

New  
American  
Paintings

ABSTRACT PLANKING:  
JASON MIDDLEBROOK AT LORA REYNOLDS GALLERY

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Brian Fee

Painting on wood panels is old-school, the most popular way of supporting media until canvas took over in the 16th century. Jason Middlebrook isn't trying to reinvent the wheel by painting directly onto internally cut trunks from the local mill. But in relocating from Williamsburg to Columbia County in upstate New York seven years ago, the artist began infusing his nature-minded oeuvre with the natural landscape. The Line That Divides Us, Middlebrook's debut solo exhibition at Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin, is a distillation of his most recent work: subtle compositions on their own sublime hardwood slabs.

Middlebrook would probably say "the tree did most of the work." He expressed that in a Modern Art Notes Podcast on his concurrent survey Jason Middlebrook: My Landscape at MASS MoCA, but it holds true to his painterly interventions on the seven planks in this exhibition. Consider how the optical waves on Black Betty refer back to the untouched cherrywood and, if you look at them from an angle, recede into the surface. It feels deliberate: Middlebrook's carefully taped and applied black spray paint belongs there, like the cherry's grain itself. He emphasizes his ethos in titling neighbor Respecting the Grain: warm-toned chevrons of varying widths ripple across the blond panel, yet they reserve wide gulfs for the creamy, yellow birch grain. The artist considers the 100+ years of growth clocked in this hardwood (old-growth birch can more than triple that estimate), adding his touches to the "work" (i.e. the tree) to make it his own.

Natural abstraction in the form of a prominent burl — a stately timber sunspot — dominates Day and Night, pulsating through veneered and bare, wavy-edged triangles and Middlebrook's network of colorful soda straws. The modestly scaled Black and White Number 5, the "oldest" plank in the show (in terms of the artist's intervention) and the smallest at just over two meters in height, presents an intriguing dichotomy. Caramel whorls and gnarly protuberances activate the surface and side of this squat bigleaf maple panel. On it, Middlebrook painted a black-striped white cascade that resembles the grand, twisting trunk of the deciduous giant — or at least a typical "tree" shape — more closely than the rugged base. Reality is far more complicated and cool, and Middlebrook revels in this.

The complex, fluidic relationship between humans and nature is a recurring concern of Middlebrook, from his exhibitions of decorated landfill waste to his Public Art Network Year in Review 2012 award-winning subway mosaic Brooklyn Seeds. While current works like Respecting the Grain strike a more benevolent tone — the opportunity to inform one another altruistically — I found Ripe on the Vine particularly nuanced. Acid pinks and yellows punctuate the zigzagging bolt of acrylic and spray paint down this razor-straight plank, echoing the synthetic colors used to tag trees for logging. As the gradient flows to the right, however, these artificial tones segue into deep, leafy greens of the forest. It's not as doomsday decadent as covering rubbish in fiberglass and tiles, nor is it as carefree as supersized weeds "bursting" up the subway walls. Rather, it walks a fine line between destruction and coexistence, suggesting Middlebrook appreciates both the beauty of nature and the consequences of cutting it all down.

Brian Fee is an art punk based currently in Austin, TX, but he can usually be found in New York or deep in Tokyo, depending on the art season.