



GALLERY-GOING

Locating Truth Within a Grand Illusion

By JOHN GOODRICH

Painting is an illusion to which all artists add their own sleight-of-hand. Seven centuries ago, Giotto ennobled his subjects with momentous pacings of forms. In the modern era, Magritte's literalistic rendering suited his surreal mischief-making; Chuck Close's 1970s paintings took literalism to its conceptual extreme.

JULIAN HATTON: Border Territory

Elizabeth Harris Gallery

The abstracted landscapes in Julian Hatton's seventh show at Elizabeth Harris are less "real" in terms of factual description, but they contain their own peculiar truths, evident in keenly felt colors and designs. His 14 paintings reflect an aesthetic — often underappreciated today — seeking the veracity of rhythmic form. One could say Mr. Hatton updates Matisse's updating of Giotto, in that he looks to formal relationships, stripped of academic conventions, to make a deeper semblance.

Mr. Hatton's vibrantly colored organic shapes are both daintier and looser than Matisse's. His paintings are more refined in their surfaces and in their smallish, two-foot-square formats, but they seem bent on conjuring as many pictorial contradictions as possible. They're ultimately portraits of plastic possibilities, rather than strictly of the objects and sites of his titles. But if their profusion of quirky and suggestive stylizations adds a postmodernist flavor, the whimsical forms are always in the service of something greater: a formal coherence that gives measure and weight to his gamboling shapes.

These latest paintings, all dated 2007, show some new developments. Glimpses of aerial views appear among the landscape vistas, while passages of charcoal drawing and bare acrylic ground contrast with the layers of oil paint. The paintings' most intriguing aspect, however, remains their combination of loose allusions and tight rhythms. As with Bonnard, a kind of muscular whimsy prevails. While forms often elude strict identification — is a rectangle a patch of road, a building, or simply a condensation of pigment? — the pressures of colors make each specific and necessary to the whole.

"Tamaracks in December" be-



Julian Hatton, 'At Sal's Pond' (2007).

ELIZABETH HARRIS

comes an arena of elastic shifts of scale and distances. Deep orange rays spread above a small grid of vertical lines held distantly atop a

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column of retiring earthy green. At the center, a kinking bar of fiery chartreuse seems to both circumambulate and climb a chunky rust-colored mass. One suspects the subject is a road clinging about a hill at sunset, but such labels hardly matter; the characters of these shapes — the green's slender persistence and rust-brown's squat domination — are self-evident.

In Mr. Hatton's worlds, nothing is real apart from its plastic identi-

ty, and all identities tease our expectations of space. The pictorial conviction of "Potato Fields," indeed, supplants all topological logic. Here, a purple-gray bush huddles with notes of brown and blue in an improbable fold of earth, while layers of hills and clouds alternate impossibly above. Between them hovers a large, potato-like shape of deep blue, which in the confluence of pressures takes on the unlikely gravitas of a figure wandering through a vast, unfolding space.

"Bu-wa" contains the unruliest distortions of all. In this painting, three tree trunks swerve up toward our point of view, leaving at their roots what appears to be an aerial view of a field. This plain stutters once, like a television screen needing a vertical hold adjustment, at the canvas's bottom edge. The rolling, funneling curves recall the effervescent

rhythms of an Arp abstraction, though Mr. Hatton maintains the pretext of a landscape, somehow containing the dizzying dislocations between sidelong and bird's-eye views.

Measure and abandon mix in Mr. Hatton's paintings with rare fluency. In today's art, form and expression often divide into separate camps: cerebral parsings of minimal shapes, on the one hand, and sheer demonstrativeness of technique on the other. By contrast, Mr. Hatton finds expression through his forms, and this links his pursuit to a great tradition transcending both concept and craft. His paintings remind us of the potency of a particular modernist aesthetic, and they reward prolonged looking.

Until April 12 (529 W. 20th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-463-9666).