

## PHILLIP ALLEN

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[THE APPROACH](#)

by *lee trining*



**LONDON** “Capital P,” Phillip Allen’s fifth solo show at The Approach since 1999, presented new works (all 2011) on board or paper, displaying a further unfolding of the British painter’s very particular language.

Allen’s signature move is to bracket his paintings top and bottom with thickly daubed impasto, bordering their receding pictorial spaces with robust stripes of emphatically physical oil paint. In the gallery, it was immediately apparent how in these new paintings Allen subjects this device to different sets of mutations. In *Blind Corridors (Stick Version)*, for example, the clotted bands of paint—interrupted in places by circular openings that reveal a chunky decorative motif painted on the board beneath—intrude aggressively into the center, confusing the notions of margin, figure and ground that the work interrogates. In *Centage* and *Exotic Seconds*, similar marginal clumps of paint are organized into tidier, roughly symmetrical arrangements recalling architectural stucco work. Here, as elsewhere, metallics sit alongside dirty Guston pinks, dirt browns and clotted bird-shit grays the paintings are fibrous, warty and deliciously overworked, occasionally smeared with garish, bright colors like clusters of jewelry made from heavy metals and industrial waste.

The 10 works on paper are quite different: also executed in oil, these untitled pieces are as immediate as the works on board are labored over. Letterboxing is set aside, and there is very little heavy brushwork marks are instead light, quick and draftsmanlike. Composition is also given a twist. Departing from the figure-in-receding-space structure common to Allen’s oeuvre, many of these images act more like screens, creating a much shallower space. At first they seemed somewhat at odds with the other nine paintings in the show, but a conversation between the pictorial depth in the two groups became more apparent, showing evidence of an established vocabulary being pushed in fresh directions.

The piled abstract forms in *Scholarly Glass Jaw (Islands of Meaning Version)*, for example, stand solidly against a ground of hazy, muted browns, the brushwork thin, scumbled and scraped down. This effulgent English murk (recalling Paul Nash as much as Turner) creates the mistily recessive space that habitually houses Allen’s abstract follies. By contrast, in *Dofa (Fornix Highpoint Version)*, hovering ranks of shieldlike arches create a compressed and more ambiguous pictorial space. Two overlapping foreground figures, like stylized amoebae, appear at once silhouetted against and recessed into this structure, complicating its cartoonish uncertainty.

These new paintings push Allen's wonky mix of tachism and clunky Looney Tunes abstraction to seductive new heights of absurdity, showcasing his virtuosity at elegantly pulling off a painterly gambit.

*Photo: Phillip Allen: Blind Corridors (Stick Version), 2011, oil on board, 24 by 20 inches; at The Approach.*

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