

Galleries: The paint strokes between realism and abstraction

Kenneth Baker

Saturday, December 1, 2007
Datebook E1, E10

Making a good painting merely takes setting all the strokes in order. Put that way, it sounds easy.

Realism in painting never loses its appeal for just this reason. Not because we have some mysterious need to see visual perception described - though perhaps we do - but because realism dictates certain ways of patterning a surface, ways that tend to set paint strokes in satisfying, if unchallenging, order.

Düsseldorf painter Driss Ouadahi has plainly thought about these matters, to judge by his recent work at Hosfelt. No one will call Ouadahi a realist, but his paintings successfully evoke real states of affairs without illustration. They also sustain a high degree of abstraction.

Ouadahi appears to construct his pictures along these lines: After covering a canvas with thin, blotchy washes of color, he applies a slender grid of drafting tape. Over the grid, as in "Untitled" (2007), he paints a cursory cityscape. Then he strips away the masking and divides each cell of the grid vertically with a narrow brushstroke, creating the impression that a second grid underlies the topmost one.

Finally, he borders some of the cells of the "foreground" grid with wide brushstrokes, making them look like open boxes and implying an overall perspective construction, frequently with inconsistent vanishing points.

Viewed as an image, a painting such as "Untitled" wavers between looking like an urban view through an architectural screen wall and a cityscape reflected in the exterior windows of a wide facade. Viewed as abstraction, it carves up the canvas into tasty episodes of brushwork while sustaining a constant backbeat of allusion to Piet Mondrian, Barnett Newman and modernists' use of the grid to neutralize compositional values.

For all its richness as painting, Ouadahi's work hints at a bleak view of the contemporary world as a heedlessly urbanizing project.

