

RICK

BRIGGS

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Full Circle

February 18 - March 15, 2016

Giving Credit Where Credit is Due by Robert Storr

Abstraction and the L Train by Wallace Whitney

Curated by Matthew Neil Gehring

Flecker Gallery

Suffolk County Community College

Ammerman Campus, Selden, NY

Director's Foreword:

During our recent studio visit Rick said something, almost in passing, that strikes me as centrally important to his work: "You have to violate the surface in some way". One might ask "Why"? I imagine Briggs might say "If you want to make a relevant painting in the contemporary milieu you have to upset it somehow". In his Williamsburg studio you will find tubes of oil and cans of gesso adjacent industrial enamels, and house paints. In his paintings you find them applied with brushes, sponges, rollers, rags, and bare hands. Not only is there no distinction between high and low materials or high and low process, there is no firm sense that these paintings are in any way separate from the rest of life. The surfaces in Briggs' paintings seem to be paramount, and act to provide a footing for the paintings in this place of flux. It is as if Briggs is a collector of familiar surfaces; the fresh sheen of the top coat of layer-caked enamel on subway girders, tagged postal boxes, and storefront grates. The whole of Briggs' lived experience seems to coalesce in a kind of equilibrium in these paintings. This kind of equity violates the rarified status of painting, not just the surface. It is a democratizing feature and key element.

Not only does Briggs eschew pristine paint surfaces and handling, he degrades the very support by cutting the canvas and penetrating the plane with paint soaked rollers, adhering paint-laden cloths to the surface, and incorporating tarps, at times loosely draped over lumpy under-structures. Briggs' paintings are cheeky-but dead serious. Thumbing one's nose at convention (in both the art world and the public sphere) while continuing to work within a tradition seems to have been the name of the game in painting at least since Turner in the mid-nineteenth century, and Briggs has smartly (or inevitably) situated himself in this transgressive vein.

These are artworks whose meaning can only be divined by examining their properties and those embodied here are certainly standing for values that are outside of any mainstream notion of good painting or taste. They are raw and unrefined. They contain no information but are filled with structural critique and dissent. They profess no practical purpose, yet are intellectually rich and assertive. They establish no hierarchy, in fact they oppose that very notion. They contain no narrative, no story of other places or peoples; instead they ask to be examined and to have their nature questioned as they question the nature of all things, including themselves.

These paintings are undoubtedly made for an audience that knows something about the history of art, especially the culturally critical role it has played from early Modernism to the present. But an open mind and desire to engage with the unknown will suffice. The following essays by Robert Storr and Wallace Whitney, which we are so fortunate to include here, are sure to illuminate a path to discovery.

Flecker Gallery is delighted to host this exhibition.

Matthew Neil Gehring, Director

Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due

by Robert Storr

Some painters just can't leave well enough alone. Which is to say they can't resist elaborating upon an initially strong image. Usually this is a bad thing. Like gilding a lily, though more often it produces something gaudy or kitschy rather than refined and jewel-like. As a rule such embellishments are a sign of mistrust in the original formal statement, an overt bid to please viewers in whom the artist also lacks trust and so feels s/he must keep busy, keep entertained and in the process over-stimulate.

Other times, however, extra layers of aesthetic attention result from a surfeit of excitement at the prospects the initial composition opens up, the still widening horizons it reveals. This kind of excess – if excess it truly is – looks very different and feels very different. It doesn't resonate as too much resulting from a fear of too little but as necessary, a necessity embedded in the insistent specificity of the choices made each time mark or shape or facet is added.

