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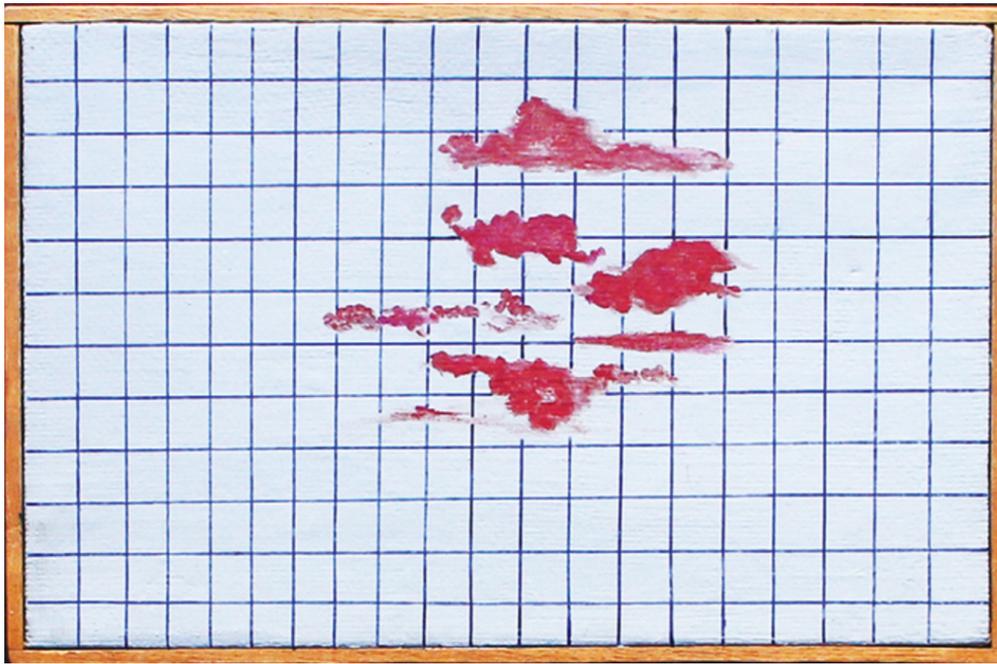
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Dale Henry, *Red Clouds*, 1966, oil on linen, 14 3/8 x 9 1/4".

Dale Henry

PIONEER WORKS

There's a fine line between enigma and aggrandizement. A piece of wood placed on the wall can become an object of fascination or a facile object—it's all in the position of the thing. In poetry, meter makes the difference. Similarly, in the oeuvre of the artist Dale Henry, it's where emphasis is placed while handling material. If anyone knew what to make of fine lines, it was Henry.

“Dale Henry: The Artist Who Left New York,” curated by Alanna Heiss, Richard Nonas, and Dustin Yellin, was a remarkable exhibition. (First realized downtown at the Clocktower Gallery last fall, the show moved to Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn, this winter, when the gallery took up its yearlong residency there, and Pioneer Works founder Yellin added his assistance.) You were immediately made aware that you were inside someone's arcane system, particularly when viewing the dramatic hanging of *Primer Sets of a Revealingly Graphic, Personal History of Western Painting Using the Complete and Basic Iambus Throughout. Eighty Pieces in Eight Sets: Marster Buckt Tho Nitid / Makar Vanisht / Oyez Fúnee*, 1972, whose seventy displayed components—wispy square supports of material including gauze, plastic, and tissue paper; scrawled references to

artists; awkward circles composed from fibrous texture—were each named after text from John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs*. As when reading those poems, you're never entirely certain what's going on here, but there was a catalyzing energy in that mystery.

In a side room, one small, clumsy painting of a grid with red clouds floating on top of it was a cipher for where to begin to "read" the work: Minimalism with a strange weather front moving in, natural science eroding the edges of practiced technique. For Henry, art was a series of controlled experiments at specific sites, and his work seems to pay homage to art and literary history's long tradition of attempting to respond to the nuances of a given space, beginning with the Lascaux cave paintings—a reference heightened by the dramatic lighting of the grand, cavernous factory, especially when one visited the show at night.

The work's elusiveness is easy to romanticize in connection with the artist's personal narrative. In 1986, Henry renounced the New York art world, of which he was a vibrant part from the late 1960s through the mid-'80s—showing at the Fischbach Gallery, John Weber Gallery, the Clocktower Gallery, and P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, and teaching at the School of Visual Arts—and moved to rural Virginia. No longer producing art, he labored until his death, in 2011, to organize his oeuvre, and prevent it from ever entering the art market. Yet the work's rigor comes not from its forced-march detachment from late-capitalist culture—admittedly bold—but rather from the way in which it insistently dissects and repurposes that culture's parts.

Henry's prosodic intervention into images—shuffling their stresses—is evident in a gripping series on display, "Plan of the Uffizi," 1973, which pairs twenty-three trapezoidal canvases with a book stand holding a guide to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence that includes slide sheets. The ghost images in the paintings—rendered in clear, reflective acrylic on raw canvas so that they appear as mysterious fragments of ancient statuary, leached of all original color—depict photographic reproductions of architectural elements and figures from works in the Uffizi. (Henry's conceptual references to memory and the mediation involved in art tourism might further signal, for anyone who has been to that mostly unclimate-controlled museum in summer, an apocalyptic future when the paint has finally melted off, leaving only an oily stain.)

My favorite works were stunning translucent drawings, also from 1973, in which subtle marks based on prosody were made in emulsion on thick slabs of Plexiglas, appearing as incisions on the surface; when lit a certain way, the indentations throw elegant patterns in gray shadows onto the back of the wall. The effect is that incised loss becomes the actual line—simultaneously an intaglio plate and its print. Some of these depict Henry's personal scansion describing the scene out his window. We can't directly understand the meter, and yet we see the view behind it.

—Prudence Peiffer

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