



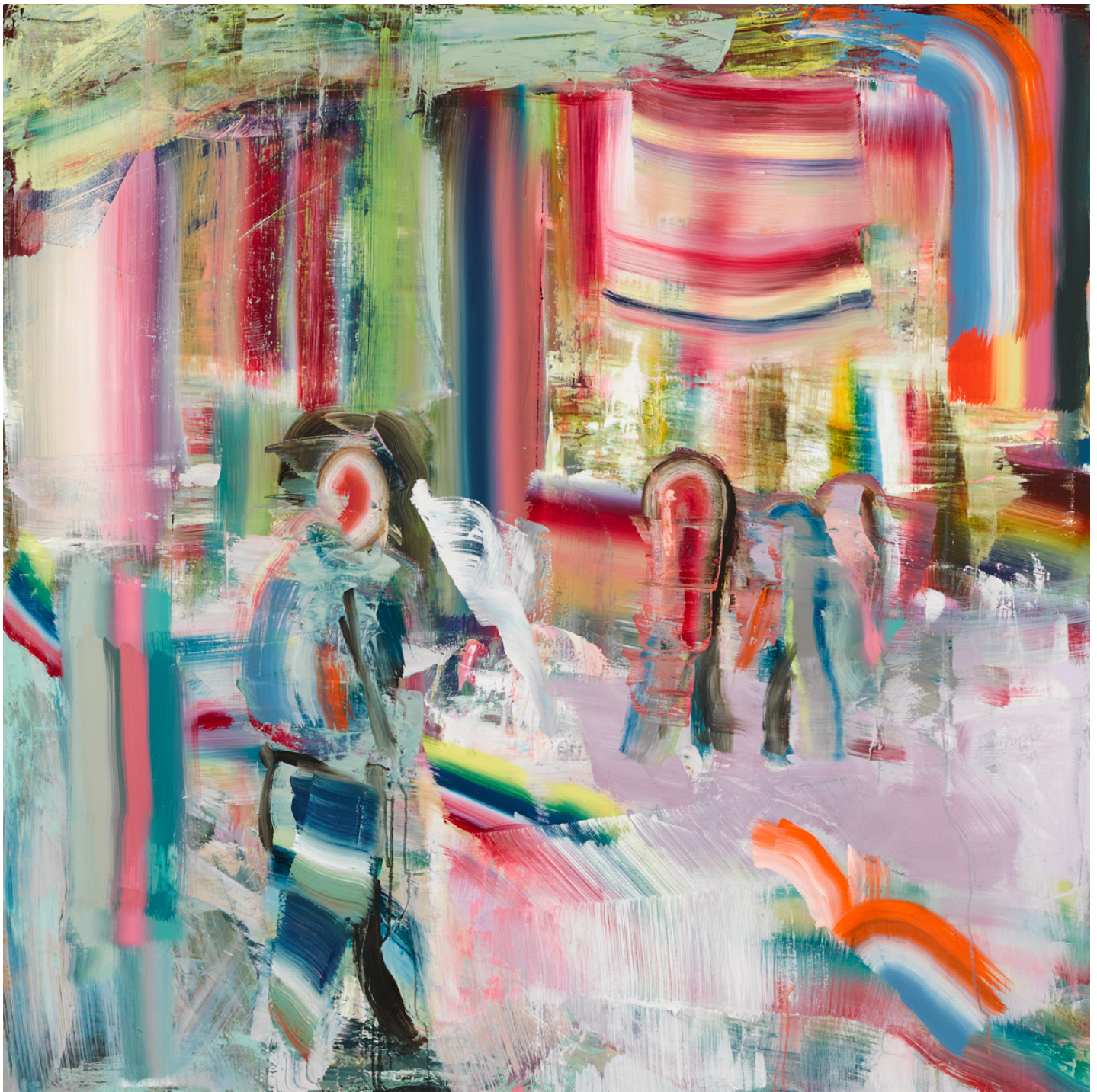
HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Diana Copperwhite: Signal to Noise