That's the way Rick Briggs' paintings read to me; as a much-of-a-muchness that could only be thus; as painterly situations so palpably exempt from the modernist "less-is-more" dictum that one feels absurd attempting to impose it. And so as a point of reference within the doodle-prone, dimension-swelling domain of Briggs' art I would direct the skeptical spectators' eyes toward the relatively simple Delft-tile crossed with sundial image of Blue Boy, and suggest that it is the baseline against which more aggressively Baroque caprices such as Painting Pirouette, with its bulges and wrinkles and folds, be judged. I would also remind them to compare Briggs current work to that of Elizabeth Murray who made spare, quirky modular, even "minimalist" abstractions for several years before making the quantum spatial leap into her mid- and late career warped canvases with their polychrome maelstrom of forms.

Briggs hasn't so much evolved from one such phase to another as given himself permission to follow two lines of thought simultaneously in intertwining directions, prompting the elemental One and Rolled Structure, on the one hand, and



"Rolled Structure", 2010, alkyd house paint on drop cover, 66 x 80 inches

the dizzying agitations and protrusions of Innervision and For JMB on the other. Other canvases are located between these *unextremist* extremes – Briggs is not trying to blow painting to smithereens or starve it into submission – but rather make emphatically material visual objects that sustain the curious observer’s involuntary response, which is to squint, knit their brows and say to themselves “What’s that?”

There are far worse questions to be asked of art. Especially in an era when critical discourse is forever “interrogating” it, as if art were a prisoner-of-conscience – a prisoner of fully alert consciousness? – who’d had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the thought police. Well, the world is in a pretty terrible state right now and the thought police are active everywhere, so it is good to have something to concentrate on and think about that is really off their radar. Something that gives unalloyed and intelligently odd-ball pleasure, indeed a little more of such pleasure than conservative aesthetes of the Beauty Brigade will know what to do with. That bonus in turn restores balance to things in another direction, since “beauty” that doesn’t disturb but merely soothes the senses isn’t really beauty at all, just an academic wet dream of the perfect low maintenance aesthetic geisha. So while Briggs upsets no apple carts he does offer a bit more of his whimsically jazzy type of image-making than the general and even the dedicated public are likely to be prepared for. So much the better, I say.

Robert Storr, Brooklyn 2016

Robert Storr is an American curator, critic, painter, and academic.



“Innervision”, 2015, alkyd house paint, oil stick, roller sleeves, spray, charcoal and color swatch on canvas, 24 x 30 inches, detail

Abstraction and the L Train

by Wallace Whitney

Rick Briggs’s paintings resemble paintings I know and love, like the lyrically abstract musings of Howard Hodgkins or the quasi-geologic expressions of Per Kirkeby. On closer inspection, there is an undercurrent that runs through the paintings that signal roots in the urban, the world of work and a slash and burn approach to abstraction which feels very much his own.

In the painting *Last Green Ray*, for example, marks add up to become atmospheric space. Gesture and mark refer directly back to the format of the canvas. The subtlety of the application and sensitivity of the palette send the paintings to a new place, a space driven by value and color. Each painting in this show has a different and particular space, created by the attack or retreat of various pressures of mark and color intensity creating emotive properties.

The paintings share a use of line: line used both as an expressive gesture and as a tool to structure each composition. Briggs has a drawn line all his own; faltering and assured simultaneously. His lines assert pictorial structure and dynamism; there is a type of insouciant “screw it” mechanism at work here. The paintings and the resolutions found in them embody Briggs’s understanding that a painting is endless, particularly a painting that doesn’t use image as its organizing principle.

Briggs has a hybrid approach to material. The stretched canvas, the rectangular supports, the use of brushes and artist grade oil color: these are the signs of a traditional atelier. There is reverence for the things that say: “this is a painting” but Briggs uses materials that aren’t so typical, as well. There are bursts of spray paint and he often applies paint with rollers used for painting walls. The roller covers themselves often become embedded in the canvases. He is fond of non-art paint: Ben Moore Alkyd Impervo is heavily featured in *For JMB*. Briggs uses Impervo, an industrial product designed to COVER, all wrong letting it drip and wrinkle pointing to it’s lusciously hidden properties. Even the canvas is up for discussion: look a little closer and you can see the seams of a commercial drop cloth, a drop cloth? Sure! No super fine Belgian linen here. By choosing materials with specific histories and meanings, Briggs complicates his paintings, placing them into new orbits: the construction job site, the hardware store, and the street.

