

Complementary Colors: New Paintings by Helen Shulman
Kobalt Gallery
Provincetown, MA
www.kobaltgallery.com
Through September 18, 2012

By Meg Brazill

In Shulman's *You Can Tackle Anything You Put Your Mind To*, six wood panels (4' x 8') comprise a whole. A blue-gray-green palette launches an airy openness across the top three panels, insinuating moving clouds and sky. Despite the suggestion of landscape, Shulman remains faithful to the abstract while invoking the familiar with her deft use of horizontal line. The persistent "horizon" creates a visual respite and infuses the painting with calmness. We read the painting like a book; our eyes seek to understand.

The openness of *Tackle...* ignites bright shapes like windows, which posit a depth beyond the painting to a horizon as distant as forever. Diebenkorn's geometric influence recedes here where composition – and narrative – suggestive of Martin Johnson Heade play beautifully across the panels. The foreground presents marshland or forest, wildfires or wildflowers, waterfalls or rusty water lapping at eroded beaches – or nothing at all except the paint in an abstraction of scratches, hatchmarks, color, and brush strokes against which we might reflect our own interior lives.

Shulman brings a looser, broader stroke to these new paintings; brighter colors, too, are evident, especially in "Palimpsest" and "Your Journey Will Be Satisfying in Surprising Ways." Shulman employs underpainting, sanding, and a spare buildup of paint to achieve interest and depth. Here, "Journey..." surprises with the addition of fabric, and bits of wood and metal affixed to the wood panel, perhaps referencing back on itself through its title. At times, the perspective of Shulman's work can feel like a kind of closeup, where we are examining the very structure underneath.

Shulman's interest in human behavior and the psychology of human experience finds expression in her titles. Some are mysterious and many are humorous; they all create a more intimate connection with the paintings. The title word in *Palimpsest* refers, typically, to a manuscript or parchment that has been erased or altered, which still retains vestiges of the earlier writing. By extension, it plays with the

place or area that reflects its history, which might be the painting itself or what came just before.

Shulman's abstractions create a road map to our psyche, raising questions along the way.

A selection of Shulman's paintings will continue on permanent exhibit at Kobalt Gallery, and in Stowe, Vermont, at the West Branch Gallery & Sculpture Park.
