

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

## Robert Bordo at Alexander and Bonin

Like an actor's stage whisper, Robert Bordo's muted colors and veiled imagery suggest intrigue and promote an aura of heightened importance. They prompt the viewer to lean in close, to hang on every painterly syllable of his oils, to be drawn into what seems like an artworld subplot. The understatement has a theatrical quality that is unlike the histrionics favored by many of Bordo's contemporaries.

The Montreal-born artist has



Robert Bordo: *another day*, 2005, oil on linen, 32 by 39 inches; at Alexander and Bonin.

worked in New York since 1972 and teaches at Cooper Union. A few years ago, he won notice for paintings composed of clusters of pale, broadly painted, postcard-format landscapes. The earliest paintings here might be a memento of this vein; in *Open Studio* (20 by 24 inches, 2003), sketchy little sub-paintings, postage-stamp size in a tint of gray, dot the pale blue-gray canvas like refrigerator magnets and seem to be floating away into a haze. Elsewhere, the vignette conceit has evaporated, but the haze remains.

Six of the 12 paintings in the show are characterized by a number of small elements—dots, daubs, tiny strokes of the brush—distributed more or less evenly across the surface. On the slightly craggy, reworked taupe ground of *suite* (22 by 46 inches, 2004), a pattern of brown dashes shifting in density and direction suggests an undulating topographical

surface. The same approach yields a sense of extreme close-up in *prickly pear* (32 by 39 inches, 2005), wherein tiny flecks of terra-cotta color sweep a mottled, organic green ground. This abstemious painting looked downright flashy in the context of this understated exhibition.

Bordo's interest in a swelling, forward-moving pictorial space, and his knack for suggesting a figurative presence while not describing one, are on display in *daybreak* (22 by 28 inches, 2004). The corner of a curiously indicated geometrical form, a platform or slab, protrudes from under preeningly plain horizontal bands of scraped ocher and gray. The bands resemble a stage curtain, which the title suggests might be rising, promising brighter conditions of light under which the mise-en-scène might be made plain.

Three regions structure *another day* (32 by 39 inches, 2005), a work that lent its title to the show. It has a disjointed and dreamy but loosely concerted ebb, as if all the elements in the picture were washed by the same tide. Bordo's wet-into-wet technique promotes subtle shifts in hue. Wafting through the midsection is a loose band of neutralized umber, brushed bits of which seem to have become detached and float upward into a receding background region, where grays sufficiently cold to suggest blues and greens serve as chromatic foils. Below, charcoal-gray shards stud an expanse of a similar, denser color. Here, improbably, brushiness imparts a sense not of movement, but of stillness and repose.

—Stephen Maine