

Joe Fyfe: PAINTER'S APOTHEOSIS

by Walter Robinson



Joe Fyfe at Graham Gallery, 2009, installation view



Joe Fyfe, *Red River, Hanoi*, 2006, James Graham & Sons, New York



Joe Fyfe, *Conticuree orn*, 2010, James Graham & Sons, New York



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What does an abstract painter want? Color, texture, surface, material, light and dark, maybe, gesture, maybe. . . . Is that everything?

Authority, also? The New York painter Joe Fyfe, who was born in 1952, and also writes art criticism and curates exhibitions, displays a distinct sense of command in his recent undertakings, if that's not too romantic a notion. Something happened in his visits to Southeast Asia, something like the world suddenly offering up freely its simple wealth to his senses. For those of us back in New York, Fyfe's breakthrough was his 2009 show at Graham & Sons, where he exhibited a room full of simple yet powerful abstractions, made not with paint but with the simple folding of one fabric onto another, the kind of discovery that made heroes of New York artists in the 1950s.

Fyfe's new show at Graham, titled "Wood / Cloth / Color," includes sculpture and photography as well as his now-signature fabric abstractions. Reflections of his journeys to Southeast Asia are especially visible in his photographs, which show a rough-hewn peasant world highlighted with swaths of brilliant fabric, which covers the roof of a hut, hangs from a corral, and even dresses a cow. Ineffably, the touches of color summon human emotions from the natural landscape.

The sculptures are more provocative still, poised on a threshold between Greenbergianism and a scavenger economy -- a few weathered wood planks, joined by a loop or two of fabric, suggest an artist fascinated with poverty's resourcefulness, with the iconic power of a simple cloth headband, and also happy with a subtle joke about a painting's surface and its supports.

The fabric paintings are something else again, enlivening a familiar language with vivid colors and patterns, and a new kind of layering and transparency. *Psar Thmei* (2011) is a jigsaw composition of gauze and cotton in blue, gold, crimson, brown and translucent white, while *Tanka fragment* (2011) summons the mystical brilliance of Orphism channeled through Mark Rothko and Ellsworth Kelly. With pigment-in-tubes abandoned, color and shape simply abide, while lines of glue and gentle puckers of the fabric trace the absent artist's hand. It's a painter's apotheosis.