

CHEIM & READ

ARTFORUM

Tal R

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The Copenhagen-based artist Tal R is a catholic sort, having made sculpture, installations, clothing, and more as well as paintings, and having ventured into theater, music, dance, and other fields. His art has appeared in both solo and group shows in New York, but a good deal less often than in Europe, where he has exhibited quite widely. This show, his first one-man outing in New York since 2006, contained a focused group of works made in an unusual medium that he handles particularly well, a mixture of pigment and rabbit-skin glue. Since the glue dries quickly, the artist must work quickly too, and is also less able to revise—to conceal and remove, or layer and add—than an artist using oils or acrylics. The paintings, then, may be something of a high-wire act in the studio, though their appeal does not depend on our knowing this.

I think of other artists who use techniques demanding speed and sureness of hand; one who comes to mind is Manuel Pardo, who works in pencil on grounds of wet paint, which, in drying, sets a deadline by which he has to finish. Methods such as this push toward drawing and often result in a linear, cartoonlike quality. Tal R's work too occasionally recalls popular cartoons and picture books—a certain old-fashioned look to his street and café scenes, and to his characters' clothes and cars, reminds me, for one, of the Babar children's books of the 1930s—but he tends to work less with line than with good-size areas of a single color that come together, patchwork style, to form decipherable images. The extreme example is *The Shlomo*, 2011, which shows a dark figure in an ambiguous space—a waiting room? a cell?—made up almost entirely of large colored planes, mainly reds, their richness somewhat offsetting the figure's solitude. More typically, though, Tal R's work displays a love of pattern that manifests in arrays of different-size stripes and dots. *Night Awning*, 2012, for example, shows a street corner and a row of shops largely composed of those forms, making for a candy-colored fairground version of a cityscape.

Pattern, of course, cannot be illusionistic, cannot be a window on the world—it announces itself as artifice. As such, it has had a complex history in modernist painting, acknowledged for its antiperspectival flatness, its implicit abstraction, its undoing of representational habits, but also shunned as decorative, unable to bear the weight of avant-garde ambition. Tal R's work postdates those debates—its patterning is floridly explicit—but it is full of echoes of artists to whom they mattered. *House Bonni*, 2012, with its grid construction parallel to the picture plane, might fuse memories of Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian, though its palette is Tal R's own and its grid is unmistakably also a building's stone wall. *Framer at Night*, 2012, plays similarly in quite lovely ways with a frontal arrangement of boxes and bars that happen to share their shapes with the painting's subject, a shopwindow display of picture frames. This kind of doubleness is inserted into every painting through a horizontal block of color along the bottom edge, often the site of the artist's signature, and reading occasionally as floor or ground—in other words, as description—but more often as an unobtrusive break in the picture's representational logic.

Tal R was born Tal Rosenzweig in Israel and grew up in Denmark. He has spoken in interviews of a long-term sense of displacement, and while he doesn't describe this as a particularly unhappy state, the paintings have a melancholic undertow. The figure in *The Shlomo*—Shlomo, by the way, is Tal R's middle name—reappears in *Shlomo Taking a Nap*, 2012, nodding off outside a building composed as a cheerful set of yellow, red, blue, pink, and green panels. Behind Shlomo, though, is a tree that's all darkness, and that darkness seems to seep down and into his body. There's also a double quality in Tal R's color, which even at its brightest and most pleasurable hints at austerity—the weave of the canvas is always visible through the thin meld of pigment and glue. These ambiguities and resonances of both form and content give the work the weight it needs.

—David Frankel

Tal R, *Night Awning*, 2012, rabbit-skin glue and pigment on canvas, 67¼ x 55¼".

