

Johnnie Winona Ross

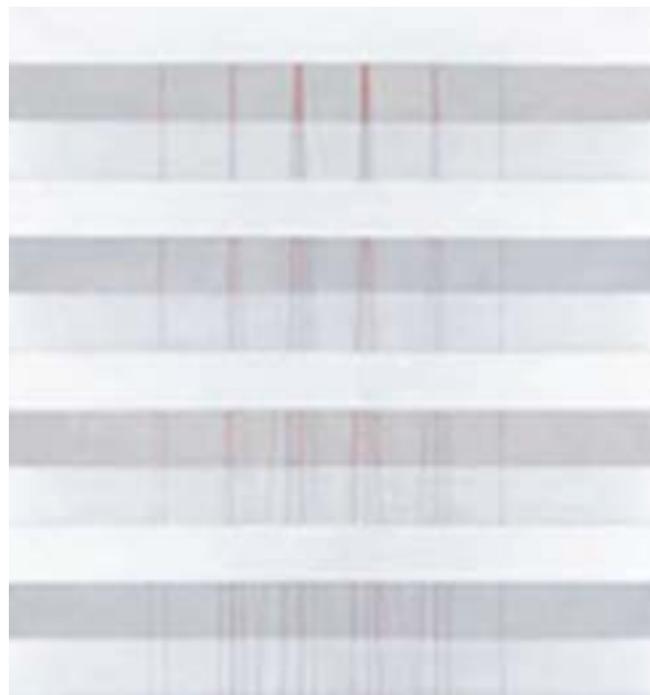
The loveliness of Johnnie Winona Ross' paintings elude translation into either reproduction or verbal description. Compositional clarity and order can be conveyed only at the cost of intimacy with the small, exquisite freedoms that loosen the architecture to let in air and light.

For all the apparent minimalism of his compositions, built on the familiar grid, there is nothing minimal in the translucence of his surfaces. The hard-won radiance of them—tinted with spare bands of pale color—suggests that contemplative emptiness sought by mystics in abnegation and forbearance. These are the most silent paintings to emerge from the minimalist impulse, so noisy with its own vaunted frugality.

Ross' work has been compared to that of Bridget Riley, Mark Rothko and Dan Flavin. Each comparison is accurate enough, in its way, but not adequate. While Riley's optical patterns can dazzle, her surfaces are arid and allusions to landscape are largely rhetorical. Ross does not intend to dazzle but to press light from color and line. Flavin's light is fluorescent, dependent on electricity and in debt to Thomas Edison. By contrast, the radiance of Ross' labor-intensive painting emerges from within, the result of pure pigment mixed with granulated marble, layered and burnished with a potter's stone.

It is in its light—even more than in recumbent parallels suggestive of horizon lines—that Ross' allusions to landscape take on reality. Here is the keen ambient light of the New Mexican desert that provides place names for the paintings' titles: "Deep Creek Seeps-Red Bluffs," "Corn Creek Seeps," "San Solomon Seeps." Lustrous whites evoke bleached bones. His colors are those of scorched sand and distances decolorized by heat and haze. Deeper shades appear sparingly, in slender bundles of vertical lines that weep down the horizontals.

This year's "Lost Creek Seep" is simple in its geometry but intricate in lambent shifts of color within the bounds of level planes. Three identical color belts, separated from each other by glowing white



Deep Creek Seeps (Red Bluff), 2010, Various paints burnished on bleached linen, 36 x 34.5 inches. At Stephen Haller Gallery, NYC

bands, stretch horizontally across—and beneath—the polished surface. Their uniformity is broken into thirds, lengthwise, by a slow warming of color in the central division. The effect calls to mind Rothko's effort to find that point where the visible glides into the invisible. But Rothko's gestures toward light were breaks in a reigning gloom. Ross' incandescent works approach the ecstatic.

No small part of that sense of exaltation is the artist's jeweler's eye and love of craft. No detail—from hand-forged tacks at fastidious intervals along the stretchers to his pigment compounds—escapes the attention of awakeful sensibility. There is something countercultural in the way these paintings assert themselves as the work of hands. Contemporary fashion for listless conceptualism abandons concern for art's origin in the vital bond between concept and labor. Implicit in the beauty of Ross' works is the aesthetic dimension of skilled labor.

Maureen Mullarkey
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