

ANAT EBGİ

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Review: Ethan Cook's paintings are not paintings. Or are they?

Written by: Leah Ollman

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Can a painting be made without paint? Ethan Cook's beautiful, ticklish show at the Los Angeles gallery Anat Ebgi would suggest that the answer is yes.

Cook's works read, at least from a distance, in that familiar way: as arrangements of color on a flat surface, within a frame. But step closer and it becomes evident that the color is integral to the threads of the canvas rather than brushed atop them.

Using commercially available dyed cotton, Cook weaves lengths of fabric that he cuts into rectangular pieces and uses as the basis of his compositions. He stitches the colored panels together in asymmetrical patterns like offset flags, then stretches each sewn piece taut over a wood support, in the manner of a canvas being prepared for painting.

The seams lean and warp, pulled out of orderly alignment. The junctures avoid right angles. That irregularity is echoed in slight deviations in the weave itself — slim rivulets of open space and unexpected densities. Colors too are refreshingly off: anodyne beige abuts assertive cherry; mustard and brown neighbor royal blue and pallid pink.

The works, all untitled, measure upward of 6 feet per side and look like enlarged details of Gee's Bend quilts, those rural Alabama treasures that caught the attention of art scholars because they so resonated with geometric abstraction in painting.

Cook, based in New York, calls his show "Propositions," and the title couldn't be more apt. At once true and false, the works issue one conceptual prompt and prod after another, and generate myriad art historical rhymes — with stain paintings, minimalist grids, post-minimalist process-driven art and the feminist-activated resurgence of textiles. Canvas hangs onto its conventional functions as surface and vehicle while assuming the additional role of image.

Like Frances Trombly and Mary Little, Cook adopts a sculptural and not just painterly stance toward canvas as he explores how the material can perform simultaneously as star and supporting cast. However many categories Cook's work slots into, and however many media and genres can claim it, what matters is the impression it leaves — that of intellectual exuberance and sensual vitality.

6150 Wilshire Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90048
+1 (323) 272 3418

anatebgi.com

4859 Fountain Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90029
+1 (323) 407 6806