The paintings of Mary Heillman, Dona Nelson, and Joan Snyder, who precede Briggs generationally, share a lot with his approach. There is a full embrace of abstraction, but in some subliminal way, there is a profound lack of purity along with the notable addition of personal content. I love the “to hell with it” type of casualness in this work. Recently this attitude has been tagged with many cringe-inducing names coined by waggish critics: informalism, crapstraction - the names are as inventive as they are useless.



"Last Green Ray", 2013, alkyd house paint, spray, oil stick, and paint skin on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

Despite a top-shelf education, the abstraction Briggs employs seems to have been invented by an amateur, an autodidact or enthusiast, not a MoMA-style modern painter. Exploring the boundaries and seemingly endless elasticity of the traditional tableau is an essential subject of his paintings. Briggs spoke to me about the near bodily pain he experienced when he cut into one his canvases for the first time, as if he was doing some sort of physical violence. Sixty years after Lucio Fontana made his famous cut paintings.

By calling the show "Full Circle" Briggs asks us to consider the journey that a real painting practice inevitably becomes. Over the course of a career begun in the 1980s, full of ups and downs, Briggs

has painted more realistically and less so over time. "Full circle" suggests a return to where he started: paintings that are improvisatory and completely non-objective. There are also a few circles in the paintings, too, a mapping of space or territory. Perhaps the use of circular forms could be read as a type of self-portraiture? Anyway, in this group of recent paintings, we find the painter returning to his origins, his first love - abstraction. This would hardly be significant without considering the arc of his practice, which makes this body of work so admirable and informed.

The writer James Salter has a description of writing short stories in his memoir *Burning the Days*. Being rather macho he uses a sports metaphor as a potential equivalent (middle distance running) and more interesting to me, he offers the untranslatable Finnish word "Sisu" as instructive. It roughly means perseverance: having guts or courage. The word also implies having this quality over time - sticking with something and not giving up despite obstacles. Painting takes a lot of time to get good at. You can have flashes of brilliance in your early twenties but in order for it to mean much you have to do it over time, a condition that seems unique to painting. Try painting seriously while working a job, making rent, paying for materials... when the "world" seems indifferent to your efforts. And as Willem de Kooning pointed out in his usual pithy way "the trouble with being poor is that it takes up all your time."

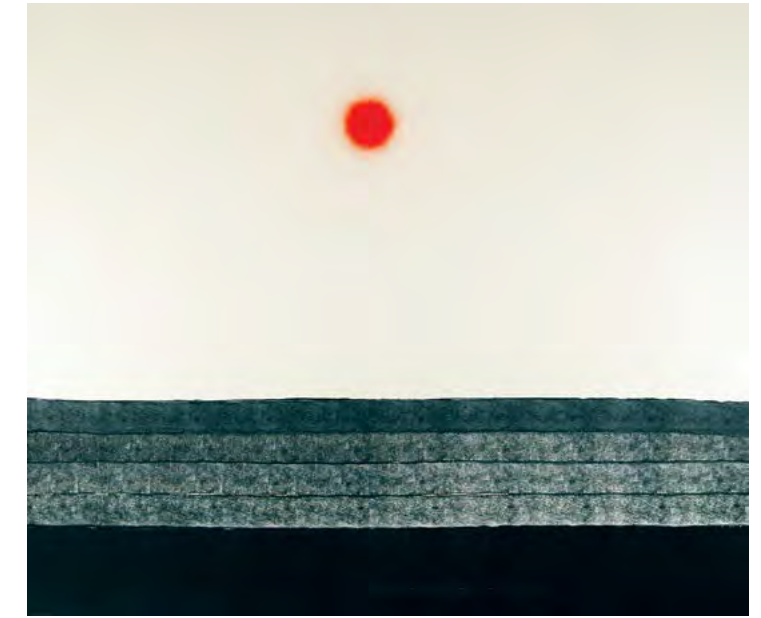
I visited Briggs's studio a few weeks ago on a gray December day, outside wind and rain slapped against the windows. I was looking at *Blue Boy*, a sweetly sweeping painting of ultramarine blue and white, full of layers and glazed depth and a powerful yet unassuming sundial-like shape in the center. It was buoyant, blithe and completely present. In his studio I became aware that I was in the presence of someone who has poked through to the other side, to a place of relative freedom. And while every painting isn't necessarily a masterpiece (his process guarantees this fact) there is an awareness of himself as a person and more importantly as an artist that is fully in the paintings.

