

# Art in America

November 2008

Exhibition Review of Per Kirkeby at Michael Werner

By Susan Rosenberg

Ever since he was ushered into international attention by 1980s Neo-Expressionism, Danish painter Per Kirkeby has burrowed ever more deeply into techniques of gestural painting, deploying its inchoate, visceral and unruly language, with the specificity of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century realist who aims to describe. In a recent exhibition at Michael Werner, 10 vertical paintings from 2007 and one from 2005-07, all untitled, faced off on two walls and were joined by a single horizontal canvas (2005) displayed on an easel. The 11 vertical paintings have in common a prominent axis around which the composition is more or less symmetrically disposed. Varying in width and placement, an occasionally multiplied, this vertical axis can read as something in nature—a tree, the spine of a feather or leaf, flowing water—or as a primal, almost childlike, compositional device. In this it raises the ghost of Newman's "zip", that iconic sign for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century romantic sublime, a tradition that is also very much Kirkeby's own.

In some of the more successful works, airy all-over painting braids itself like an open lattice from the canvas's edges to the center, or intrudes from the corners. Directed or trawling, the patterned marks obstruct any composition beneath, in the way that tree branches affect a vista. In nearly every work, nature's pervasive binaries—sky/water, light/reflection—are cast as abstract archetypes discernible in eccentrically oriented vectors and patches of vivid color. The application of diaphanous tempera to the backgrounds, and, over that, viscous yet resistant oil, produces a modicum of deep space—but also enhances the irresolute feeling of Kirkeby's awkwardly tactile and direct mark-making.

The lone horizontal painting, a melancholy presence, includes elements of still life and landscape; its striated expanse resembles both pooled water and the patterned wood grain of cut lumber. Two enigmatic objects, one seemingly near, the other far, measure a diagonal through an insubstantial space harboring at its center a rocky monolith, both intractable and ethereal. (Kirkeby's study of geology in the late 1950s and his visits to Greenland and Arctic remain significant touchstones for his work). The painting is a *vanitas* in mood, if not subject, and it performed like an emissary from a different universe; its slowly unfolding mystery offered a stark contrast to the wall-hung works, each of which presented a discreet, immediate sensation. A counterpoint to the rest of the show, its lateral reach worked insidiously to introduce doubt into the assertive verticality that prevailed in the group as a whole. The process by which abstraction both embodies and negates landscape was held in apparent and exquisite tension.