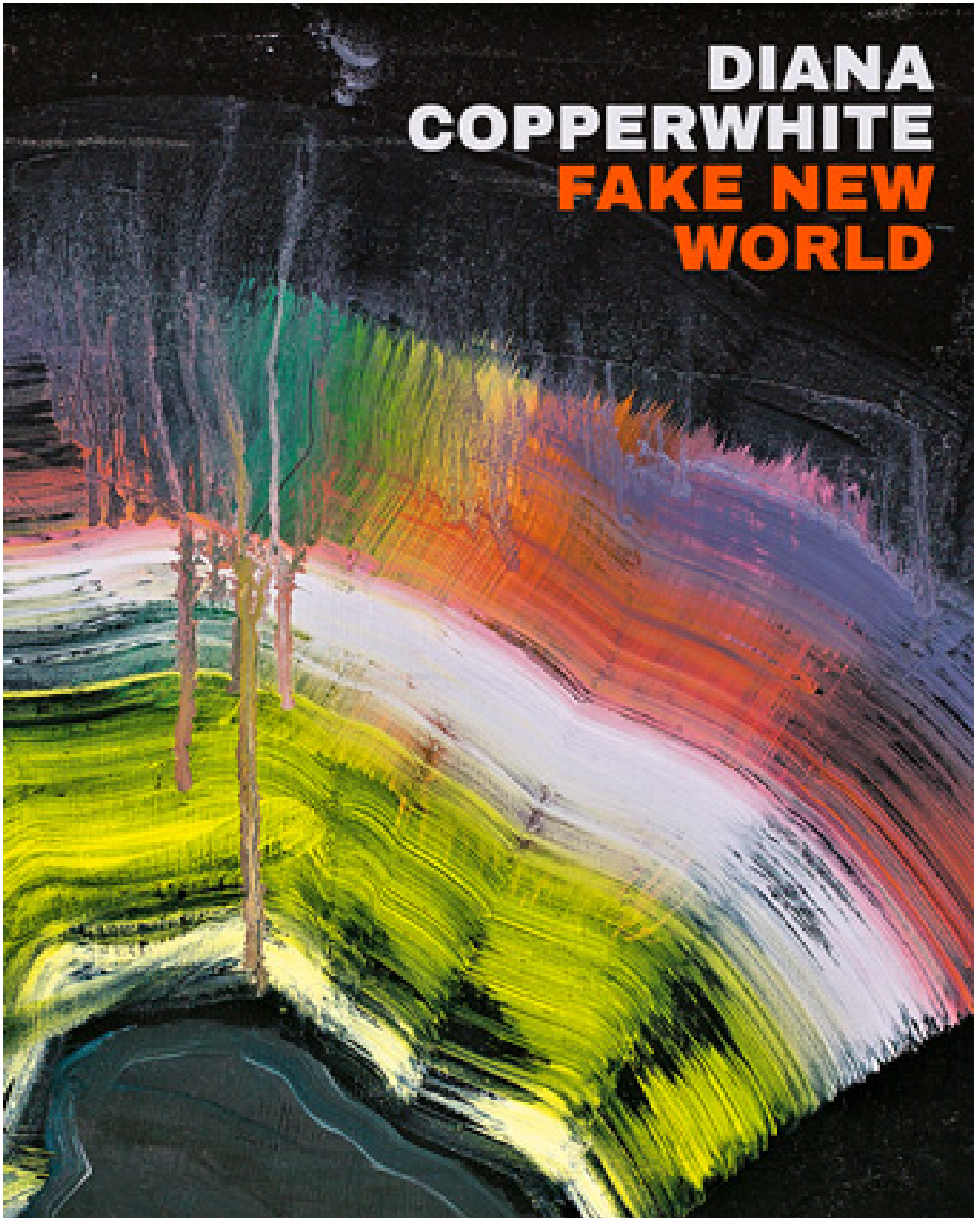
Sometimes a single, simple pictorial device is all it takes to set your work apart.

