

Griffin, Nora, "Mary Weatherford Red Hook," *brooklynrail.org*, July 13, 2015



Mary Weatherford Red Hook

by Nora Griffin
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Mary Weatherford, *Engine*, 2014. Flashe and neon on linen, 117 × 104 in. Courtesy Brennan & Griffin. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio.

Painters tell themselves stories in order to keep painting. In the case of Mary Weatherford, a Los Angeles-based artist, the stories are connected to specific places and her visual memories of them. Her signature Flashe paint and neon combines have had three prominent iterations: "Manhattan" and "The Bakersfield Paintings" in 2012, and "Los Angeles" in 2014. Her current show, "Red Hook," inaugurates Brennan & Griffin's new space in Red Hook, Brooklyn. Weatherford created the suite of eight paintings in tandem with the Lower East Side gallery's leasing of the former metal castings warehouse earlier this year. The paintings are commanding in scale, measuring 117 × 104", with one at 112 × 99". The works are installed vertically in sets of four and three on two facing walls. A single painting anchors the back wall and draws the viewer inside. Located on a quiet side street off the main thoroughfare of Van Brunt Street, the gallery is airy and industrial, with beams of metal and wood supporting an arched ceiling, a cracked and smooth concrete floor, and dark brick walls. An open garage door lets in abundant sunlight and the low level surrounding buildings lend a meditative aura to the show.

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In a departure from Weatherford's previous work, the "Red Hook" paintings embrace a scattered formlessness. They have the countenance of exploding blotting pads, the paint is silky and matte like photographic emulsion, and the colors are high octane. The tumult of strokes calls to mind a flattened Joan Mitchell painting, made by a giant's paw and soaked in water. The messy expressionism knows itself too well to be vulnerable, but the twisted lines of neon add a physicality and emotional presence otherwise lacking in the paint. In *Engine* (2014) and *past Sunset* (2015), tubes of orange, pink, and magenta neon are deliciously radiant against mottled blue-black. In other works the neon replicates patches of color and serves as an electrified extension of the watery vinyl paint. The yellow horizontal neon of *Out by Coney* (2014) levitates over an area of diluted cadmium yellow, and in *Canal* (2015) a vertical grouping of neon in bright blue, aquamarine, green and red magnify their paint counterpart on the linen's surface. Lush, light cobalt is the leading star of the *Beautiful Lake* (2015). Red-orange and dirty yellow offset the blues and the colors smear and become more transparent as they push towards the edges of the linen. A short, soft white neon affixed to the lower right corner appears like an object amid this watery mass. The energy of neon white bounces off the milky white of the surface. Subtle shifts in hue from work to work invite the viewer to share in the artist's deeply felt knowledge of color.

Weatherford's paintings have been compared to Barnett Newman's zips, Morris Louis's stained canvases, and the sculptures of Dan Flavin and Keith Sonnier. Beyond these formal similarities, the configuration of neon and absorbent paint offers a new move to the old dance around the limits of abstract painting. What does it mean to attach neon, a cosmic chemical, to a medium and a style that promises infinite returns, yet has been historically debased as "dead." The tubes are screwed into the surface, supported by thin, almost invisible wires, and long sweeping extension cords connect to grey boxy chargers plugged into wall sockets. The paintings breathe in this unholy configuration, as a body on life support remains conscious with the aid of advanced technology.

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On the other side of this intimation of mortality, the paintings undoubtedly seduce with their material presence: the texture and strength of the Belgian linen, the tight stretching on large-scale supports, and the chromatic richness of Flashe. Another pleasure is in the referential nature of the neon colors and forms, most readily apparent in the "Manhattan" series. For instance, in *Brooklyn Bridge* (2013), two vertical neon strips, warm yellow next to turquoise, are conjoined at their bases by a looping cord, mimicking the bridge's suspension cables. In *Palm Reader* (2013), a curving line of purple neon is instantly recognizable to New Yorkers as the color of the signage that announces storefront psychics. The light brightens and is absorbed into the purple and black Flashe puddle beneath it.

The blue variations and splashy paint handling of the "Red Hook" paintings imply an equivalency to water, but it is here that an observable relationship to the city's oldest harbor ends. The rest is poetic conjecture. A walk around the neighborhood's streets takes one past industrial complexes, grass lots, 19th-century brick houses, and abandoned factories with crumbling painted signs. Graffiti is prevalent, though not as aggressive tags, but as more indeterminate lines and forms. Pedestrians have the time and space to regard you, and even say hello, an anomaly in New York City. A grey cat lies down in the middle of the street blending in with the tarmac. As the sun sets at Valentino Pier you can observe, all at once, the Statue of Liberty, the glittery mirage of Wall Street, and the journey of an illuminated Staten Island Ferry. Perhaps it was in moments similar to these that Weatherford found her source material. But more importantly than the artist's own relationship to this area, it is the viewer who will emerge from the show with a more complex appreciation of a city in flux and stillness.