

Knot of This World

Do not fear graphs and theory! Terry Winters paints the reasons why.



Terry Winters, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

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Matthew Marks Gallery
522 West 22nd Street, 212-243-0200
Through January 24

BY R.C. BAKER

Maybe it's because I saw them the day after the election, but there's something hard-fought and heartening about Terry Winters's new paintings at Matthew Marks. Chunks of intense color tumble and collide across garish or sooty or muddy matrices. Like our times, they're fraught, complex, and scarred over, but also haltingly optimistic.

I was first struck by Winters's slow-burning art in the dark days of Reagan and Bush the First. Too much American painting felt vain and bloated—you might recall the Whitney's mid-career retrospectives of David Salle's callow figures or Julian Schnabel's busted crockery in the late '80s.

But Winters's 1992 exhibition brought the sudden sense of an artist struggling across a broad, inhospitable frontier; included was *Dystopia* (1985), one of the great paintings of the late 20th century. A translucent burgundy sphere, buttressed by charcoal-gray struts, floats across a smoggy sky—was it inspired by Montgolfier's original hot-air balloon, an Edgerton stop-motion photo of an atomic blast, or

perhaps a spore seeking fertile ground? Winters's wide-ranging interests encompassed them all, and *Dystopia*'s deft shifts of scale, rough passages of thick paint, and strangulated palette invited catholic interpretations.

Winters's Whitney retrospective closed with *Event Horizon*, a 10-foot-wide expanse of splashy pinks and smeared whites stacked up on the canvas like sediment; irregularly perforated red slabs hovered perpendicularly over this wasteland, forming a jarring taxonomy. It was as if these lumbering elements were exerting ferocious torque on the horizon line and sending palpable reverberations across the basically flat composition. This was a compelling expansion of earlier work, in which Winters (who was born in Brooklyn in 1949) had portrayed mushrooms, seeds, and insects bluntly arrayed across swathes of vigorous brushwork—a sloppy scientist's specimen collection.

Like Jackson Pollock, Winters has evolved beyond depiction even as he has created believable environs on canvas. Pollock used his studies of Tintoretto's swirling Renaissance figuration to embody nature in the form of graceful loops and snarls of poured paint. Winters, however, seems unconcerned with classical influence even as he conveys a deep appreciation of Cézanne's clunky facets of space

Art

sci-fi epic could do worse than to hire him to crank out production drawings.

It's to Winters's credit that his work can be deeply uneven, as he kneads notions of figure and ground like taffy. In Matthew Marks's front gallery, two recent paintings offer pallid, organic geometries on rich blue ranges, which feel rather one-note in comparison to the "Knotted Graphs" series in the main space. In *Knotted Graphs/4* (2008), that same cool hue underlies a scrim of knobby white forms flecked with yellow and peach, as if a Matisse painting had been spun through a centrifuge and leached of color. The catalog notes that the artist's "knots are abstract conceptual figures culled from knot theory, a specialized area of topology involving the study of mathematical knots—defined as closed curves in space whose lines do not intersect." If that doesn't sound like much fun, consider this addendum: "The simplest of knots—so simple that in knot theory it is referred to as an *unknot*—is the circle."

Winters's shapes are anything but simple—they protrude and gather, forming tumescent lumps bound by invisible cords that reveal their backgrounds through rats' nests of negative space. These autonomous worlds contain no suns or artificial light, only the interior glow of bioluminescence or radiation. Are these abstractions, or illustrations of places not of this world? In a 1992 *Bomb* magazine interview, Winters recalled a "famous quote from Leonardo's notebook about seeing figures in the stains on a wall," adding, "There seems to be almost a biological need to invest images with those kinds of readings." But if we have a driving instinct to discern faces in clouds or the Virgin Mary's visage in a grilled-cheese sandwich, how can abstraction persevere?

That has been Winters's quest for nearly three decades. While his early observations led to paintings as pungent as the deadfall of leaves, roots, and worms in a dark forest, the later work seems an acknowledgment that the material world of our senses is being transcended—not by the philosophies or religions of yore but by cutting-edge science and computers. Paintings in one of his mid-'90s series were as flat as CAT scans, yet the curved, cratered contours were volatile, even sensuous; colors became hybrids of nature and technology, like radioactive dyes injected into the bloodstream to throw disease into high relief. In the new *Knotted Graphs* paintings, Winters deploys strata of often-transparent pigments that bleed into one another, a crazy quilt that at first looks disparate and random until the ragged grids and cascades of bulbous shapes slowly, even laboriously, coalesce into beautiful bloom, an organic cyberspace.

The artist's smarts extend to finding poetry in the technical terms he often employs for titles, such as the 1985 drawing *Fate Map*, which he defined as "a diagram used in embryology to describe the future of a form," explaining, "I like the idea of projecting a future, graphically." If the future is a place where our progeny will laugh at our present-day superstitions, cruelty, and ignorance, they won't be able to dismiss Winters. Devoid of classicism, he is making our age's classical art.

How soon will Winters go Hollywood? *Knotted Graphs /1* (2008), detail

and a thorough understanding of color unmoored from any descriptive function—think of Matisse's vibrant *Red Studio*.

Usual concepts of style don't really describe the restless, stubborn search for inspiration that has sent Winters delving into the far reaches of scientific and mathematical theory. The artist recently pointed out that "much of the contemporary world is driven by abstract processes; whether it's developments in chaos and complexity theory or computers and scientific visualization, it all feeds new ideas about abstract imagery." Yet there is also a pulpy, even lowbrow quality to his work. Take the 10 "Viewing Notation" drawings currently at Matthew Marks: Ovoids bulge

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and recede, sending out shock waves that deform thick striations of graphite—these are landscapes in search of a theory that they can even exist. In an era of elaborate computer-generated vistas, Winters's worlds have a gritty plausibility—any movie studio embarking on a big-budget