Stephen Maine | 5 days ago



Diana Cooperwhite, "Depend on the morning sun" (2016), 150 x 150 cm (all images courtesy Gallery Thomas Jaeckel, NY)

Sometimes a single, simple pictorial device is all it takes to set your work apart from your contemporaries. At mid-career, the Dublin-based painter Diana Copperwhite has hit upon a crazily recognizable way of applying paint that both updates (somewhat tongue-in-cheekily) the concept of the "autographic mark" so prized by the analysts of Abstract Expressionism, and simultaneously taps into a leitmotif of contemporary, computer-inflected visuality, the color gradient.



**DIANA
COPPERWHITE
FAKE NEW
WORLD**

The new Diana Copperwhite monograph with an essay by Gail Levin and the painting “Confucious confused” (2016) on the cover.

She hasn't totally figured out yet what to do with it, but her command of painting's essentials is sure and her determination to work through the ramifications of this particular device amply evident, so it seems like just a matter of time before she starts making truly magnificent work.

Six oil-on-canvas paintings dated 2016 constitute *Depend on the Morning Sun*, Copperwhite's second solo show at 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel. They are broadly and energetically painted, using (apparently) an array of tools for scraping, wiping, splashing, and smearing— nothing unfamiliar there.

But Copperwhite also uses wide, flat brushes that were evidently loaded with a precise sequence of hues along the bristles' tips, so that the resulting stroke is a multi-colored band. The constituent colors blend a bit where they meet but generally hold their places in the line-up whether the mark is short and choppy, drawn out into a meandering trail, or (most often) something in-between, taking a curve or two. It is a flashy move — it could become gimmicky if Copperwhite's not careful — but for the moment, at least, the artist's mark-making *chutzpah* is working in her paintings' favor.

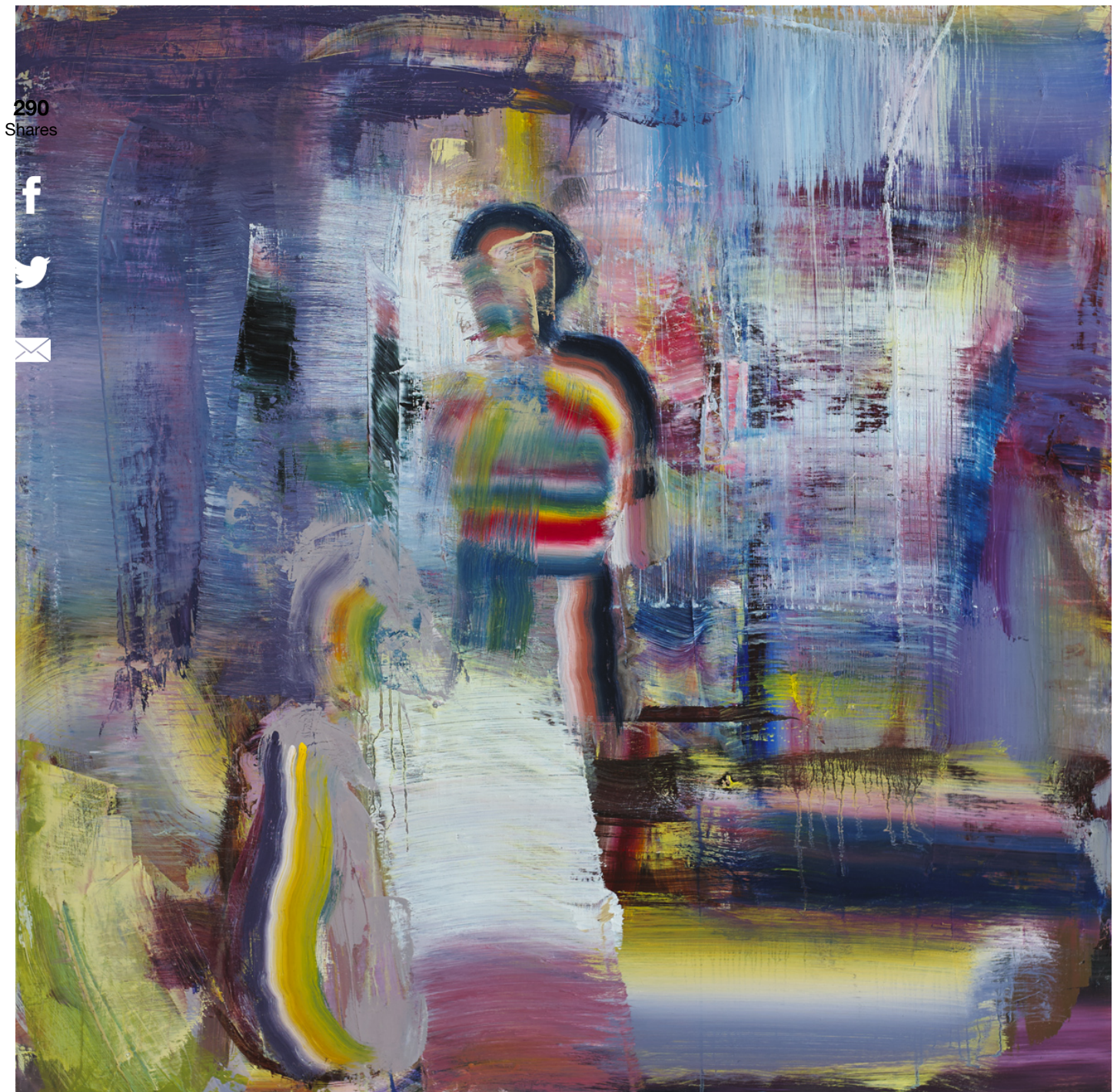
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Diana Cooperwhite, "Weird glamour" (2016), 230 x 180 cm