Paintings that are raw, hold the impurities of the found, the non-art. Paintings that nod at the confusion of "what kind of painter are you? A house painter or a ...?" Paintings that are formally taut and alive, full of the maker's knowledge and reverence for abstraction. Paintings that carry an inoculation against simplistic self-importance, Briggs has built into his paintings auto-critiques on issues we know so well: gender, class, and the problematic nature of painting in our post-conceptual environment.

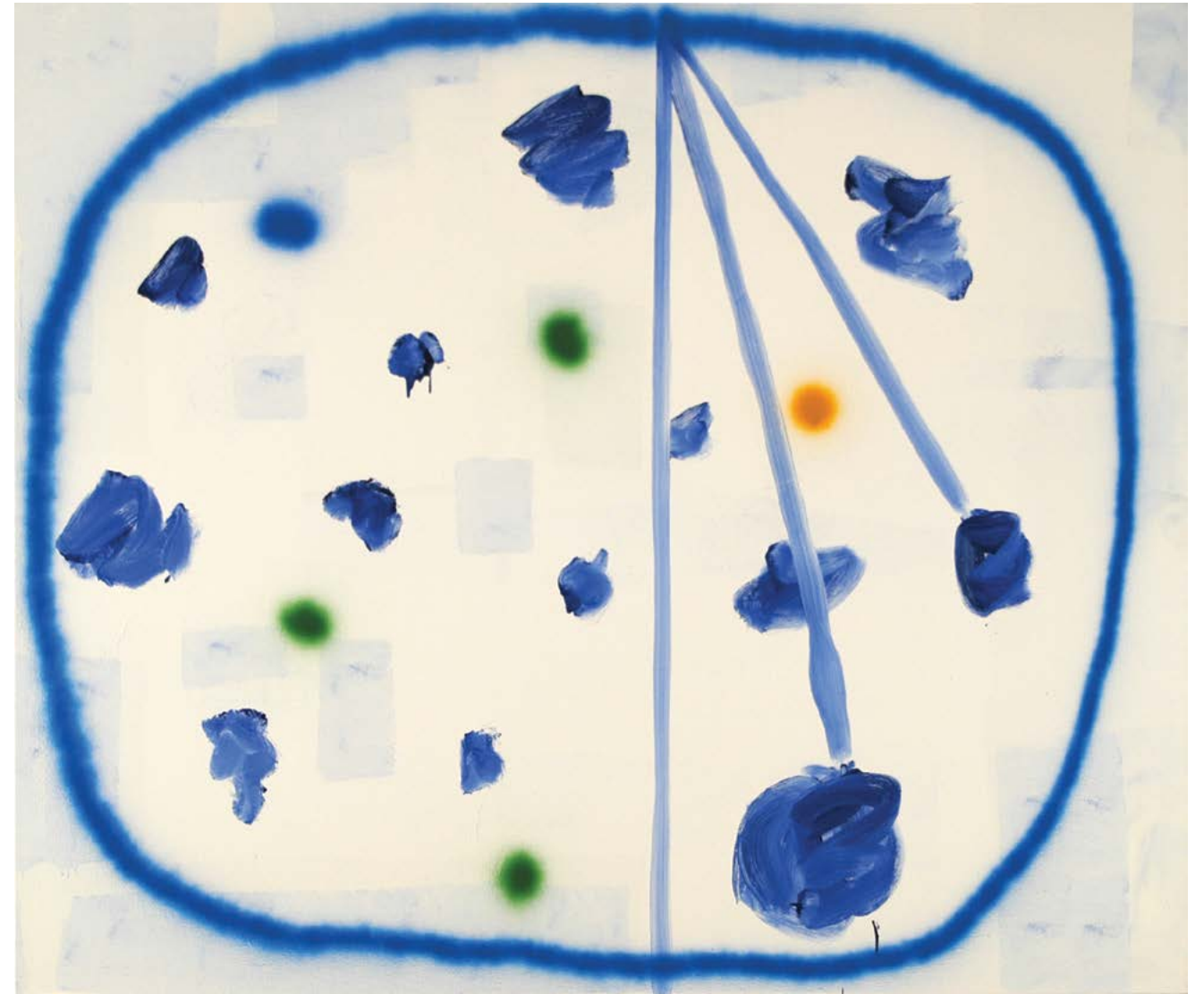
Yet they are emphatic paintings, full-throated sincere paintings. The best word I can think of for this balance is "grace" in a strictly secular sense. That Briggs can manage all of this in his life and in his studio in order to make work that is deft and urgent shows a graceful type of humanity that makes me feel fortunate that he completed his particular circle.

