

The Appeal of Circular Logic

By David Grosz

Familiar distinctions between order and randomness and representation and abstraction break down in the new paintings by Jim Long on view at the CUE Art Foundation. At the center of this conceptually rich, but ultimately underwhelming show are four circular canvases, each 10 ½ feet in diameter, titled “For Jagannatha,” after the Hindu god. In each, a dense lattice-work of gray-brown lines spreads over the tawny beige surface of the unprimed canvas, creating an intricate pattern reminiscent of naturally occurring abstractions like a network of veins or cracks running along a wall or ceiling.

Jim Long

CUE Art Foundation

The paintings were rendered between 2003 and 2005, but the genesis of the series goes back much further. In 1988, on a visit to a friend’s studio, Mr. Long discovered a piece of paint-splattered masking tape that had been pulled from a recently coated canvas. Impressed by the accidental, unmanipulated pattern of the paint, he began investigating spills and splatters formed by chance rather than a deliberate act of an artist. In one experiment, he filled a circular pan with water and poured oil paint on top. He assumed the pigment would create a solid layer with which he could stamp a series of solid circles, but the paint would not stay still. It spread into a complex of thin lines, unanticipated patterns he pressed on sheets of Mylar.

Years later, Mr. Long visited an empty gallery space and imagined filling it with four floating circles. He recalled his Mylar paintings and selected four of them, which are represented here as “For Jagannatha Working Drawings.” Dated over a period of many years – between 1993, when the original prints were made, and 2003-5, when the related paintings were completed – they testify to an extended process of creation. With their overlaid graphs and handwritten notes, they also illustrate the considerable deliberation, study, and plotting that went into each composition.

In the translation from the working drawings to the completed canvases, Mr. Long’s project grew increasingly complex. If the original intention was to eliminate artistic craft and decision and establish a pure art of “facts,” these paintings reincorporate subtle traces of the artist’s touch. The drawings are perfect circles, yet the curves of the tondos are imprecise, as if hand-drawn. As a result, the images do not fit exactly

Jim Long, 'For Jagannatha3' (2004); below, 'For Jagannatha Working Drawing 3' (1993-2003)



to the rounded canvas, but dip over its lip in places, while failing to abut the edge elsewhere.

You can also spot the artist’s hand in the brushstrokes, which are short and exact, but still communicate personality. Mr. Long began each composition at a point toward the center and worked to the right and upward, then to the left and downward. The final stroke of the series, a tiny tail dangling from the bottom of “For Jagannatha 4” (2005), communicates discreet joy: an understated but noticeable, triumphant final flourish.

Such excitement, however, is rare in these works, which, despite the rich history of their creation, present little visual surprise. The overall mood is placidity, the network of lines less a tangled mess than the organized intricacy of a labyrinth, and the repetition of forms from one canvas to the next establishing an overriding sense of order. But this calm lacks depth; the paintings feel pleasant but



thin.

This exhibition was curated by Rackstraw Downes, a painter of realist landscapes. This may seem surprising at first, but the more one looks at Mr. Long’s work, the more the pairing makes sense. Like Mr.

Downes's, these canvases are humble, painstakingly worked, and quirky, and they force the viewer to reconsider basic assumptions about the natural world and the possibilities of artistic representation.

In the end, however, a comparison to the curator's quietly exuberant art shows the weakness of Mr. Long's self-effacing approach, which he has used for many years to dissociate his agency from the creative act. Unfortunately, something more like the opposite has happened here: Art has been removed from the life of the artist. Vitality, passion, conviction in the indispensable nature of creation, the fact that Mr. Long worked for several years on these paintings and thought about them for many more – all of this is hidden deep below the painted surface, the impression too faint to detect. This challenging series refuses the usual categorical slots: the work is technical, impressive, and conceptually alluring. Too bad it lacks the eloquent energy that separates truly compelling art from all the rest.

Until October 15 (511 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-206-3583