These blended blurs tend to be the paintings' focal points. A tricolor swatch in red, pale yellow and yellow-green pops up near the center of "Green light," flapping like a flag in the wind. Nearby, crimson and blue striations (merging into purple and violet variations) punctuate the canvas, structuring the otherwise chaotic space. Just above the centerline, an incongruous semicircular curve, fat with phthalo blue, naphthol red, and a salmon-pink core, puts a brake on the action around it— ultimately, it is the composition's primary figure, and the rest of the painting is ground.

It may be an abbreviated human figure, as well — a cranium, to be exact. At the center of the 90-by-70-inch "Weird glamour" and the smaller but compositionally similar "A pale thunder" are juicy strokes tracing the unmistakable contour of head to neck to shoulder to upper back (or upper arm). In "Weird glamour," a window of deep space behind the head and a subtle but telling diagonal descending from the upper left are enough to place the figure in an architectural interior: an office, maybe, full of free-floating banners and awnings in orange, scarlet, magenta and teal.



Diana Copperwhite, "A pale thunder" (2016), 100 x 100 cm

My American eye detects the possibility that California painters such as David Park and Elmer Bischoff, who painted figures and their immediate surroundings with both precision *and* laden brushes, lurk at the back of Copperwhite's mind. (For that matter, so might the British painters Leon Kossoff and Frank Auerbach.) But beyond the matter of Copperwhite's touch is the strong sense that the personage in the picture is going it

alone in a hostile (or anyway bewildering) environment, making his or her way through a signifying blizzard of signs (be they icon, index, or symbol). As such, they are second cousins to Francis Bacon's forsaken souls.

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Bacon often isolated his subjects at the center of oppressively stark settings in which details are scarce. Copperwhite goes in the opposite direction but arrives at the same place; though nearly engulfed by the sensations that accrue to their situation, her head-and-shoulder figural units are no less isolated than Bacon's naked, abject loners.

Not much in painting is truly new, but some tropes, once adopted, can be amplified and recontextualized, their potential rediscovered by another artist's creative imagination. I associate this banded-brushstroke technique with Howard Hodgkin, who has for many years made occasional use of a rougher sort of proto-gradient, loading his brushes with multiple colors and laying in blunt and/or sensuous strokes of thick, multicolored paint.

