



Portola, 2009. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

LYRIC CHROMA

BY JENNIFER RILEY

Erick Johnson's *PARALLELOGRAM PAINTINGS* are a continuation of his investigation of color. Constructed mainly of slanted bands stacked horizontally over fields of linear under painting, these geometric abstractions are immediately familiar, recalling something urban and welcoming like an easy smile. They also suggest in their leaning-to-the-right shaped forms; cars, trains, trucks and buses. They evoke the speed and whirl of life in a crowded metropolitan center. In *Vif*, planar areas of color abut each other leaving thin cracks between their soft-edged geometries where we see bits of busy under-layers. Like a door ajar on a busy street, these fissures allow a glimpse from one realm to another, as from a public to a private space, and we become aware that these paintings will speak of more than speed, motion and rhythm.

In addition to notions of movement they also suggest slower activities of making and looking, where the parallelogram form, is an apt metaphor for active potential. In their stacked configuration, the horizontal plank-like bars suggest items of domestic scale such as, building materials awaiting employment, Peruvian textiles of rich, vegetal colors and floor designs of multi-colored stone and marble.

The paintings are also imbued with art history. Color saturated geometries, surface textures and fluid quirky forms can recall Diebenkorn's *Ocean Parks Series* and Jack Bush's color-field paintings from the mid-60's. Horizontal bands seem to have passed through the structural logics of early Noland and Stella to ultimately embrace the idiosyncratic structures and improvisational rhythms more akin to artists working today with Stanley Whitney as a lead example.

Although the paintings are similar in format, with the number of unequally scaled planks being the main variable, these are not serial in the way say, minimalist works can be. Instead, Johnson explores the notion of multiplicity within sameness by working experimentally, following where his mind and the process want to go. He often undercuts notions of symmetry by sliding the planks closer to one edge here, making it thicker there, so that the structure never devolves into sameness. Johnson is a painterly painter with an abundant, natural gift for color. In unrepeatably nuanced strokes, lines and marks, his fluid paint shows traces of the brush, that vary across the picture plane, yielding moments of transparency in some areas and opaque passages with thickening edges in others. Color decisions about the three, four or five planks, which reach from edge to edge are sequenced without a narrative, but combine like musical chords to form relationships yielding a wide range of emotional effects. Colors chosen intuitively, under perfectly



Unison, 2009. Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in.

mysterious conditions, for completely subjective reasons or from memory, create openness where one has to both interpret and construct meaning as one reads the work.

These are not utopian abstractions constructed to present an escape from this world to another say, amnesiac space, nor are they landscapes per se. Though they do offer in musical words that we are all familiar with, in titles such as *Chord Stack* and *Flat Third*, a portal to the unnameable places we go when listening to Beethoven or Miles. In their horizontal, imperfect geometries, we are reminded of more concrete moments such as the planned and unplanned surface-texture delights of the numerous jammed-together elements that create an urban wall. And their vibrant colors of radiant energy that reaches out to us, recall particular atmospheres, such as a cloudless sky over rolling hills, buzzing and blooming in late June. The paintings reverberate emphatically with experience of all types of landscape and when this combines with the titular references to music it becomes evident that the work is a confluence of interior and exterior panoramas.

These are complex, rugged, at times humourously inelegant, yet, consistently articulate paintings, arrived here by carefully reduced means. Abstract painting, Johnson knows, acknowledges the speed, fragmentation and gloss of contemporary life and without imitating it, it has to be something else. It has to be an alternative that offers the potential for experiences that differ from the day-to-day systems we are entangled in. And, in his search for an appropriate pictorial language, one that reflects his interest in the city, landscape and music, this work evolved by incorporating ideas from previous paintings. Calligraphic lines from earlier works have become planar areas now, allowing greater experimentation with — and contemplation of color and color relationships.

The paintings take a long time to make. Working in layers with oil underscores this fact. Johnson does many things to each surface to form the space of the painting. It is a process that entails, scraping, sanding, abrading etc. and allows information to build up over time, thus imbedding a sense of history in the work. The intensely hued color shapes that nudge into areas with such 'history' hit the nervous system through the eye and we automatically respond. By intentionally putting these two differing types of things together for us to experience at once — Johnson asks us if we can see the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of the world he sees. The clarity of things — right up next to the chaos of things — begins to become apparent.

Within the planar layer that extends both vertically and horizontally off the picture plane we sense, as in color-field painting, that we are not being shown an *entire* world but rather a part of one. And we see in the under layers, that slip out here and there, vestiges of traditional pictorial constructions. It is because of Johnson's inventive deployment of information, that the layer of stacked parallelograms is understood not only as a delightful and brilliant formal solution, but also more exactly, as a thin membrane which holds within it a flood of painting history.