

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

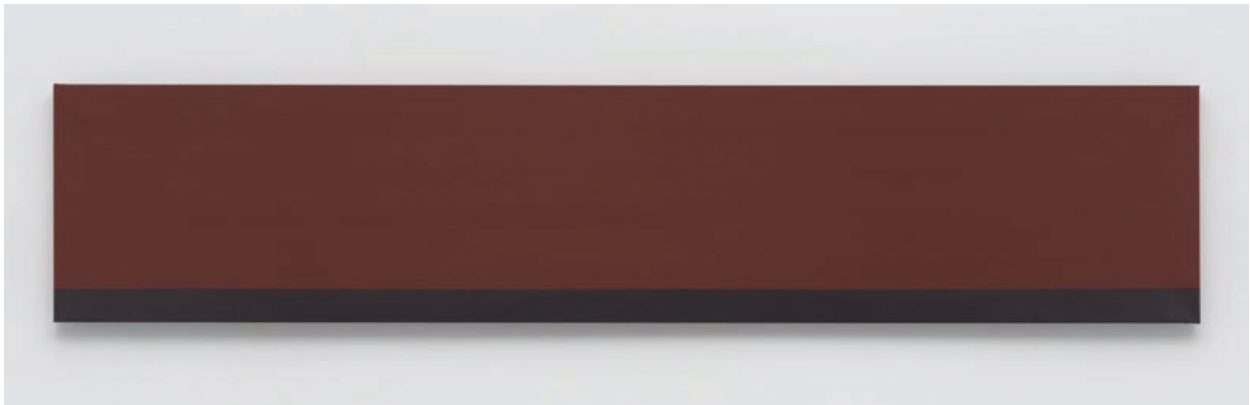
523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



ArtSeen

Anne Truitt: *Paintings*

By Louis Block



Anne Truitt, *Brunt*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 19 x 92 inches. © annetruitt.org / Bridgeman Images / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

In a journal entry written at Yaddo in the summer of 1974, Anne Truitt recalls falling asleep as a child in Maryland, attempting to locate, in pitch darkness, the position of furniture in the bedroom. She goes on to describe what lies behind her head, out the window, beyond the lawn, the river, the town. It is only once this task is accomplished, once she is “in place,” that she can fall asleep. “I pay attention to latitude and longitude. It’s as if the outside world has to match some personal horizontal and vertical axis.”¹ In the absence of light, when only flickers of visual information are available, Truitt relies on a corporeal sense to build an image of the world.

This preoccupation with spatial orientation is present in much of Truitt’s writing, not just as a means to ground oneself, but as a way to structure the emotional landscape of her own life. Consider this early memory of Truitt as an infant being changed by her nurse Stella:

I remember lying on a table in the pale light of night. My lower body is drenched. My diaper is being changed. I already know that I will be comfortable very soon, and I feel patient. My nurse is tall and slender and serene, like my mother, though I know that she is not my mother.²

Block, Louis. “Anne Truitt: Paintings.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2018.

Already, Truitt associates her own horizontality with helplessness, and the verticality of her nurse and mother with comfort—they are beings that, by virtue of their upright stature, provide care for her. Later on in childhood, Truitt’s mother brings her to see Stella on her deathbed. She is shocked to see her former nurse lying down:

Her length, so often measured vertically from my low perspective, was now shockingly horizontal. My knees were above her head. Her frail body was flat, scarcely lifting the cover under which it was neatly stretched, and her long hair, usually wound around her head, was combed out and spread thinly on the sheet.³