In my read of Hodgkin, whose eye-hand coordination was formed well before the digital era, the device accentuates the manual; the much younger Copperwhite (b. 1969) makes it look technological, potentially abrasive and slightly hallucinatory. Not as hallucinatory as Bernard Frize does, mind you — though Frize seems to me to be concerned primarily with painterly procedure for its own sake. I've no doubt there are others working with this method. (There must be someone in L.A.)

"Predilection for fiction" contains no overt figurative hook. There are few indicators of architecture but for a pretty arch — two strokes of the brush — peeking out from behind the painting's main event, a central, horizontal rectangle streaked vertically with some of the punchiest chroma in the show. Here as elsewhere, it appears that Copperwhite used a blending brush to further soften the transitions between the bars of color. The painting's interior framing of this cloistered, intensified core echoes another of Hodgkins' pictorial inclinations. It is a take on the painting-within-a-painting idea, or (if you shift the scale to landscape) maybe a drive-in-movie-screen-within-a-painting.



Diana Copperwhite, “Predilection for fiction”(2016), 170 x 230

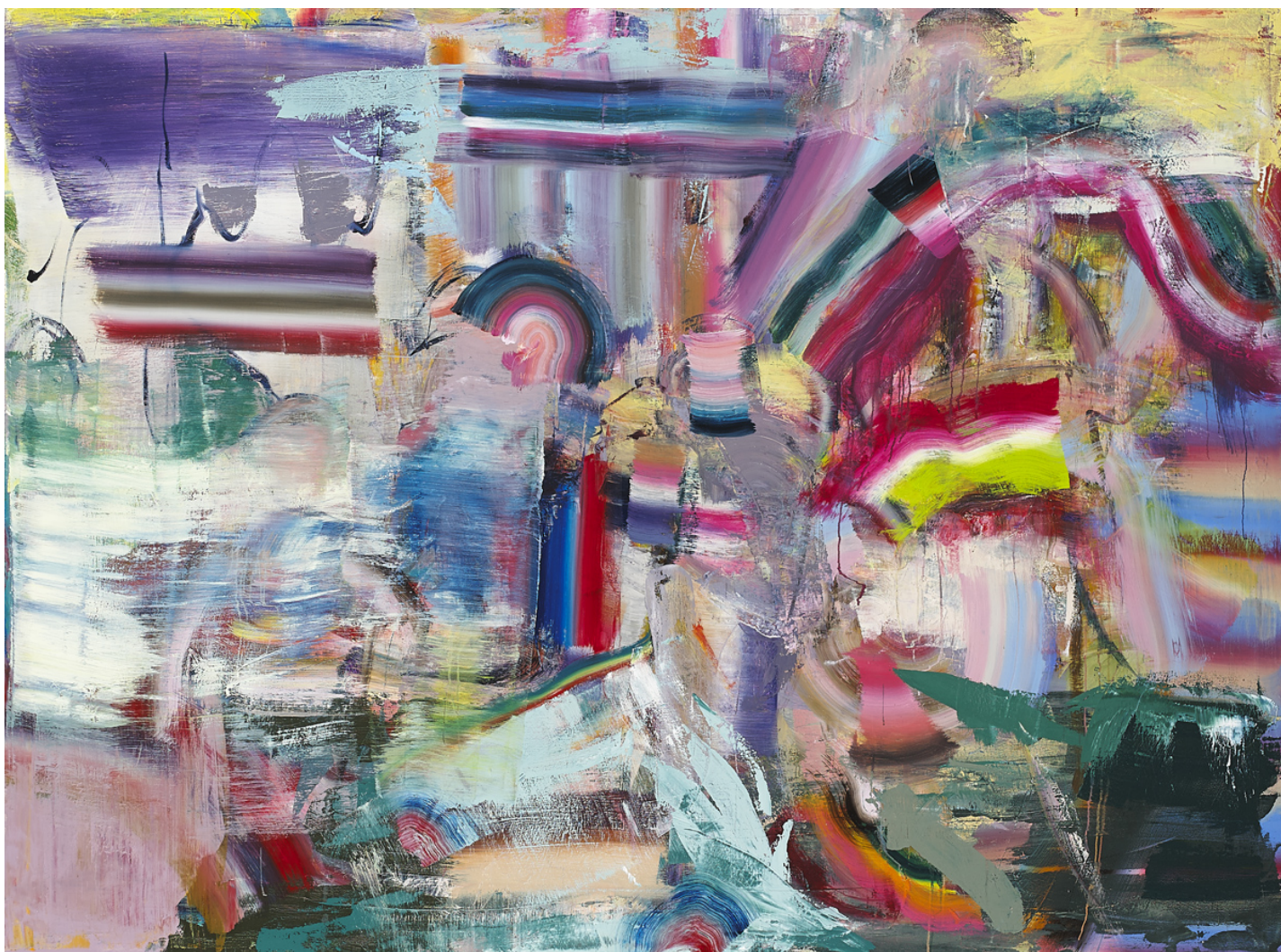
At about five feet square, “Depend on the morning sun” is among the smaller paintings in the show, but it contains one of the broadest gradients — two horizontal-ish swipes of a brush outfitted with crimson, titanate yellow, Prussian blue and orange-pink, about a foot wide — slapped onto the upper right corner like a warning sign. Secondary, vertical banding on this patch looks like a blurred reflection such as you might see on the side of a passing train, and thus creates the illusion of rapid movement (which, interestingly, most of these blended passages don’t). Copperwhite uses whites, light grays and pale tints (especially pinks and violets) extensively, but here her snowy palette becomes chalky, and the artificial light she seems to be pursuing dissipates.

