

frieze

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Pedro Barbeito

BASILICO FINE ARTS, NEW YORK, USA

This young artist's first solo show besieges the viewer with deliciously painted phenomena of the universe - black holes, heat signatures, complex molecules. The paintings revel in scientific and painterly geekdom: at once sprawling and adolescent, controlled and elegant, and deeply entrenched in the arcana of current scientific and imaging knowledge.

Barbeito digitally combines and abstracts images he plucks from sources such as the NASA web site, Scientific American magazines and astronomy textbooks. He then laboriously paints the composites in acrylic on large canvasses, using, for example, four different views of a molecule for his painting Triple Molecule: ICDH (1998). It's the kind of art you imagine being taken up by excruciatingly plugged-in technology wonks, eager to suck up neat scientific data and even neater pictorial tricks. And the tricks are neat, indeed.

Each round or oval canvas is structured by a curved grid system, lightly underdrawn and suggestive of graph paper on Quaaludes - a riff on the historically freighted visual system of the perspectival grid. They are populated by painted cubes which combine to form exquisite and complex pixellated shapes: dizzying black holes blossom, heat clouds shimmer with radiant colour and intensity, and electron chains take one's eye through labyrinthine journeys. Just when all this tightly orchestrated science starts to get chilling, Barbeito surprises you with unexpected violations of the organising grid - eruptions concussing across the surface and extrusions of slightly distasteful techno-material. Resembling nothing so much as gorgeously digitised wounds or tumours, variously translucent and opaque layers of acrylic paint are built up to project out from the surface by several centimetres.

Barbeito lays down paint brilliantly, first thickly, then thinly, sensitive to luxurious changes in colour, opacity, figure and ground. Digital Winter Landscape (1999), for instance - a combination of the linear and painterly - is coldly and lavishly beautiful. It celebrates the formal pleasures of paint, intimately applied by a painter who obviously loves his medium. The paintings' appeal to sight and touch functions like a counterpoint to the phenomena depicted, which are ungraspable by any of our God-given senses alone.

As an elegant surrogate for the actual perceptual experience of these phenomena, the paintings purport to document and translate into apprehensible visual terms that which is indiscernible except when aided by technology - and even then only as mediated approximations and extrapolations. Taking some cues from Mel Bochner, with whom he studied at Yale, Barbeito transforms the visually interpretative systems of scientific representation into those of artistic representation.

There's a nostalgia in these paintings for the old certainties of both science and painting, the first of which promised to deliver a bright and limitless future, the latter which offered the hope of transporting us into a universal sublime. Barbeito's convincing productions hark back to the trusty and all-knowing science classes of our childhood, long before the sceptical and carelessly uncertain mood of the present. It's hard to decide whether they embody an earnest belief in the explanatory power of science, or if, in fact, Barbeito's process transforms an otherwise positivist project into something entirely the opposite.

Similarly, Barbeito's seeming sincerity and utter lack of self-consciousness about his medium could be perceived as both a strength and a weakness. The work gets better the more it effects a sense of the mutual alienation between his expansive futuristic subject and the moribund medium of painting to which he limits himself - but which he doesn't seem to question. While this endows the work with refreshing confidence and assured technique, it's rather curious in a young painter: Barbeito's earnestness, combined with the 50s Scientific American tone, emanates more than a whiff of futuristic anachronism, like watching a favourite episode of the *Jetsons* or *Lost In Space*.

Barbeito's paintings look as if they leapt from the 50s to the 90s - as if his thinking circumvented the painting dilemma entirely. What we're left with is a strange history-negating independence, a take on what the next developments in painting would have been if the crises in painting had been averted. Wilfully oblivious, however, it's also kind of liberating, giving that hint of something new - a lovely, crepuscular, anticipatory tingle about what the artist can do next.

Jenny Liu