Wallace Whitney, Bronx 2016

Wallace Whitney is a painter who lives and works in the Bronx. In addition to his painting practice Whitney writes, curates exhibitions and since 2001 has co-owned CANADA an artist run art gallery that he co-founded in the Lower East Side neighborhood of Manhattan.



"One", 2010, alkyd house paint, spray on drop cover, 68.5 x 80 inches



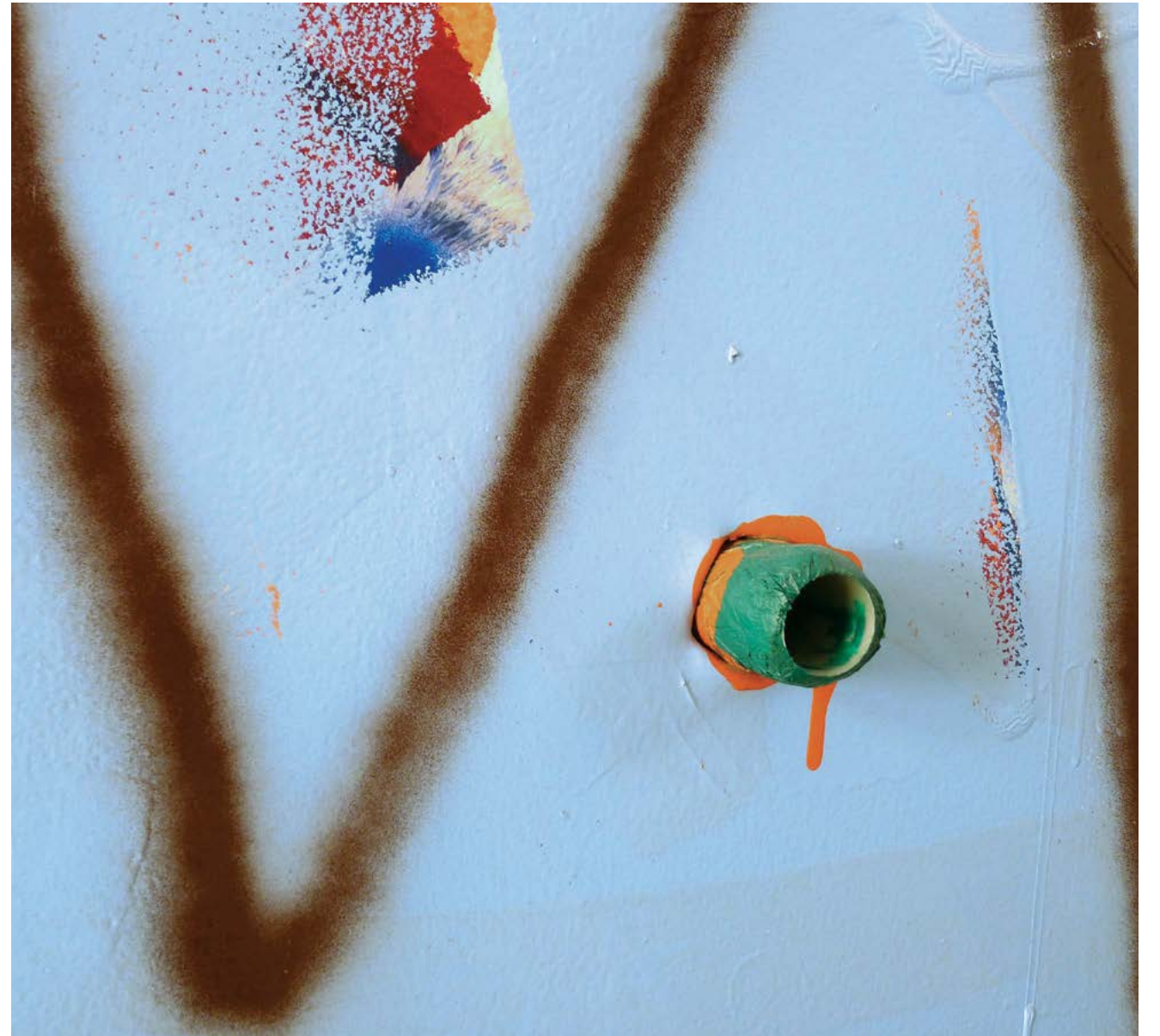
"Blue Boy", 2010, oil, alkyd house paint, and spray on canvas, 54 x 64 inches



"Hermit", 2011, oil, alkyd house paint, spray on drop cover, 68 x 80 inches



"For JMB", 2015, alkyd house paint, spray, shirts, paint skins, and roller sleeves on canvas, 66 x 72 inches



"Nazca Bug", 2013, alkyd house paint, shirt, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches



