

Painter Rubens Ghenov Invents a Fresh Storyline for Abstraction

By R.C. Baker

Wednesday, Dec 3 2014

It might come as a surprise that Rubens Ghenov's arresting compositions — hard edges adulterated by voluptuous pours and gossamer gradations — are inspired by the unpublished poetry of Angelico Moranda (born in 1940 in Spain; death date unknown), who was said to retreat to the woods for devout meditations during which he would wear a shroud that exposed only his ears. It might come as even more of a surprise to learn that Moranda never existed but is "almost a resident ghost or bodhisattva of sorts," as Ghenov (born in 1975) informed me in an email. The hesitancy of "almost" and "of sorts" goes a long way toward explaining the elusive but dynamic presences Ghenov conjures from paint.



A viewer who reads Moranda's backstory in the gallery handout might see the exposed linen grounds of Ghenov's paintings as an homage to the poet's shroud. Whatever their impetus, the raw surfaces convey vulnerability — a slip of the brush would mar the sophisticated, straight-edged geometries. Or maybe that's where some of the gorgeous blots and blurs of acrylic paint come from — does a serendipitous flick of the wrist beget Ghenov's evocative biomorphic shapes? Francis Bacon, who spent much of his career working on raw canvas, would occasionally throw blobs of paint at it to create shapes that would surprise him (or, sometimes, ruin the image). The English painter spoke of trying to capture a glimpse of a figure in motion, when its visceral indistinctness could convey more human truth than the sharpest photographic portrait.

MORGAN LEHMAN

535 West 22nd Street, New York, New York 10011

Like Bacon, who early in his career worked as an interior decorator, Ghenov possesses serious design chops, and some of these small paintings — each is 20 by 16 inches — deliver the initial punch of mid-20th-century graphics virtuoso Alvin Lustig's knockout book jackets. But although Ghenov's titles include words like "chronicle" and "unabridged," along with the occasional trapezoid that hints at the spine of a book, his deft paint handling and sumptuous palette transcend any sense of illustration, even as a pair of facing rectangles here or a stray snippet of text there might summon a chapbook of ephemeral verse. Moments of gnarled texture recall the fractured grace of Georges Braque's cubist interiors, while gray slabs floating like concrete clouds channel a deft surrealist ambiance, reinvigorating the timeless insight that a painting of a pipe is not a pipe.

Ghenov's achievement is to have found a new door of perception for abstraction to knock on.