

ArtSeen

Dan Walsh at Paula Cooper Gallery

by Jennifer Coates

The sensitivity to place in Dan Walsh's muted, minimal paintings is surprisingly reminiscent of the way that Fra Angelico created murals for the private cells in the San Marco monastery. Simple compositions were extensions of monastic solitude and plain, modest rooms. In Walsh's work, the monastery's piety gives way to the modern building's efficiency, and Biblical imagery is replaced with abstract units or quadrants drained of accoutrements and overt specificity. He generates pared-down caricatures of the basic components of architecture,

furniture, and storage units, the constructions that contain and circumscribe us. Hung low along the wall, the paintings themselves appear pseudo-functional and draw attention to the immediate surroundings. I found my eyes wandering to the smooth white corners of the gallery, along the walls between adjoining rooms, and out the gridded windows to the orange or yellow trucks and grey delivery ramps on the street.



Dan Walsh, "Study" (2003), acrylic on canvas, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Walsh's most obvious precursors are Agnes Martin, Philip Guston, and Mark Rothko. He carefully renders sweetly awkward, untaped rectangles, squares, and lines in fields of color. Outlining bands often surround the shapes, framing them within ambient backgrounds. There is a vaguely cartoony feel to the work: lines can sag under the imaginary weight of heavy squares, or boundaries expand under the force of invisible surface tension. In one painting, purple squares that look like computer monitors or television sets seem to sit on a clothesline and emit a dull light against a peachy red background. In another, a scrubby pale blue envelopes a whitish rectangular form with two protrusions along the bottom. It could be either an architectural diagram of an empty room with doorways or the silhouette of a cabinet. Like many other works in the show, it is not always clear whether the view is frontal or aerial.

A sense of exponentially multiplying scale pervades the work, providing an opportunity to consider how simple units increase in size from a desk to a room, from a building to a city block. Walsh's abstract images are like lowest common denominators, reminders of the

elegant simplicity of utilitarian rituals like cleaning, organizing, and ordering. He methodically interprets the compulsive compartmentalizing and right-angled divisions of the modern world from a quirky, folk-minimalist perspective, preserving sense-memories of the world— a margarine-yellow grid or the top floor of an office building at night.

