

ArtSeen

Paul Wesenberg: *Half Past Paradise*

By Ekin Erkan



Paul Wesenberg, *Half Past Paradise*, 2024. Oil, Ink and Oilskins on Canvas, 59 x 79 inches. Courtesy the artist and SLAG&RX.

The fifteen canvases that make up Paul Wesenberg's *Half Past Paradise* are fit with mixed-media studies loosely inspired by landscapes. Linen is abraded and lined with peeled oilskin skeins prepared on a Plexiglass surface. The occasional letter or number is tucked beside a cascade of leafy impasto, aquamarine cables, and fushia filaments. The series is both arachnean and cartographic, with Wesenberg's additive-and-subtractive practice of drilling and weaving the linen canvas complicating the adage that "painting is essentially line and color".

Wesenberg's process begins with preparatory drawings, each smaller than a polaroid photo. After the composition and color are diagrammed, Wesenberg scratches linen sheets with a miniature drill, irritating and indenting the canvas with permanent marks. He then reinforces the verso with wire and glue before stretching the canvas. The artist then attends to the canvas with a palette of radiating pigments while simultaneously layering wet-on-dry "oilskins" on Plexiglass. The drying process totals about a month, after which the artist removes the hardened leaves from the glass and applies them to the canvas. In some works, like *Jaragua* (2023), Wesenberg loosens stray linen threads and sews them into scar-stitched furrows—narrow linen bridges that cross-channel the boundaries of paint below. Occasionally, Wesenberg also shelters a steel number or single letter within the furrows of the painting's grooves.

Within this expanse of elements is the occasional visage (a parrot, panther, iris, or moon) indented in the canvas's membrane, concealed by a web of impasto. These facets only reveal themselves after close observation, connected as they are to jade leaves or a turret of crimson-outlined flower petals flattened within the broader semblance of a landscape. There is also no shortage of prismatic abstract elements, ranging from splatters to ruddy washes. Hard edges are eschewed in favor of crusts, scabs, and flakes. This abstract amalgam is what one first notices, and it invites comparison to the history of texturally-coarse abstract painting, including Beauford Delaney's under-layered flaxen "Untitleds" and the Situationist International's collaborative paintings. Wesenberg's networked animal silhouettes and splatter-bedaubed hazy landscapes, painted with thick layers of oil and glittering mixed materials, also recall Cecily Brown's ability to seal figurative imagery within an open picture plane. His closeness to the textile vernacular of abstractionists like Anne Ryan and Rosemarie Trockel further places Wesenberg outside of the developmental narrative of "pure painting."



Paul Wesenberg, *Night Rain*, 2022–23. Oil and Oilskins on Canvas, 94 x 67 inches. Courtesy the artist and SLAG&RX.

Unlike Ryan and Trockel, however, Wesenberg does not introduce textile materials alien to the canvas, instead drilling into and weaving with the canvas' constitutive filaments. Wesenberg makes use of composition to prefigure perceptual "entry points": semi-recognizable images that are disclosed within a pocket of the canvas. He shares this strategy with Brown, although his work differs in that the pictorial material is rarely anchored in art history. Wesenberg's works are only landscapes or *nature morte* studies in the loosest sense. Though he makes use of the Surrealist technique of *grattage*, Wesenberg is, unlike Delaney and the Situationists, not an automatist. Every pictorial element is pre-planned and programmatically addressed. It is a curious choice to include figurative anchors at all, but it is here that our gaze coalesces and from here that it optically loosens, subsequently traveling along errant drabs—a cartographic progression directed by scars, seams, and furrows.

There is, indeed, a map-like quality to Wesenberg's works. The canvas's lacerations are our optical guides. In *Night House Plant* (2021–22), for instance, the contours of a *Dracaena Lisa* are framed by a flurry of haphazard coal brushstrokes stripped into vertical segments by the distressed bores shorn by Wesenberg's drill. In *Azalee* (2023), the eponymous plant mass's cardinal fronds are deployed as streaking daubs that hem and divert movement away from the center of the canvas towards its upper edges, before undone linen threads draw our perception downwards and to the right. The ultimate torrent of burrows and mounds resembles a raised-relief map.



Installation view: Paul Wesenberg: *Half Past Paradise*, SLAG&RX, New York, 2024. Courtesy SLAG&RX.

Although it may strike viewers as an exercise in archaism, Wesenberg’s work shows us that there are further riches yet to be drawn from a modernist sensitivity to medium. The developmental view of the modernist enterprise distilled painting into a self-definitional project that involved reflexively examining painting’s perceptual criteria. According to the conventional view, modernist painting reached its logical endpoint with the post-painterly abstraction of artists like Morris Louis and Frank Stella, in which the image was essentially collapsed into the nominally two-dimensional structure of its support. Yet, as Barry Schwabsky notes in “On Paul Wesenberg’s Paintings” (2024), “Morris Louis with his stain paintings, ... [does] not increase the thickness of the work’s surface but imbue[s] that surface with permeating color.” Wesenberg, on the other hand, demonstrates that post-painterly abstraction’s primarily optical address to the flatness of the picture surface has little to tell us about the inherently three-dimensional nature of the canvas itself, as a material object. It is especially through his *grattage* drilling and linen-thread weaving that Wesenberg reveals the intractably textile character of the canvas as a painterly material. The artist’s engagement with abstracted landscapes, animal visages, and still life flowers demonstrates that putting pressure on conventional understandings of medium-specific reflexivity is not the artist’s sole concern—the slippage between objective and non-objective abstraction is another—but it is perhaps his most interesting one.

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