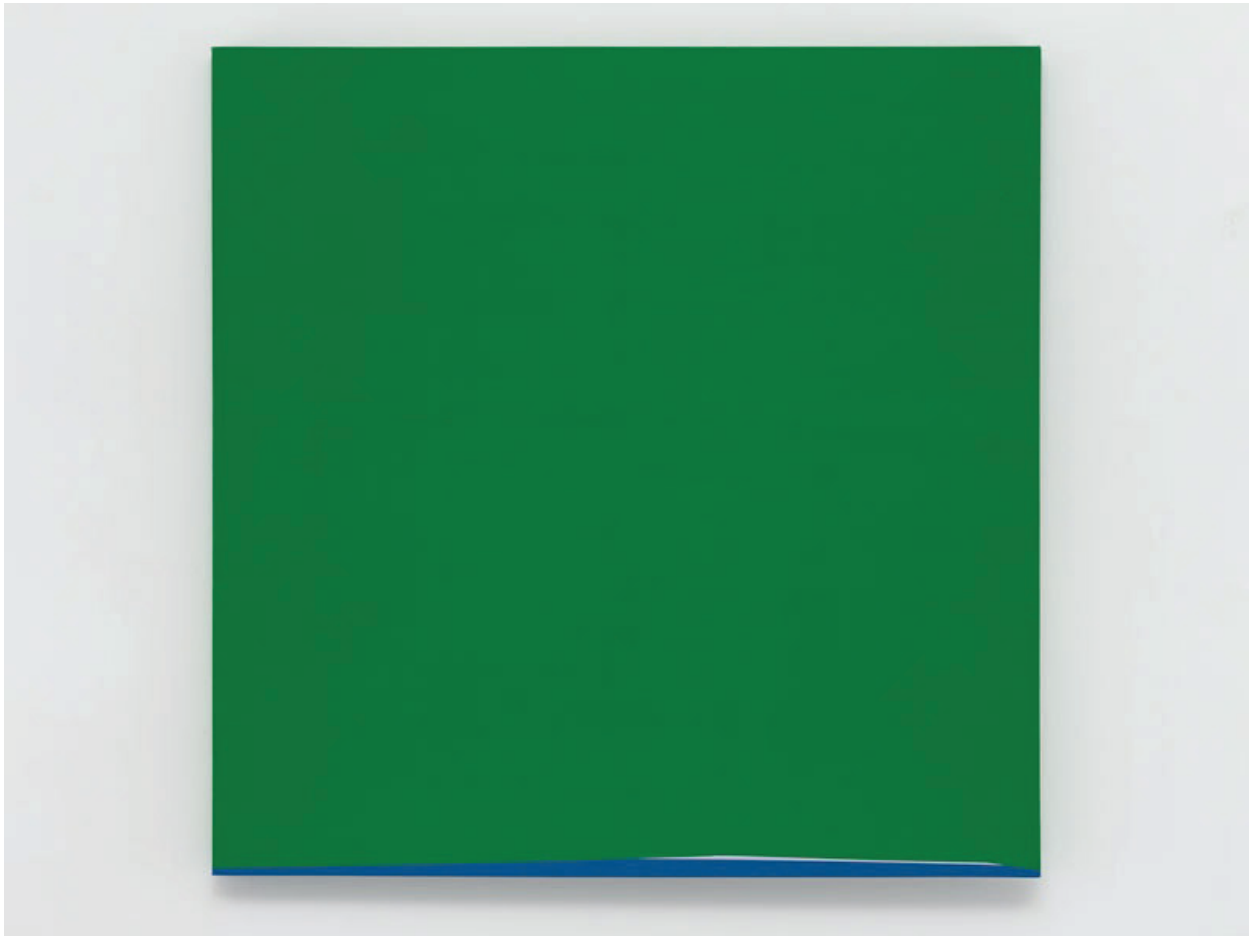
In this psychological inversion of roles, Truitt assumes the position of caretaker, standing above the bed. Upright, she has assumed full control of her world. In this vertical axis one finds choice, independence, strength. Being horizontal then, is to be subject to the tides of nature and biology: infantile impotence, uncontrollable dreams, disease, death.

All of this is to say that it would be obvious to read Truitt’s works as figures or landscapes. With their frequently elongated proportions (tall and thin or short and wide), her paintings and sculptures seem to resonate along their respective axes. While the vertical pieces embody a physical presence in space, whether imposing or shy, the horizontal pieces are something to fall into; they request the viewer’s presence. These infinite couplings—sleeping and waking, voids and bodies, nature and nurture—allow for a neat compartmentalizing of Truitt’s work. It was this division that I attempted to circumvent while visiting a new show at Matthew Marks of eleven paintings, made between 1974 and 1993.



