

**“CRYSTALLINE:
THE PAINTINGS OF JASON VANCE DICKASON”**

Essay by Richard Speer

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There’s something radical about these paintings: steep angles climbing and plunging across the picture plane, surface strata dramatically exposed through a host of abrasions and debridements, and a color palette that since 2012 has consisted of stark titanium white, lampblack, and the numberless hues floating between their polarities. Jason Vance Dickason (b. 1975) has arrived at an invigorating, elemental vocabulary of forms and surfaces at once abstract and narrative—abstract in their uncompromising defiance of figuration, narrative in that each work lays bare its origin story and shares with viewers its journey of materials and process over time. Why is that radical? Because the paintings assert their terms without need of overt contextualization; knowing, wise, sophisticated, they allude and encompass, but they do not quote, critique, deconstruct, or pander. Like Walt Whitman’s polymorphous itinerant they celebrate and sing songs of themselves: of invention, grit, and a certain brazen confidence. Like Robert Morris’ 1961 touchstone, *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*, they reference the plain brute fact of honest labor in the service of transcendence. And like that piece, Dickason’s greyscale études flout modernist tropes while somehow orienting themselves squarely within their lineage.

First, how they look. Some people find the shapes evocative of ships’ sails aflutter in strong wind. Others, less lyrically, see shards of glass—perhaps nodding to Rudolf Arnheim’s *Gestalt*, in which sharp angles metonymically connote sharp edges, while curves suggest pillowy softness. In the jangled geometries, the obtuse and acute akimbo-ness of these pictures, others see reflections of our turbulent times, our most recent installment in the infinite regress of ages of anxiety. Dickason doesn’t mind such interpretations but doesn’t traffic in them himself. My own reading lies between the poles of maritime idyll and Kierkegaardian angst; to my eye, these

forms neither balm nor cut, but grow. This strikes me as a crystalline vision, of straight lines in jaunty diagonals suggesting the growth of crystals in ice, snowflakes, geodes, minerals, stalagmites and stalactites, forms that fascinate with their metastatic accretions. I look to popular culture and see wisdom born of violence: Superman's vaulting Fortress of Solitude canting out of Arctic snow, crisscrossing and cross-bracing in a tectonic mêlée that finally quiets into a cathedral of sacred prisms. In these contours I see a kaleidoscope morphing from one form to the next with psychedelic intensity, forming, fracturing, fractal, always shifting into the next iteration. I see tracers of zipping fire and cascading sparks and spatter (at age 25 Dickason began working a day job as a welder; his field of vision is suffused with fire-flicks and steel planes in constant dialogue, which seems transliterated into his painterly syntax of oils on canvas, panel, and paper). This is a language of growth, of pictographs like synapses that spark, travel, and morph. No matter how boldly these forms echo the spiky lines of Constructivism or van Doesburg's diagonally-tilted De Stijl, Dickason's paintings admit nuance; they wear their wounds on shirtsleeves; they sing in softly modulated tones of gray. They slash, but they also accommodate. They cut, but they also cauterize.

Dickason's overarching concern is to engage with art history within a painting's four sides. He wants to push the abstract idiom forward. His regard for Abstract Expressionism led him—as it led Willem de Kooning and Richard Diebenkorn, artists he greatly admires—into a conflicted relationship with the human form, which he consciously endeavors to avoid in his work. In 2010 he began a dialogue with the renowned Oregon-based artist James Lavadour, driving out into the eastern-Oregon high desert to talk with Lavadour about painting and attitudes about the art world. Lavadour's ethos resonated with Dickason: a credo of making and then making more, of showing up in the studio and putting in the time, and of eschewing the navel-gazing pretensions so many artists are invested in.

Buoyed by his interactions with Lavadour, the younger artist set to work with greater intensity and conviction. Integrating aspects of AbEx and minimalism, he eliminated curvilinearity in order to expunge references to the form. He removed color to neuter color's power to evoke referents. He incorporated tools like housepainting shields and squeegees to create hard lines without resorting to tape and to more fully engage his body as an instrument of making. His larger works, anthropometrically scaled, seemed to encompass the viewers' own bodies, allowing them to lose themselves within these primal narratives of what was added and what

was taken away. Today, having exhibited at venues such as Elizabeth Leach Gallery, WorkSound, False Front, Union Knott, and Gallery 114, Dickason has evolved a style built upon compositional bravado and virtuosic surfaces. The paintings draw the eye in, riveting attention, inviting close inspection, eliciting complex responses. They are time- and labor-intensive investigations into light, line, form, color, and value. As an artist and personality Dickason is earnest and determined. He perseveres and innovates. He lets the work speak for itself and is loath to assign too many meanings beyond the formal. His modus operandi, as he related during a recent studio visit, is as simple as it is profound: "I want to make work with sincerity. I want to make an image that I haven't seen before."

—Richard Speer is contributing critic at ARTnews, Visual Art Source, Fabrik, and The Oregonian. His essays and reviews have appeared in The Los AngelesTimes, The Chicago Tribune, Salon, and Newsweek. He has written catalogue essays about many of the world's leading contemporary artists. As a curator he is helming exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art. He is the author of *Matt Lamb: The Art of Success* (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), *Peter Halley/Alessandro Mendini* (Mary Boone Gallery, 2012), *Peter Halley Before the Fall* (Karma, 2017), *Eric Wert: Still Life* (Pomegranate, 2018), and *All Was Whiteness Floating: Sam Francis in Japan* (forthcoming 2020).