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MARC FRANIS: ACUSTIC OCEANS REVIEW - A FASCINATING DEVELOPMENT IN THE IRISH ARTIST'S

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Subtonic, 2024, Oil on aluminum, 48 x 60.2 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist and Kerlin Gallery.

Born in 1962 in Newtownards, Co Down, Mark Francis is a well established painter with a singular style. He moved to London in the 1980s to attend art school and has lived there ever since. After the heyday of Francis Bacon, David Hockney and Lucian Freud, artists such as Derek Jarman and Gilbert & George were in the ascendant when Francis arrived, developing the themes and visual grammar of British queer art, while YBAs such as Liam Gillick, Sarah Lucas, and Tracey Emin followed close behind. Rather than fit in with what others were doing, Francis eschewed the (loose) artistic conventions associated with both camps and instead forged his own path, developing a highly idiosyncratic style of abstraction.

Francis describes his childhood as contemplative and outdoorsy – weekends absorbed in the landscape surrounding his hometown, trekking over the mountains of Mourne. This sense of wonder at the natural world translated into a passion for science: picking up a textbook containing images of the molecular structure of plants and animals, Francis recalls that the discovery of these microscopic vistas, hidden within the visible world, had a major impact on the direction of his painting practice.

Over the years, as he continued to explore the limits and permutations of what you might call "ordered abstracts," two further ideas infiltrated his work. The first was the phenomenon of sonic vibration. Sound requires a medium to carry through, and wavelike patterns appear time and again in Francis's canvases. The other idea, even more prevalent across Francis's oeuvre, is that of the grid – any collection of points or nodes, held together by a rectangular network of connecting lines. Extremely simple and efficient frameworks, grids comprise any number of physical formations, ranging from the chemical and biological to the cybernetic.

Both ideas inform “Acoustic Oceans,” the new series at the Kerlin Gallery, which consists of 11 works painted on canvas, aluminium and paper. What these ideas point to, and the principle that underlies so much of Francis’s art, is tracking the way information is exchanged and communicated without recourse to thoughts or words – after all, vibrating molecules and grid structures are purely physical methods of transferring data from one place to another. “Acoustic Oceans” explores this territory anew, with a fresh twist: here Francis is playing with contemporary anxieties relating to deceptive data and informational noise.

Each of the paintings is an optically intense sequence of multicoloured vertical lines. In most of the works, these lines appear in bands, stacked one on top of the other, Francis employing a brushstroke technique to blur the divisions between each band. This method frequently produces a sort of trompe l’oeil for the viewer, where the vertical lines stand out against one another, as though each band were overlapping the next. This illusion of perspective is never fixed, however, and your eye repeatedly flicks back and forth, automatically seeking to confirm which band is in front of which, as they toggle in depth. The effect is disquieting, akin to visual nausea or vertigo.

The compression of the lines, added to their colourful diversity, further heightens the impression of visual noise, as well as invoking digital processes of data representation.

Provocatively overstimulating, Francis’s newest exhibition is a fascinating development in the artist’s decades-spanning career.