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## Mel O'Callaghan

GALERIE ALLEN/PALAIS DE TOKYO



Mel O'Callaghan, *En Masse (blue and black iridescent pull)*, 2017, acrylic on glass, 63 × 47 1/4". From the series "En Masse," 2017–.

For the better part of the past decade, Mel O'Callaghan has produced large-scale performances and installations for venues including the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2016 and 2017) and the Sydney Biennale (2014), all the while quietly making paintings in the privacy of her studio. The artist's recent exhibition at Galerie Allen (which she cofounded in 2013 with curator Joseph Allen Shea) marked the first public glimpse of this heretofore unseen body of work. While representing a significant material departure for the Paris-based Australian—whose better-known work typically combines elements of dance, ritual, and meditation—her paintings on glass remain intrinsically connected to movement, the body, and time.

Collectively titled "En Masse," the four two-tone paintings in this series (all works 2017) were made with household acrylic paint poured directly onto human-scale (approximately five by four feet) sheets of glass. Working initially with the glass supported by waist-high sawhorses, the artist covered roughly half the composition with black paint before adding generous pours of either red, blue, yellow, or green and then immediately tilting the panes upright to drip-dry. Left to chance and chemistry, the interactions of pigments produce nuanced variations in tone, texture, and form. In *En Masse (yellow and black instant pull)*, abutting bodies of yellow and black paint form gentle, hazy gray waves at the center of the composition, while in *En Masse (red and black after J-PB)* the dripping red has pushed through the black, creating subtle striations of maroon in the lower half of the composition. Each with a consistent midline, which reads as a horizon, the painterly compositions suggest vistas ranging from the aurora borealis over the earth's curvature (*En Masse [green and black blurred pull]*) to a silhouetted mountain peak against a luminous dusk sky (*En Masse [blue and black iridescent pull]*).

Gradual tonal shifts that reveal themselves over a period of extended observation liken O'Callaghan's paintings to Rothko's transcendent late works. The paintings' meditative quality is underscored when considered in the context of two recent works contemporaneously on view in Paris as part of O'Callaghan's solo show at the Palais de Tokyo, "Dangerous on-the-way." Less excruciating than the ritual harvest of rare edible birds' nests from the Gomantong Caves in Borneo, which the artist documented in the two-channel video that shared the show's title, and less direct than the performance *To Hear with My Eyes*, during which participants attempt to reach a state of "ecstatic trance," O'Callaghan's paintings are nonetheless the results of a physical challenge that requires two people, working in tandem, to manipulate the glass using their whole bodies. The physicality of this process and its materially ambiguous results harken back to the late 1960s when Lynda Benglis heaved pigmented latex onto the floor from five-gallon paint cans and created works that were neither paintings nor sculptures but both. Extending this notion of all-inclusiveness to the making of "En Masse," O'Callaghan frames painting in terms of dance and ritual.

—Mara Hoberman

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