

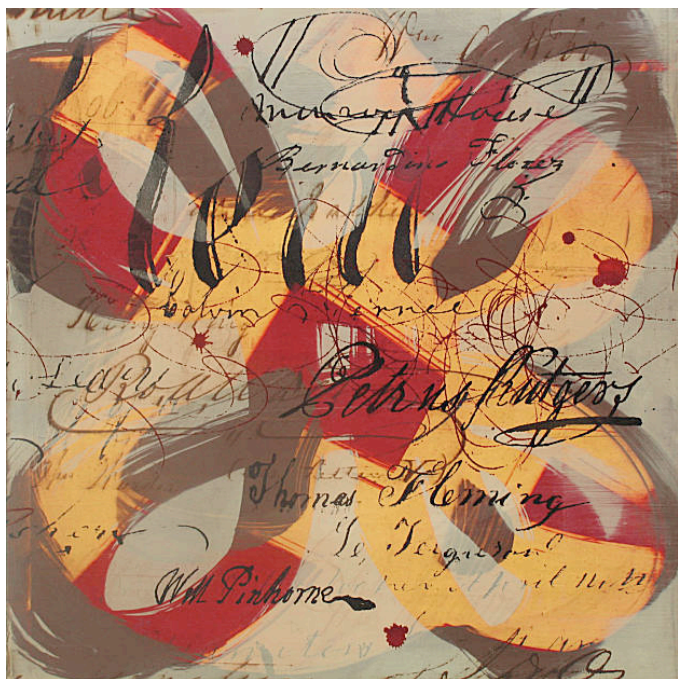
San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2009

By Kenneth Baker

Flexibility brings pressure for Courtenaye



"Moniker 17 (Florez)" (2009), an oil on panel by Catherine Courtenaye.

Photo courtesy of Modernism Inc., San Francisco

Abstract painters evolved the concept of picture space as a field, rather than a window or a mirror. Unlike those tropes, the pictorial field implies no orientation, no depth, no determinate relationship to enframing reality.

But with that flexibility comes a pressure that we see Catherine Courtenaye contending with in her recent paintings at Modernism.

In larger pieces, Courtenaye creates amorphous fields of nuanced color and borrows - or simulates - snippets of antique penmanship, geometry diagrams, jotted calculations and such, to give them structure.

The inscriptions assert the flatness of the picture surface while acting as tendrils of allusion that never reach their referents.

Courtenaye assumes - correctly - that the obsolescent art of florid handwriting will look to contemporary eyes like abstract drawing. Like Cy Twombly's scrawl paintings, hers evoke an ancestry of graffiti: expressive, but not necessarily pictorial marking.

Courtenaye's inscriptions gently mock the idea that every move of the artist's hand registers some truth of personality or mood. The whole point of calligraphic penmanship was to suppress vagaries of temperament.

Too many of the larger canvases in Courtenaye's show have the vaporous quality and dissipated energy of field paintings that lack adequate structure.

But in foot-square panels, such as "Moniker 17 (Florez)" (2009), Courtenaye has solved this problem by exploding a few graphic details with colored brushwork. The results are more decorative, but produce a satisfying sense of the pictorial field under compression, rather than out of hand.

Catherine Courtenaye: Fieldhand and Other Works: Paintings. Through Dec. 23. Modernism, 685 Market St., San Francisco. (415) 541-0461, www.modernisminc.com.

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This article appeared on page E - 2 of the San Francisco Chronicle