

# Free Times - Ohio's Premier News, Arts, & Entertainment Weekly

## Arts

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Arts Lead

## Buying Time

Todd Chilton At Raw & Co

By Douglas Max Utter

Painting doesn't exactly solve anything, doesn't really go anywhere, but that doesn't

stop painters from trying to unlock the doors of perception in their own way. Like artists in other disciplines, painters share at least one thing - a need to establish some medium of exchange so they can buy a little chunk of real reality. Abstract painting in particular is a sort of machine built to manufacture such coinage. Sometimes the emphasis is on form, sometimes on materials, but the crucial ambition is to produce a self-contained system, often based - paradoxically - on synecdoche, proposing a small part of visual/tactile experience to stand for the whole shebang. Then the serious messing around begins, the trimming and training of the chosen visual fragment until it becomes a thing somehow truer than other visual objects, an artifact from a less distracted dimension.

This isn't easy either to do or recognize, and galleries sensitive to such quietly ambitious, highly demanding labor are tough to find - especially outside of major art markets. Per Knutas, raw & co's director, has done a consistently good job of finding and showing such work over the past three years, despite the difficulties of being located

Raw & Co Gallery

1009 Kenilworth Avenue , Cleveland, OH,  
44113  
216-235-0635

**Todd Chilton: Recent Paintings**

Tue, Aug 28th - 8:15 pm Through Sun, Sep 30th



**"Squeeze" By Todd Chilton. Oil on canvas, 2006.**

well off the beaten track. A small but enthusiastic audience has learned to expect art of a high order from each show mounted at the tiny storefront gallery in Tremont.

The current display of works by recent School of the Art Institute of Chicago MFA grad Todd Chilton is no disappointment. His six crisp, introspective oil on canvas paintings are engaged in a search for some word, some clue, trapped between paint, canvas, and simple, even primitive formal ideas. His paintings often take place on a surface nuanced by much under-painting. Like subcutaneous levels of history and influence, these emphasize a feeling of contingency already inherent in Chilton's roughly rendered lines of paint. No search for certainty or inevitability drags this work away from a plainspoken acceptance of imperfection. Take "Squeeze" (2006) for example, a medium-size painting that seems large in Knutas' parlor-like space. The oil on canvas work is made up of a series of blue and brown lines against an orange background, arranged in a diminishing series of rectangular boxes, one inside the other. A couple of the final inner boxes have a slight warp to them, so that the keyhole-like patch of orange in the center is in fact squeezed. At first glance there's not much to look at, but there turns out to be more. For one thing Chilton's brown or blue lines aren't exactly what they appear to be; they're weirdly lumpy. The blue ones in particular are complicated constructions of short, probably vertical strokes of brown, covered with a lateral swathe of blue. The top and bottom of each brown stroke is just barely visible and has a textile-like, nappy quality. Then there's the overall optical buzz that these colors and formal choices inevitably crank out. "Squeeze" is like a homemade op-art piece, like a 1960s-era Frank Stella painting made by someone who, for whatever reason, has no interest in Stella's crucial, overstated precision.

Chilton has said these paintings aren't about optical effects, but surely several of them allude to perceptual vertigo. With "Squeeze" it's as if he's trying to press the trickiness or trippiness of op right out of it, restoring an elementary geometric quality through a somewhat funky, highly personal technical approach. But this is incidental to his central project. All six of the paintings at raw & co seem to insist on the basics: that any painting first of all is an interplay of color, form and substance, and the physical way that a painter's moves and processes shift these facts around. Chilton chooses his somewhat obsessive-seeming motifs and actions as a kind of game board, where contests of the self vs. whatever are deprived of most of their oxygen. What is squeezed in these paintings is irrelevance, inadvertence; they resist theory of any kind, but also stop short of personal reference, apart from conveying a sense of the hand that made them.

"Precision" (2007) is about the same size as "Squeeze" and is another purely geometric piece, consisting in this case of thin green lines against a white background. Optically it's also somewhat mesmerizing, for two reasons: The green lines aren't just one shade of green but play with each other in a wavering tremulo of tints; and the geometric pattern here is hard to resolve into any sensible linear idea. There are things that it is not, like M. C. Escher's plays on

repetition, or Stella's hard-edged angled chevrons, and there are things that it resembles, like a doodle in a high school kid's notebook. It reads from right to left, starting with a few lines that run from top to bottom. But the next few start turning corners. Instead of forming boxes, they abruptly make a corner or two and head out the left side of the canvas, converting vertical to horizontal motion. Just above the center of the work is a white box, the eye of this orderly storm. Maybe it's a portrait of the painting itself, before it was invaded by green lines, or maybe it's just a place they can't go - either way, it's both a rest area and a place-holder for some unarticulated question. Again, part of the content of this work is the wobbly, hand-hewn quality of Chilton's painted lines, which lends them an aura of personality and suggests that these long marks really don't have the time to care about being good lines; they're too busy being paint and not describing boxes, as they head in an orderly fashion for the edges of the surface.

Located near the margins of contemporary American abstraction, Chilton is inspired by the great New York abstractionists Mary Heilman and Thomas Nozkowski, among others. Most of his work is deliberately far simpler than either one of those painters, and he avoids the relatively overt tensions between natural and ideal renditions of form that characterizes much of their work. Yet his rough, peculiar lines do embody very similar ideas, mixing the personal and formal as they try to buy enough time from between the lines of their rudely decorated space to become, or at least hint about, something real.

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