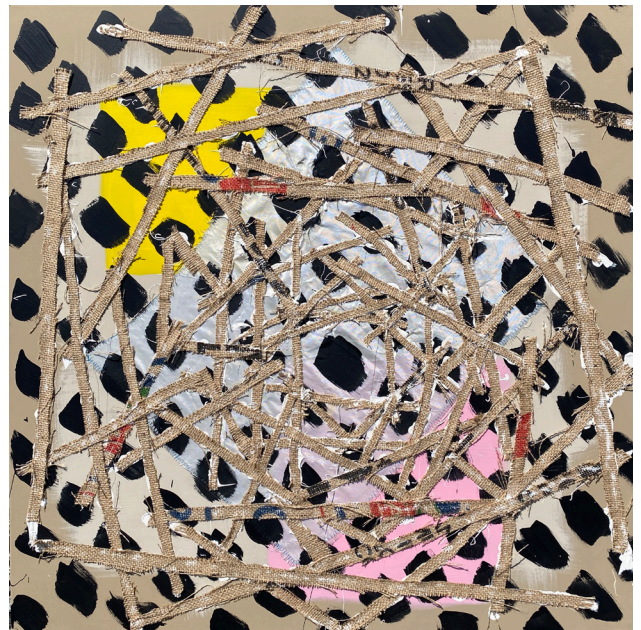
musical horns or drinking glasses). These bluish-white areas have been scraped over in a variable grid pattern, so that the red and yellow underneath shows through. The red is so vivid, it seems to occupy the foreground – a weather-beaten fence, caging in the blue shapes. The fact that the red actually comes from behind the blue creates an interesting optical conundrum.

These sorts of ironies of perception are part of what draws Osteroff to this approach of layering – the way it introduces the mystery of how it was made, and how it came together. He takes inspiration from the German-born, New York-based artist Charline Von Heyl, who works with the addition and the erasure of layers. “She practices subtraction,” Osteroff explained. “She mentions destroying something beautiful in order for something else to live.” He really resonated with that concept: “You make this beautiful pattern or shape, and then you paint over it, or you scrape it – you’re destroying these pieces as you go, which allows for a new addition.”

### ILLUSIONS OF DEPTH: *NESTING*

Part of what Osteroff is wrestling with in these canvases is the illusion of depth. It’s something he feels he could push further in his work, wanting to extend the sense of space more than he’s been able, tricking the eye into falling deeper into the canvas. There’s something about the pictorial illusion of depth that, for him, invokes metaphysical depth. I find the depth of his paintings very intriguing – his abstractions aren’t flat, but at the same time there doesn’t feel like there is tremendous space between his layers – the visual planes feel compressed, like strata lying close to each other.

*Nesting* is an interesting depth exercise. The painting is dominated by straight strips of burlap-looking material, crossing each other at angles to make circular shapes (one can imagine Osteroff working like a bird – foraging for materials, then winding his findings on each other in interlocking spirals). As he moved toward the center, he cut the strips smaller, forcing perspective with this alteration of scale – creating a vortex that telescopes into a painted black dot. It’s still quite evident, however, how artificial this telescoping is – the texture of the strips remaining stubbornly constant, the strips all stuck almost carelessly to the surface with the white paint or glue affixing



*Nesting*, 42" x 42", acrylic, sewn fabric and burlap on canvas, 2023.

them leaking from the edges – a viscous, irregular aura. The textile strips bulge up slightly where they cross each other, and even when they're just one layer thick, they're substantial enough to cast shadows on the canvas.

All this is to say the whole painting exists in a state of visual contradiction, where the composition attempts to project your eye into the distance, while the materials continually arrest the eye at the surface. It's something like a magician explaining a trick in the middle of performing it, leaving the audience to decide whether to embrace the illusion, or to understand its mechanics.

### NON-REPRESENTATIONAL REPRESENTATION: *HEIL VON HEYL*

*Heil Von Heyl* (obviously titled in tribute to his inspiration) seems to mark both a synthesis and development of Osheroff's strategies. First, it's an expansion of scale – as Osheroff noted, it's basically human-sized, which allows it to absorb your whole visual field. If Osheroff stands at the middle, the edges end just beyond his outstretched arms, so the canvas can encompass his gestures at full extension – which he felt gave him a certain painterly freedom. The layers are very dense, an interpenetrating jumble of pinks, reds, and greenish-greys. Sections of black and white stripes seem to form an obscured superstructure, and a sort of anti-blizzard of black spots occupies the background, against an earthy orange-brown color field. The entire composition is traversed by dashed white lines, like the lines painted in the middle of a road, minus the road. They also remind me of the way outlines of invisible characters or objects are sometimes drawn in comic books.

Floating over this organic environment – where none of the edges are sharp, and the patterns are resolutely handmade, drifting or wiggling outside of any implied grid – ghostly white forms start to elbow their way toward figuration. Among them are an angler fish, a dog, a mushroom, and what appears to be a bottle of wine with a wineglass. What volume they have comes from being scraped back – after the white paint was applied, some of it was clawed off the canvas, and that subtractive scoring gives hints of light and shade. But these are just traces – their primary



*Heil Von Heyl*, 60"x 51", acrylic and pastel on canvas, 2023.

quality is of insubstantiality. They don't seem like the objects themselves, they're more like the afterimage of objects lingering against the eyelids after your eyes have shut. They also have a pliable doughiness, reminiscent of Philip Guston's figuration, after he swam against the currents of abstract expressionism back towards figuration.

I think Osheroff has found an interesting strategy, here, for smuggling representational forms into his work, without quite crossing the threshold of representation. One of the chief things that attracted him to non-representational work was a sense of newness, the sense of inventing something that he'd never seen before. Of course he's seen a dog and a mushroom before – and at least a picture of an angler fish. But in their indeterminacy, these figures are more connected to ideas and memories than the physical world. They could be platonic forms, or icons flirting with a fundamental blankness. They don't inhabit a world – they float out in space like data-points, or map legends sent scattered across the map. In fact, the figures arrived as examples of categories – Osheroff started by thinking of the four elements (the angler fish is connected to water), and then decided that four elements weren't enough. So he added the fungus element (the mushroom), the fauna element (the dog) – and to respect Osheroff's desire to not give the whole game away, I'll stop there, and leave you to puzzle out the rest. But it's exciting to me, as a viewer, to observe Osheroff's restlessness as an artist. To use a sewing metaphor, I see him pulling at the seams of painting, tugging on textiles here, layering there, depth elsewhere – hoping to make a profound enough rift that something surprising will shake out.

The question “when is a painting not a painting?” is so philosophically slippery, it will never receive a definitive answer. But Osheroff has at least figured out how to make a painting of a dog that's not a painting of a dog.

Chris Lanier  
Reno, Nevada  
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Samuel Osheroff

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