When a painting or other artwork is titled after a song lyric, you’ve got to wonder what aspect of the music is reflected in the art. New Order’s “True Faith” contains the phrase “depend on the morning sun,” so we surmise that a wistful daybreak epiphany of self-

worth and personal agency is somehow relevant to Copperwhite's motivation for the eponymous painting. But actually, looking at the show I found myself thinking about the great Dublin band My Bloody Valentine.

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Phenomenally loud, MBV's guitar-driven avant-rock features drifting, haunted melodic lines that emerge from a deluge of electronic distortion, dissonance, and pure noise. There are correspondences in the way Copperwhite's squalls of non-depictive paint frame and support her shimmering pools and polychrome slipstreams, which seem to border on description (acid rainbows? ribbon candy streamers?) but sidestep mimesis. The music's layered construction, cavernous scale, and otherworldly glissando effects call out for a Copperwhite painting on the band's next album cover.



Diana Copperwhite, "Green light" (2016), 175 x 235 cm

The presence of an elliptical narrative is clearly discernible, if not readily deciphered, in Copperwhite's paintings of just a few years ago. While the artist has eliminated (or temporarily set aside, as time will tell) all but traces of narrative from her working method in larger canvases, she continues to paint heads, roughly life-sized (though this show includes none). The attitude and disposition of these heads is so specific that they function as portraits, even though facial features are usually absent, partially obscured, or eclipsed entirely by passages of brushy paint.

On the same scale as these heads is "Confucius confused," a real gem. It's a raspy, slithering, half-head-shaped arc — purple into red into pink into a yellow or two into charcoal gray — against a tar-black ground. As usual, the palest hue (in this case, the pink) is the centermost stripe, so the whole stroke seems to radiate light, to glow. It's both a curiosity in this show of ambitiously-scaled paintings, and its most succinct embodiment of Copperwhite's paradoxically impersonal "signature" move. If only it were seven or eight feet wide!

So is Copperwhite's work *Ab Ex redux*? No, but not because it isn't truly abstract — why, de Kooning himself almost never quit the figure entirely. If a key strategy of historical Abstract Expressionism was to trim the lag time between impulse and response — the belief being that doing so would allow form to emerge from the subconscious, unmediated by culture, the "literary," or the artist's internal editors — then Copperwhite's calculatedly eye-grabbing tricks with the brush are in quite the opposite spirit. (And anyway, you can't go home again.) Rather, Copperwhite approaches "action painting" as an inherited language, to which she contributes some striking dialect of her own.

[Diana Copperwhite: Depend on the Morning Sun](#) *continues at 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel (532 West 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through January 28.*

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