

“Review: Brian Wills shows his invigorating stripes at Nye + Brown”  
Christopher Knight / December 5, 2013



Brian Wills, "Untitled," 2013, single-strand rayon thread and enamel on board.

From Gene Davis in the 1960s to Tim Bavington in the 2000s, stripes have been a resilient format for abstract paintings. That's surprising, given the seemingly limited range of possibilities of parallel straight lines on a canvas.

Now, add Brian Wills to the list of inventive practitioners. The most satisfying of a dozen recent works at Nye + Brown are five striped works on flat, square wood panels. (The others are more sculptural, including shallow boxes, wedges and cubes.)

Wills alternates stripes of textured enamel paint in various widths and colors with stripes made from dense rows of single-strand rayon thread stretched taut across the surface. Some are further coated with polyurethane.

The juxtaposition of paint and thread emphasizes the surface as a physical skin. One result is a disconcerting sense of line and color as material objects, as something you might be able to reach out and hold in your hand. Wills' debut solo at the gallery last year focused on cruciform shapes, which echoed the weave of traditional canvas; the austere stripes here feel more elusive -- more mercurial and buoyant and thus more engaging.

The differences between light reflection and absorption in the two materials disrupts optical continuity across the surface. The bars of rayon thread seem to glow from within, advancing and receding in space depending on your physical proximity to them and creating three-dimensional curves where none exist. The painted bars lie flat, establishing a fixed plane that the thread stands on or, by turns, slips behind.

More than mere eye candy, Wills' striped constructions open a new and potentially invigorating avenue within the rich phenomenology of Light and Space art. It will be interesting to watch where his work goes from here.