

# rachel uffner

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## artcritical

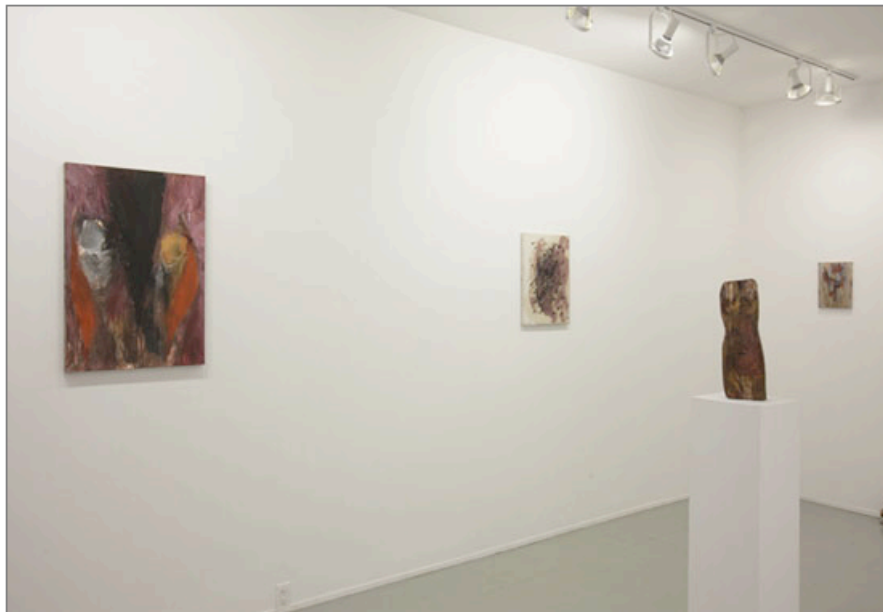
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*Making Space For Innocence: Bianca Beck at Rachel Uffner*  
by David Cohen

***Bianca Beck: Body at Rachel Uffner***

October 30 to December 23, 2011

47 Orchard Street, between Hester and Grand  
New York City, (212) 274-0064



Installation shot of the exhibition under review. Courtesy of Rachel Uffner Gallery

There is something deliciously grubby about the paintings and sculptures of Bianca Beck. She favors distressed, punctured, encrusted surfaces, an earthy, at times visceral palette and painterly gestures that border on violence. Lacerations, smudges and sgraffito incisions attack the paint as if in a last-ditch attempt to extract imagery from recalcitrant materials.

This debut solo commercial gallery show is titled “Body” and follows a spot earlier this year in the project room at White Columns. In but a couple of instances, the paintings are untitled, date from 2011, and are less than 2-1/2 by 2 feet. The three oil painted sculptures – also 2011 and untitled – are roughly carved or perhaps found shapes of wood, arranged on pedestals, each not much more than a foot high.

*Dance Painting* is an exuberant aggregation of curlicues forming a web against what could register equally as a flower or an orifice, a red depression with a black and blue center. A swirl of lines, seemingly dragged wet in wet through thin paint, sometimes sharp, sometimes smudged, is accented here by dabs and there by scratches. Darker browns against the light tan of the panel support invite an association of pubic hair against flesh but without enforcing such a reading. The painting has a compelling gestalt, an almost tantric center, and yet there is a sense of elements coming into being as we look at them, of wet, wayward squiggles coalescing into form.

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The artist, who is in her early thirties, has been seen in a number of group exhibitions recently, including *Le Tableau* at Cheim & Read in 2010, a show that proffered affinities between contemporary artists from various centers and postwar French painting. Beck's work would make a convincing bridge in a three-person show with two otherwise formally dissimilar co-exhibitors in that show, namely Joe Fyfe (its curator) and the British painter Merlin James. Readers aware of this reviewer's ongoing attention to Fyfe and James will recognize this as a statement of praise.

Beck's scruffy supports and mucky surfaces share with these artists an oxymoronic luxuriance in unprepossessing ingredients. What is less immediately apparent in the younger woman than in the supremely history-conscious older painters is a way of reconciling studious awareness of precedence with a determinedly improvisatory expressiveness: knowingly making space for innocence. Beck adopts a striking variety of approaches from piece to piece without a loss of personal style, managing simultaneously to bolster and destabilize authorial integrity.

Her primitivism is both "primitivism" in quotes, with a strong nod in the direction of postwar apocalyptic art informel and art brut, and at the same time an authentic-seeming venting of feeling, a connection to deep urges. The allusions or affinities are with artists like Hans Hartung, Jean Fautrier or Jean Dubuffet (in his brown phase), or with Lucio Fontana and Alberto Burri. They are not with the Viennese actionists, Antoni Tàpies, or Julian Schnabel, with each of whom they bear some occasional formal resemblances. This comes down to a matter of scale, not just size—or even for that matter bombast or speed. The key is that Beck's visual statements are contained. Thus the sense of their being pictures rather than paintings; images rather than fields of experience. Thus, too, perhaps, the title of the show: *Body*. The show almost feels like a vindication of Fyfe's inclusion of the artist in his curatorial argument for a kind of abstract picture making that is a paradigm apart from Abstract Expressionism.

Art historical erudition is not the same thing as pictorial intelligence, of course, but these enticing objects – at once spontaneous and heavily worked, orgiastic in their immediacy and thought through in their local, formal implications – achieve a delectable balance of seemingly opposite impulses in painting.