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By Kenneth Baker

## James Hayward pursues a kind of 'pure painting'

Suppose someone produced an example of "pure painting," how would we recognize it? By what it excludes? By its refinement, its pronounced materiality, its power to empty the painter's mind, or the viewer's?

Los Angeles painter James Hayward has put all these possibilities to the test during the three decades of his work briskly surveyed at Modernism.

We see plenty of refinement here, also plenty of materiality and a good deal of restlessness. Perhaps a certain type of pursuit, rather than some point of arrival, might define "pure" painting, if anything does.

Hayward has tried his hand at minimalist abstraction. A triptych titled "Automatic Painting 47 x 80 Black/White" (1977-79), despite its simplicity, recalls the work of Barnett Newman (1905-1970), Los Angeles painter John McLaughlin (1898-1976) and San Francisco painter John Meyer (1943-2002). These echoes intensify Hayward's triptych rather than dim it.

But no other work on view plugs us into Hayward's temperament better than "Nothing's Perfect/The Second Proof" (1997-98). Here, measured salmon pink brushstrokes streak into the canvas plane from its edges, a pale slate-blue ground color winking through their striations. Far from the melee of gestures that marks a picture such as "Fire" (1992), the composition of "Nothing's Perfect" looks as carefully assembled as a fine piece of basketry, illusions of overlap constructed wherever one brush mark intersects another.

The fastidiousness set the pattern for others in the series, such as "Nothing's Perfect/The Eleventh Proof" (1996-98), where monochrome makes the brushstroke thatch work almost impossible to see. At the right angle, reflected light makes the details faintly



"Chromachord #129 (Alizarin Crimson/Cadmium Green/Caucasian Flesh/Portland Grey Light)" by James Hayward

visible. That comes close to my sense of "pure painting": an abstract picture that demanded a discipline almost no one will notice.

Recent pictures such as "Abstract #132 (Cadmium Red Deep)" (2007) and "Chromachord #129" (2007) visit the opposite extreme: a confectionary, cloying surfeit of color and facture, tempered by a po-faced consistency of execution.

The monochromes done in this manner flirt with irony, while the wet-into-wet painting of "Chromachord #129" produced pleasing little skirmishes of hue that wink out the paradox at the heart of abstract painting: The hand cannot sense color, whereas the eye cannot escape it.