

NEW AMERICAN PAINTINGS. BLOG Interview:

[New & Noteworthy: Michelle Mackey](#)

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Ghosts of Industrial Past, 2008 | Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches

[Michelle Mackey](#) was included in edition #60 of *New American Paintings* and was selected as a Noteworthy artist in edition #80. The Brooklyn-based artist has made some recent changes, not only to her paintings but some geographic changes as well. Now in Texas teaching at universities in Dallas, I caught up with Mackey this week to discuss her work, and to see if now that she's gone black, will she ever go back. —*Evan J. Garza*

EJG: Last you were featured in *New American Paintings* in early 2009 you were working on your *Portal* series, which featured colorful, almost collage-like oil abstractions on canvas. Your current work is quite different, much more reductive in both composition and palette.

The *Portal* series was an effort to show a crack in the fabric, perhaps a reveal of another world. Not so much an escapist world, but a glimpse into what's really going on. A bit more like the possibilities that quantum mechanics reveal. I'm always wanting to take a closer look at possibilities and at my own misunderstandings—that is what *Portal* was about and it is also what the recent black work is about... The “black” work is more about a slow reveal and less about a crack in the fabric. I had a more meditative approach to these paintings and I've been told the viewing process is also meditative, and the associations go into vast territory.



***Trefoil*, 2010 | Acrylic and enamel on resin-coated panel, 47 x 47 inches**

EJG: Why the switch to black and white (and gray)?

In short, I reacted to the panels. I was working at a scene shop where they produce sets for TV shows. They had these black panels, essentially masonite with a black shiny resin coat, that I had seen for years but never really considered for my own work. When I was packing up my supplies for a residency at [Vermont Studio Center](#), a co-worker challenged me to experiment on those surfaces. I said “sure” and threw them in the truck along with my canvases. The juxtaposition of multiple edges, landscapes and points of view in the *Portal* series was done through color and edge. In these panels, I could work with surface-sheen and precision, so my color voice needed

to be quieter to allow for this. And, since it was a new surface, I did approach it quietly and reflectively. The black, white, and gray seemed clarifying to me. I felt like I was getting further into what I was searching for in the *Portal* series.



***Punk Pass, 2010* | Acrylic on resin-coated panel, 10.5 x 22 inches**

EJG: Your work, regardless of series, relies heavily on dimension and space.

I seem to have a natural proclivity towards architectural spaces. Somehow I can explore time and memory through architectural imagery more than other types of imagery. I'm interested in places in between identities. Again, that desire to get beyond the overlooked and into the core of what that space contains. I often explore places that have been allowed to go to ruin, like the old train station in Detroit, designed by the same architect who designed Grand Central Station. The interior of the Detroit station is cavernous and pocked with light leaks from broken windows and holes in the walls. It is grand in a way that tells the story of Detroit—full of battles and the tensions of humans versus nature, as well as the marks of humans over years of time. I'm not interested in all ruins. There usually has to be some personal connection for me. In Detroit, for instance, I have several dear friends who live there and my experience of the station is informed by their history with the city. A similar connection happened to me with a park in Berlin, and several old pier buildings on the Hudson River. I'll take photos and do drawings and spend time in these places. And then often the actual imagery in my work is from memory. One of my main interests in observing these places, is how the light interacts with the structure. The light is the key.

EJG: The forms in your new work seem quite sculptural.

The depth is illusionistic, but I am, in fact, working subtractively, as well as additively. On

panels, I can sand into the surface and through layers of paint. When I worked on canvas, I could wipe away the paint, but I was using oils, so I didn't really sand that often. In the "black" work, I feel like I can really reach-in...I suppose my mindset is more sculptural. I am recalling interior spaces. The work is from memory, so I am reaching into the recesses.



Leap, 2010 | Acrylic and enamel on resin-coated panel, 47 x 47 inches

EJG: Given the reductive nature of your recent work, there are some obvious ties to the Colorfield painters, interrupted obviously by your abstractions and painterly effects.

I love the idea that something is happening in real time between the work and the viewer. The phenomenological experience of the color field painters has always resonated with me. Also, the work of the minimalists—a Donald Judd piece says, “slow down, really look; the angle you choose will change your perception of the piece; don't assume you know what two steps over will look like”. Because sheen plays an important role in my “black” work, the viewer's body and proximity can sometimes play a role as a fragmented reflection. So, that goes back to your sculptural question. The surface is invoking the 3D world of the viewer.

EJG: You've made some exciting changes in your work in the last several years. What's in store for you next? Do you have any plans to return to the colorful, graphic work you were making before?

Well, I currently have a studio space in Dallas, Texas—I've taken a Brooklyn break for the fall. I'm teaching painting and design at [Southern Methodist University](#) and [University of North Texas](#), two universities here. And, I have more room in this studio, so I'm taking this opportunity to work on black panels that are 8 feet wide. I've doubled the width. So, that's exciting! And, color may return... the work will decide.

[Michelle Mackey](#) was featured in editions #60 and #80 of *New American Paintings*. Mackey is currently featured in *World of Speculation*, a solo show of her work, at the Thompson Gallery at [Furman University](#) in Greenville, South Carolina, and she is also currently included in a group exhibition, *Lost Horizons*, at [ARTJAIL](#), New York.