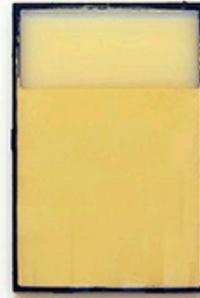


A Near Order

July 11 - August 17, 2019

**Cameron
McLellan**



empty | gallery

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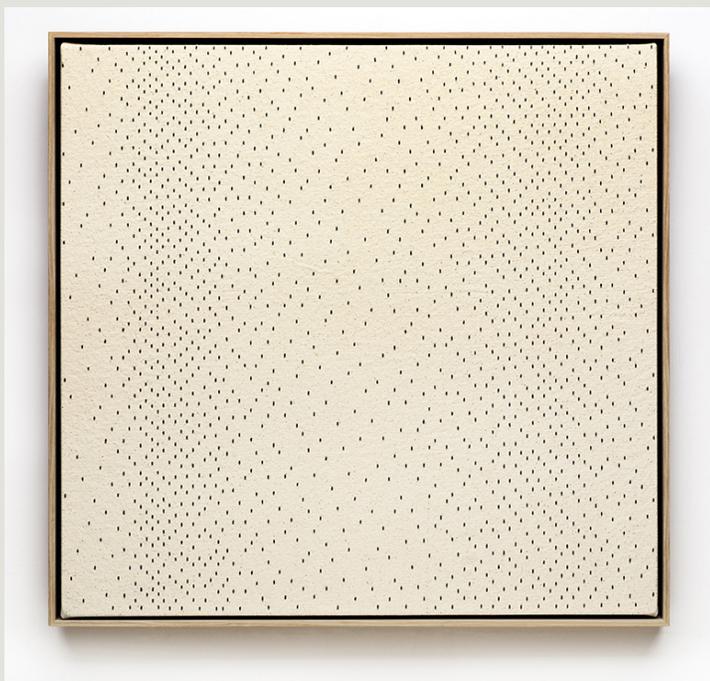
response by
Anne Petrie



My invitation to write about Cameron McLellan's *A Near Order* came more than two months after I saw the show. But I had no trouble remembering it. Vividly and in detail. I had been at the opening where the usual crush of people so often turns the art into a secondary attraction. But from the moment of walking in on that warm summer evening, I was immediately engaged with the work on the gallery walls. I looked and sensed and thought as much as I could that night. It is a great pleasure now to re-visit this event in both memory and reflection.

As the Empty Gallery is configured, the back wall dominates. It's definitely where your eye goes first. It is a fairly large wall and I immediately flashed back to how impressed I was at the gallery's opening show when that wall was filled with Rick Leong's massive painting *Swell*, 10x20 feet of a monumental wave rolling into the space of the gallery.

But tonight, for McLellan's show, maximal had given way to minimal. On that same wall, there were now just five small pieces, perhaps ten by eight inches each, arranged in a row at eye level about five inches apart. That was it. But for me, they held the wall as completely as Leong's giant surge of water. Each small rectangle felt like a quiet mystery with textures that seemed both solid and fluid, made of unnameable colours, that somehow, even when dark or dullish, emanated an internal light that pulled me closer and closer to these paintings, or wall sculptures, or...?



As I move in, mystery plays with the mundane. This is just leftover house paint—not even fancy artist paint—squished between two plates of glass. There’s a sort of black metal frame, but it seems roughly put together and randomly abraded. They could be found objects—perhaps old window panes—from some construction/destruction building site.

But this is an artist at work. There must be intention. Some process has been put in motion at some point to let the paint slither and settle into place. We have no idea when that process began, or under what conditions, or even whether its work is yet complete. Man-made materials have been scavenged, then left to act upon each other to take on a new form, a new life.

Time past, time present and perhaps even time future are all here in each of these *Sealed Units*. Although the title of the grouping is accurate enough, ironically—through whatever the process of transmutation—these very ordinary materials have acquired a precious, almost jewel-like quality from their time in metal containers. If the phrase were not so over-used these days, I would call them objects of meditation; there is so much to be with in each piece. (Full disclosure—in a most un-meditative way, I am also definitely experiencing a very material desire to possess any one of them.)

Turning to the east wall—another five pieces. These are hanging—long, thin, needle-like but lumpy with some kind of coloured coating. Still thinking about construction, I imagine abandoned rebar the artist might have found and acted upon.

But McLellan is more ‘artful’ than that and would not run a simple through line between these two groupings.

As if to deliberately put us off the track, this grouping is officially ‘untitled.’ There is found material again, but now McLellan is using pulled canvas threads, likely not from a construction site—more probably from the artist’s own studio. The threads have been dipped repeatedly into, again, house paint, this time identified as ‘recycled.’ Back to building materials and used commercial products. Art provides an afterlife.

And of course back to process. But the colours of *Untitled* have a very different sensibility—flatter, less intense, almost (dare I whisper—a bit Martha Stewart? Playing with the decorative? Almost fun?). And as if to confirm that feeling of lightheartedness, there is a ‘drip’ on the floor, a flat blob of the same colour as the hanging piece above. As the gallery owner casually flips up the dried paint, I joke about ‘travelling drips’ assuming they are a permanent part of the work. Yes and no. The drips are left open to whatever process—including ‘light fingers’—that might occur. The artist is happy—should one ‘disappear’—to re-dip the ‘thread’ adding another coating and a new drip. This process might never be over. Time again. Time past, time present and a definite set-up for time future.

