



Charles Michael Norton, *Ornette*, 2006, acrylic on linen, 72 x 90"

The Sudden Springs Series

Charles Michael Norton at TAMA Gallery, TriBeCa, New York

by Kóan Jeff Baysa

Charles Michael Norton, trained and renowned in Europe and the West Coast of America as a sculptor, now transliterates three-dimensional objects into remarkable paintings. The physicality of gathering, the materiality of emotion, and the concretization of thought were hallmarks of his sculptures. From this background he brings the concept of building structures, an architectonic methodology combined with the archeological metaphors of excavation. This current exhibition of his new acrylic paintings on Belgian linen at TAMA Gallery in TriBeCa, New York, gathers many of the breakthrough pieces that he has painted over the last three years. They are partly inspired by the recently

acquired country property he and his artist-spouse Ruth Hardinger named Sudden Springs because of the land's numerous aquifers.

A broadening spectrum is seen in the artist's palette with the increased use of red and yellow pigments. The addition of flesh-colored paints such as Titan Buff and Portrait Pink introduces a human element. This shift is reflective of a different way of seeing and initiating a different dialogue with a varied approach to constructing his paintings in a malleable, more forgiving way, one that allows for adjustments. Worked primarily with cadmium-based colors for their vital intensity, these paintings have more organic references

yet retain their architectural concern with the line. Painting without brushes but instead with spatulas and tools identical to mud knives he used during an earlier stint as a taper in drywall construction, he employs the similarly vigorous physical gestures of both endeavors.

To achieve specific effects, Norton arranges and blends paints on the blade before their application onto the canvas, employs tape to mask out certain areas, and uses subtractive rubbing to reveal, blend, or negate underlying layers and colors. Areas of raw linen canvas underscore the palimpsestual nature of Norton's resonant paintings. Layers are created through sweeps of the paint spatulas and exposed by scraping. Described as reverse drawing, pigments protected by overlying tape are flayed as the tape is drawn away, breaking up space, apposing and exposing layers. The



Charles Michael Norton, *Second Summer 6, 2006*, acrylic on linen, 22 x 30"

drawing analogies are extended to include the strategies of shadowing and outlining with black pigment. The artist often creates a genealogy of paintings, as one may receive the residuum of pigments on the knife from another. Windows and portals reveal labyrinthine passages and strata of paint, analogous to overlapping membranes or layers of tissues, thick and opaque in some areas, tapering and diaphanous in others. Rubbed areas, direct evidence of the artist's hand, lay open with exposed nerve endings. Perceptions shift with differing and simultaneous vantage points, from the optical push and pull of images, and from microscopic and telescoping perspectives. Within these illusionistic interstices the materiality of the medium is revealed. Scabrous surfaces and congealed colors stir visceral reactions, and the biomorphic agenda opens up the potential for narrative, for the stories that are borne within.

Ornette is named after the legendary musician who formulated the term "harmolodics," a concept of compositional improvisation that promotes individual freedom while simultaneously respectful of other musicians and achieving harmony. In the eponymous painting, the viewer is

led through a quasi-synaesthetic experience of visualizing free jazz melodies. Four adjacent and indistinct vertical planes, like major chords, lie over minor chords, and are Norton's deliberations resolving visual dissonance and striving towards harmony within the planes of the painting, an origami folding of space and time. A rhythm is orchestrated as the viewer's eyes are drawn across the painting, between the long ultramarine blue vertical note on the left to the red diagonal pitch bleeding off the right corner. Blaring deep red colorations bared by circular windows riff off of rectilinear scales of reticulated yellow pigment, as flesh tones and raw linen evoke somatic references. The tinnabulation of colors in the upper right quadrant stand resolute as traces of a compositional problem solved, with the remnants regarded as important as what has been concealed.

Norton has the depth and the skill to imbue the smaller paintings with the gravitas of the larger works. The painting's vertical divisions resemble dynamically shifting tectonic plates in *Second Summer 6* where the physicality of troweled pigments is even more evident in its intimate scale. Since the suite of paintings is partly inspired by

countryside views familiar to Norton, the works can be read through that filter, as the artist remarks, "like a squashed landscape." The cresting green-pink-black bead of paint near the top edge of the painting demonstrates this, as well as the escarpment of built-up pigments near the lower left edge. Skinned in some areas and revealing its understructure, the painting bears an area rubbed raw down to the red. Eddies of pigments swirl at the vertical edges; flecks of paint adhere to the rough surfaces over which it was dragged. Ultimately self-referential, this work evinces dripping, oozing, pooling, melting, smearing, slipping, shearing, and smudging, from the laying up of buttery pigments onto assorted surfaces. Differing viscosities result in colored dribbles and drools. Spontaneity and serendipity manipulate the force vectors between the edge of the blade holding the pigment and the various receiving surfaces, producing patterns as surprising as those that echo stones skipping across water or the photic feathered undulations of the Northern Lights. Within the delta of pink stand islets of blue. Visual poetry results from the dance and the dialogue, the immediacy of communication between the artist, the paint, and the surface. "It is all about the paint," Norton remarks, "with forms servicing forms, colors servicing colors, creating feeling and emotion. It is abstract and it is expressionistic, but I seek a fresh approach that stands apart from Abstract Expressionism."

In his prognostication of the value and utility of abstract art in the book of his collected lectures, *Pictures About Nothing*, former MoMA curator Kirk Varnedoe reminded us that more than mere pure looking is necessary to begin to understand its man-made and made-with-intent experiential language. Within these complex paintings and their nuanced histological references lies a sensate humanness. At their core, these paintings evince mark making that invokes their genesis as essential human gestures from the exceptional persona of Charles Michael Norton.