

TUBES produced an article some time ago, following our interview with New York painter Brian Rutenberg. Knowing that artist Alan Clement Evans was also a great admirer, TUBES recently invited Alan to write a follow-up piece for the magazine.

To further explore the significant talent of Brian Rutenberg, you can examine his work at: <http://www.brianrutenbergart.com>. His highly popular blog series on painters and painting can be followed at: <https://www.youtube.com/@thomgains1727/videos>.

Brian Rutenberg - "The Art of The Real"

by Alan Clement Evans

We live in an artistic era that dares not ask too much of its viewers. Gallerists speak of accessibility. Artists are encouraged to embrace the Instagram "hit". Critics, those few who write with a modicum of rigour, are expected to decipher meaning in art as if translating a manual.

Against this pallid landscape, Brian Rutenberg's work resists, not with violence, but with stillness. With rigour and commitment. And it is precisely that refusal to pander and yield to fashion that gives these works their weight. They support the view that Rutenberg must be considered to be one of the finest American painters of his generation.

Brian Rutenberg's canvases are not concerned with posturing nor hitting at a quick sensation between viewer and surface. They do not flatter or flirt. They stand in front of you - dense, thick with material, stubborn in their refusal to move at the pace of our current artistic appetites. In a contemporary art world increasingly intoxicated with novelty, performance, and the easily digestible spectacle, the paintings of Brian Rutenberg arrive possessed of that rarest quality in visual culture today: substance.

They are not fast, nor are they "easy". They do not resolve in a flash of cleverness. Rather, they unspool, like music heard through a wall, emerging slowly and with persistence. They demand more than a passing glance. They demand you stop. That you stand. That you look. And looking - really looking - is precisely what these paintings reward.

Rutenberg's process is the slow burn. These are works that require time, not only in their making - where paint is dragged, pulled, scraped, then reapplied - but also in their reception. They are not intended to teach or, even worse, to preach. There is no political agenda here. What they offer, instead, is presence. A density of being. The sense that you are not so much looking at something as looking "into" it. Through it, even into a place where the sediment of memory, gesture, and thought has been layered, not just with deliberation, but with infinite care. These are not conceptual games. They are not platforms for performance. They are, to put it bluntly, "real" paintings. And in this 21st century, that is more radical than it sounds.

To call Rutenberg an abstractionist is both true and insufficient. His forms certainly do not represent reality. Yet, the term abstraction flattens what is a physically rich result. He is not abstracting from nature in the traditional sense. He is conjuring its pulse, its pressure, its embodied memory. Rutenberg does not depict that place so much as distil it. The memories of his birthplace and childhood in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in the southern USA is ever present. He may as well have his studio there, rather than in New York.

His paintings carry the South not as an image, but as an atmosphere. The air is thick. The light is soaked. The green is dense. There are no trees, no rivers, no bayous. And yet they are there, in the weight of the colour, in the humidity of space. This is not the South of myth or romantic ruin. It is not Faulkner's decay nor the cinematic cliché of Hollywood. It is something less literary, more elemental. One might say his paintings feel like a sensation of the South remembered through the body.

Rutenberg's surfaces are resolutely physical. They are not screens upon which an image floats, but terrains - worked, reworked, and thick with the sediment of previous decisions. You see this immediately. Paint is applied in generous slabs, dragged across linen with palette knives, rags, fingers. The gesture is not bravura but choreographic. It is a body thinking in colour. The surface becomes a kind of archaeology. Layers are built, scraped back, rebuilt again. A mark is made, reconsidered, overwritten, revealed. It is the very opposite of the clean digital image. There is no slickness here. No surface perfection. Instead, there is evidence. The hand, the decision, the change of mind. In Rutenberg's world, all remain visible.

This is what gives the work its authority. Not ego, but earned structure. There is nothing casual here. One thinks, not incorrectly, of music - its structure and drama. And if you listen to the canvases long enough - and attentive listening is precisely what they ask of you - you can feel the rhythms at play. Motifs recur. Forms echo. Colours pulse and retreat. There is call and response. These paintings are not static. They move, but not in a cinematic sense. There is no narrative. Rather, they move like weather, like tide, like memory. Their motion is internal.

Unlike much abstraction, which seeks to flatten or simplify, Rutenberg's paintings deepen. What at first appears chaotic, almost explosive, settles with time into coherence. The eye adjusts. Space emerges. Not illusionistic space but compositional logic. A passage of cobalt set off by an ochre slur. A band of crimson hemmed by green. These are not decorative gestures. They are structural.

It is this sense of structure that so many contemporary painters lack. The studio has become a site of spontaneity, gesture a mode of evasion. The market rewards speed, volume, and narrative. Rutenberg offers none of that. His paintings are not stories. They are not diaries. They are not hot takes in pigment. They are built. Like bridges. Like musical scores. And they are built by him alone. In an era where studio assistants are fashionable and art "factories" are commonplace,

Rutenberg's solitude matters. Because each decision is his. Each mark is thought through, lived through. There is no outsourcing. No delegation. That solitary ethic is embedded in the work. You can feel it - like the difference between hand-thrown pottery and mass-produced ceramic. The irregularities are not errors. They are the signature of attention.

The longer you look, the more the painting reveals - not in the sense of a hidden message - but in the way a place becomes familiar. You start to notice the dialogue between a scraped back underlayer and a new mark laid on top of it. The way a line curves is not out of whim but necessity. There is clarity in the complexity. And if you stay long enough, you start to hear it speak.

Rutenberg has said he paints for an audience of one. It sounds precious, almost anti-social. But it is not. It is, in fact, a rebuke to the prevailing currency of performative engagement. He is not painting to be liked. He is not painting to provoke. He is painting to find what is right. Right for the canvas, for the mark, for the moment. That search has integrity. And it shows.

Over time, his work has evolved - not in the sense of reinvention but in deepening. There is more volatility in the colours now. The structures are looser, more daring. The contrasts are sharper. But the core remains: structure, rhythm, presence. It is not the style that has changed. It is the range. A broader vocabulary within the same grammar. This, too, is rare. The art world rewards transformation. Change is currency. But Rutenberg's trajectory is one of refinement, not mutation. He is digging deeper, not shifting ground. And this, paradoxically, gives the work its freshness. Because it is not trying to be fresh. It is not trying to be anything but itself.

And so the paintings endure. They endure in a way that much contemporary work does not. Because they were not made to be momentary. They were not made to circulate on social media. They were not made to illustrate a point. They were made to last. To be seen. To be held by the eye over time. They will not go viral. They will not become NFTs. They will not decorate a hype cycle. But they will remain. Because they were made with care. Because they were made alone. Because they were made to mean something.

This is not nostalgia. It is not the conservative plea for a return to old values. It is a belief in painting, in form, in the dignity of the well-made thing. And that belief, stubborn though it may be, is what gives these works their staying power. There is a moment, standing before a Rutenberg painting, when the noise fades. The theories. The trends. The need to understand. What remains is the painting itself. And you. That moment is rare. And it is enough.

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