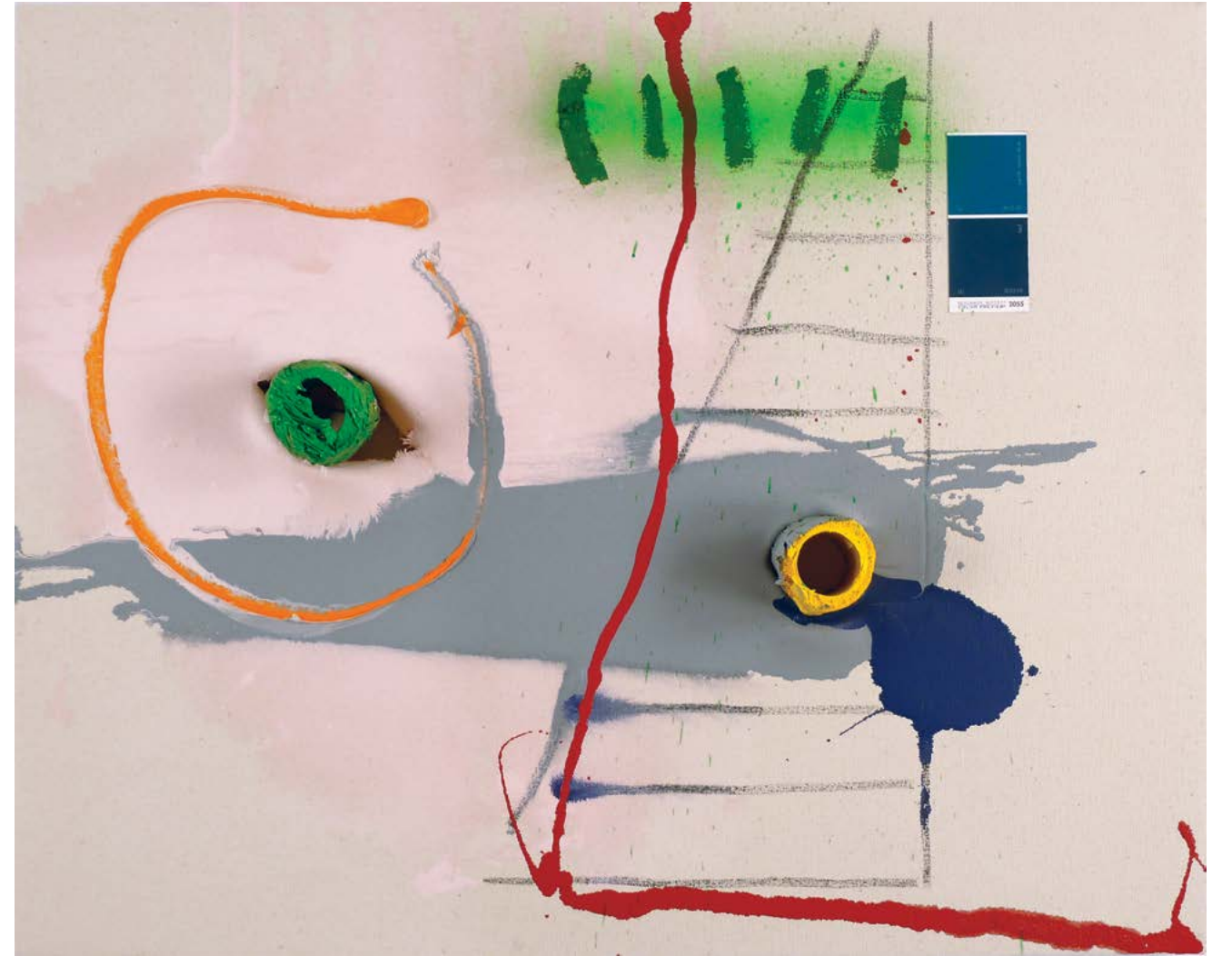
"First Painting", 2015, alkyd house paint, paint skin, aluminum spray, oil stick on canvas, 18 x 20 inches





"Painting Pirouette", 2013, alkyd house paint, spray, paint skin, and color swatches on drop cover, 24 x 30 inches





"Innervision", 2015, alkyd house paint, oil stick, roller sleeves, spray, charcoal and color swatch on canvas, 24 x 30 inches



Rick Briggs was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and studied there at The Tyler School of Art (BFA). He moved to NYC in 1980 and a year later to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Later he attended SUNY Purchase (MFA). In 2004, he was included in the Brooklyn Museum's "Open House: Working In Brooklyn" exhibition. The following year he had his first solo exhibition, "Painter Man", at the Sarah Bowen Gallery. In 2008, Robert Storr invited him to be in "Making Do Trois" at the Yale School of Art. He had his 2nd solo show at Valentine in 2012 and has been included in many group shows at venues such as the Paula Cooper Gallery, The Drawing Center, and Arts & Leisure. In addition to his work as an artist, Briggs has curated the shows "Let's Get Physical" and "My Big Fat Painting" and written exhibition reviews for the art website Hyperallergic. Briggs has attended artist residencies at Bennington College, The Edna St. Vincent Millay Colony of the Arts, and at the BAU/Camargo Center in Cassis, France in 2014. He received the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship in 2011 and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Fellowship in 2012. Briggs lives and works in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

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Essays by Robert Storr and Wallace Whitney

Gallery Director and Curator: Matthew Neil Gehring

Images appear courtesy of the artist.

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