

'...James takes painting's multiple and overlapping histories partly as his subject matter and partly as a point of departure. The paintings are stylistically promiscuous – it is hard to describe or even imagine a "typical James." Yet seen together they not only make perfect sense but also articulate something of the infinite freedom and the stubborn vitality of the medium.'

(Matthew Higgs, Art Forum, December 2011.)

In recent years Merlin James has made paintings often on semi-transparent supports, and with picture frames that are integral to the work. These quasi-conventional frames, and the stretcher bar structures partly visible through them, may be fabricated from humble, seemingly salvaged materials, pressed into service as 'fancy', high-art objects.

Extending James's long-standing investigations into the nature of painting, the works continue to feature his particular erotic, topographic, architectural or abstract motifs – images that both function as elements in his aesthetic experiment and build to a poetic account of human experience. Writing in Frieze (November 2011), Ara Merjian notes how in James the environment is presented 'through a baffle of layers both material and metaphysical' in work that is 'stubbornly, mischievously paradoxical' and that 'vacillates between the cerebral and the basic stuff of paint'.

James also continues to paint on canvas, frequently using hair, sawdust and other unconventional substances as well as paint. Works may be apparently abstract, or may feature diverse 'subjects' – heads, animals, emblematic figures, canals, bridges, skies. Small vernacular buildings of uncertain vintage – mills, homesteads, old factories, tower-blocks – are often scattered through James' pictures, either as representations in paint or as miniature 'model' buildings made from wood off-cuts and fragments and physically incorporated into the work. Expansive spaces are evoked, and the vistas can suggest dream- or memoryscapes, or landscapes seen in passing.

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