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CHRIS KAHLER: *Viral*

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Chris Kahler's *Viral* abstractions vividly evoke the insatiable appetites of nature. Without anecdote or sentiment, his paintings enact the elemental and universal processes of growth, struggle, and decay. Each canvas is a potential arena of natural selection; each layer of pigment, a new mutation consuming that which preceded it. This pathological process finds myriad parallels in the living world, from the microscopic to the cosmic. The *Viral* paintings become metonyms for any system under attack, proliferating with biological, technological, and cultural implications.

Unlike his previous works, which over the past decade have hinged, to varying extent, on organic and medical referents, Kahler's latest series is less illustrative than demonstrative. Paint is now the protagonist. Insistent—and at times, impertinent—the paint appears to gestate on the picture plane, generating the seething forms, corrupting hues, and decaying structures that give substance, and life, to these works. The evolution in Kahler's methodology is manifested emphatically by *Viral A-2*. Formerly exhibited under a different title, its original identity was all but obliterated by additional swarms and pools of pigment. *Viral A-2* was regenerated by the very process of eradication, and now roils in its accumulated excess.

The medium is made emphatic in the *Viral* paintings, encrusting the surfaces, and activating the space in front of the picture plane, while washes of color suggest the depths beneath it. The spatial interplay is heightened by the overlay of matte and gloss finishes and the introduction of refractive colors that animate the paintings on approach. Paint begets illusion not by description, but by its chemical and physical reality. *Viral A-9*, the largest in the series to date, is thus activated by its material, which appears to migrate, coagulate, and calcify across the canvas. Aesthetics are beside the point in these artless

compositions. When beauty occurs, it is random or residual effect of the medium.

We may be tempted to name specific sources for these paintings. However, their origins are necessarily elusive. The white fissure that streams across *Viral A-2* could be cellular, terrestrial, or galactic, and likely all of those things simultaneously. Our interpretations are bound by an essential drama, everywhere enacted by fundamental conflict between light and darkness. Throughout the *Viral* paintings, forms populate and swarm over backgrounds of white or tinted gesso, blotting out its reflective quality and threatening to shut off the only source of illumination. Survival equates here with supremacy. Shapes and structures accrue to the point of crisis. In *Viral A-2*, a swollen black mass appears to be scattering its seed into the jellied surroundings, which in turn envelopes its host. All of the works, in their overloaded state, approach critical mass, verging on spectacular collapse.

There are times when a painting needs to be a painting; to speak in the uncompromising tones of its specific visual and tactile language. Chris Kahler exploits paint for what it's worth, finding meaning deep within the medium. Subsumed in that alchemical process, he achieves his own disappearing act. Despite his technical intervention, the *Viral* paintings seem to exist of their own volition, as though cultured in a laboratory rather than imagined in an artist's studio. To make a painting that appears to make itself is doubly hard. With a knowing abandon, Kahler sets a chain reaction in motion, halting its growth and containing its spread at the very moment of greatest potential and immanent danger.

Written by Joe Houston

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This essay is a series of introductions to the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.