

Tonight, I dream of air

Sean McDowell's exhibition *In the day I dream of faraway places* (2021) includes a series of artworks looking at fantastical scenery through the lens of expanded painting. The artist deploys texture, colour, form, and composition to suspend his painting in a nether region of figuration and abstraction. This plane of ambiguity invokes complex vistas and states of nature, ranging from the explosive formations of the cosmos to ethereal matter—such as air and gas. This predilection for intangible content reflects the discipline of abstraction, which has a penchant for impalpable forms.

McDowell explores this dynamic by using a range of techniques to imprint vaporous shapes over his canvas. One of them is material transference: where a drop sheet coated with dry paint is pushed and adhered against another surface, to let it dry and then have it ripped like skin glued to a sheet—leaving patches and fragments behind. He also squeezes tubes to create droplets of thick paint, and hangs the work in the uneven walls of his studio, where gravity distorts the image. The outcome is a combination of deliberation and incidence, embodying the tension that typifies such in between spaces.

The work *In Space* (2021) encapsulates these concerns by alluding to a misty dragon-esque head, made with post-painting techniques. This amorphous and yellow figure seems to be floating in a white space populated with colourful gestural marks, ranging from dots, to lines and smudges. Some of these are signature motifs of the artist—such as the symbol with black and white strokes found in many of his works—while others are more spontaneous actions. The creature in this painting appears to be hovering across the space of the frame but also the universe of representation, as it relies on pareidolia (our ability to see patterns in random imagery) to depict discernible forms. Like a sign that always points to something new, this otherworldly creature shifts and morphs to evade fixed meaning in a landscape of oil and polymer paint.

One of the darker iterations in the show is *Vortex* (2019-21), a painting rich in blacks that captures the engulfing spectacle of space. The surface bears thick drops of paint and pieces of marble, surrounded by manic drips that collide with scars of dry paint to mirror the chaos of the universe. The sinister atmosphere of this painting becomes a looking glass for the spectator's imagination, where one can gaze at demons, spectres and sinners emerge from the infinite darkness of the surface (or the recesses of the mind). Like the Temptations of Saint Anthony—a trope in painting showing demons tormenting the Saint—we see colours haunting the depths of frame. This painting also captures the in between state that permeates *In Space* by referencing the vortex, which we often imagine as the opening of a portal.

This is also true of *Void* (2021), where darkness appears to emerge from the frame to swallow those that meet it. Unlike *In Space*, there is no discernible form and we are instead at the mercy of a shapeless shadow that appears to grow with time. The work also captures the breadth of techniques employed by the artist, featuring drips, material transfers and textured droplets.

There is a conflict in Sean McDowell's work that—like an event horizon in the abyss—create a gravitational pull, for they point to the exterior reality of the Self (space, landscapes, creatures) while conjuring the inner imagery of the mind. Indeed, one could

argue that these are portals into his imagination, bearing the foggiest that characterises mental imagery. The title of this exhibition signposts to this territory by referencing the ideation that occurs in dreams. But we find a stranger encryption within the size of the paintings, as the artist scales them to mimic the dimensions of his body. For instance, some of them measure the length of his arms to endow the linen with a body and imply that the image is the brain.

In the day I dream of faraway places inhabits multiple dual spaces, where painting fractures and explodes like the cosmos to signify a variety of meanings.

Diego Ramirez is an artist, writer and arts worker. Written on 18 June 2021