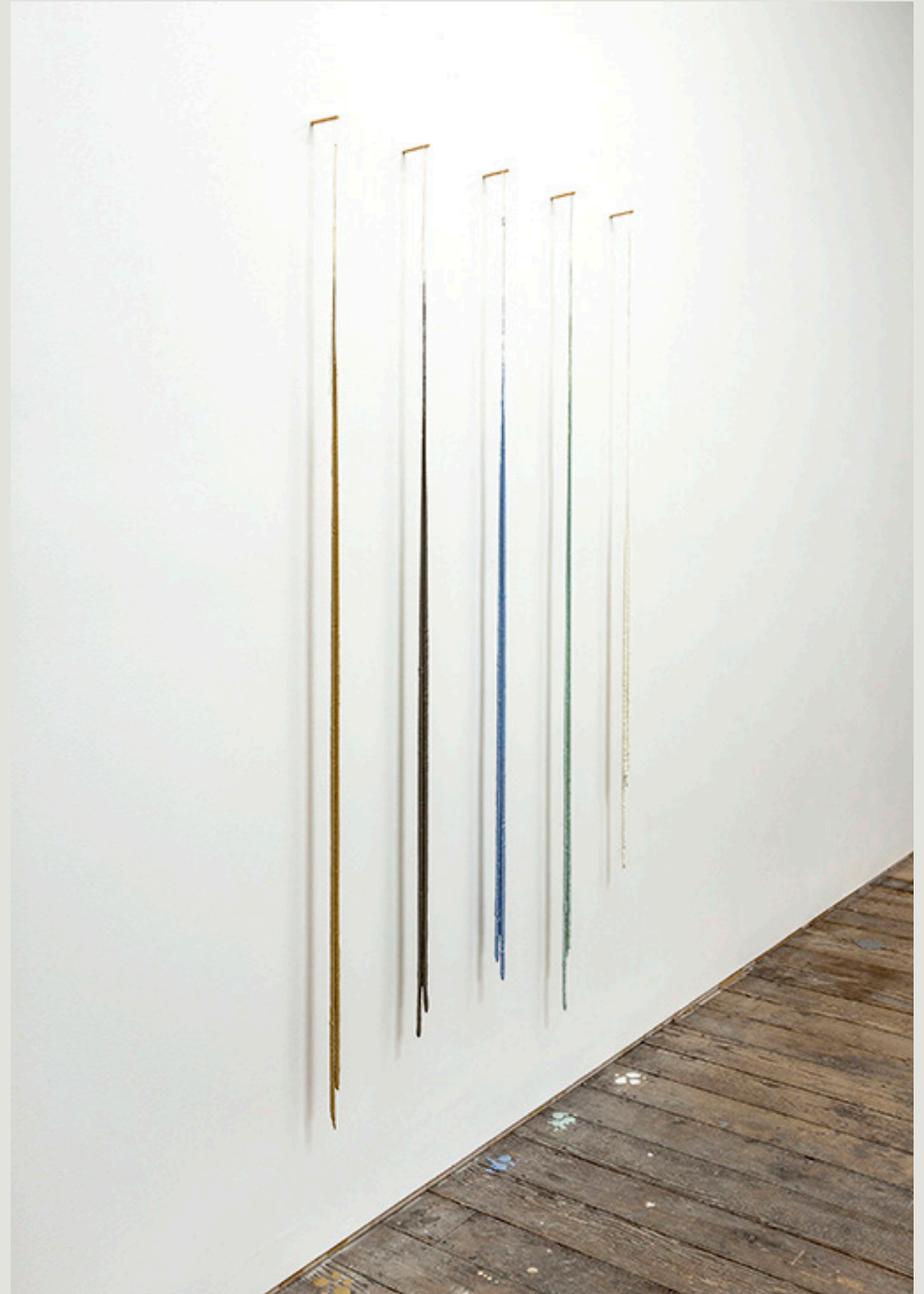
A third grouping is titled *System Variations*. There are five pieces again, but now they divide into four on the west wall and one on the north. Each is a meticulously wood-framed square of perfectly taut raw canvas. One has a tilted inner

rectangle of white gesso but all are filled—to more or less—with very deliberately made, short straight vertical graphite marks.

These are exquisite pieces with their implied grids and vague sense of architectural plans. I also sense some kind of emerging/receding pattern within and perhaps between the pieces. But each time I think I've found a link, it eludes me and I'm left disoriented. It's a neat trick that draws me back again and again.

These five pieces don't have the obvious colour or found materiality of the other two groupings. So how do plain flat 'drawings' relate to the other parts of the show? Again, the title is helpful. As 'System Variations' they are also products of some process, in this case a specific, however indeterminate, system. We don't know what the rules of this system are, but as with the sealed glass and the dipped thread—some action was set in motion that 'in time' generated something new and unexpected. And as the bracketed word in the title affirms, this series is 'ongoing.' Once more we are into time future.

That continuity corresponds to the overall title of the show, *A Near Order*. The phrase comes from an essay by the late west coast artist Jerry Pethick. For Pethick a 'near order' is, a democracy of objects wherein a grouping becomes a collection...a certain organization develops but remains just short of being complete or total.



It's a concept that makes perfect sense for this show. It has a subtle organizational foundation as the groupings play with small similarities (for example, the use of house paint or how the canvas threads link to the canvas drawing surfaces and the architectural echoes among all three) and, of course, the larger theme of process. But the order is not total. With the differences on clear view, there is still only a near order.

Perhaps in Time Future some perfect coherence may develop. But is total order really preferable to near order? Isn't it much more interesting to be just 'near'—even sometimes oh so close, rather than actually 'there'? Doesn't near order allow for more of life, more of being, more of becoming?

Anne Petrie



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RESERVOIR

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A repository for ideas, **Reservoir** is a digital platform promoting writing derived from a close engagement with the programming at Empty Gallery.

R2019:1 Rick Leong x Kegan McFadden
R2019:2 Emily Geen x Rihannon Herbert
R2019:3 Cameron McLellan x Anne Petrie