Installation view, Anne Truitt *Paintings*, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2018. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Aaron Wax. © annetruitt.org / Bridgeman Images / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

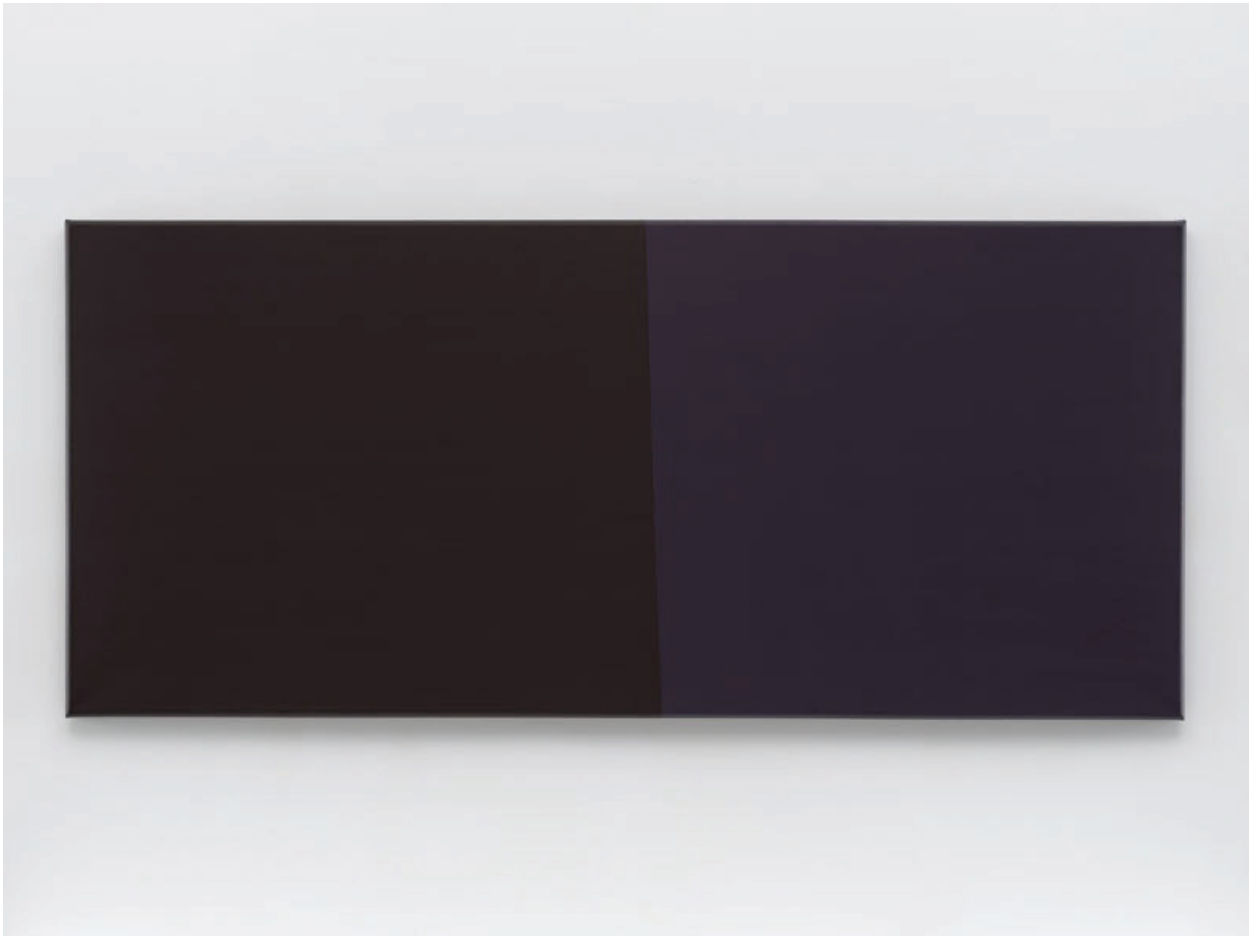
Block, Louis. “Anne Truitt: Paintings.” *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2018.



Anne Truitt, *Run Child Run*, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. © annetrutt.org / Bridgeman Images / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

It was helpful, in reading the lines and forms of the paintings, not to try to identify horizons versus figures, but to ask “which horizon, which figure?” Truitt’s titles invoke autobiographical details, whether they are place names or phrases like *Run Child Run*, not so much implying the specific content that is being abstracted, but rather hinting at a specificity of experience, a location along the emotive axes of perception.

The gallery’s main room holds four vertical paintings, beacons against the stark walls. *Ojibwa* (1993) is bisected by a black diagonal with a slight red fringe. On either side, two fields of purple—impossibly close to each other in hue—push inwards. Up close, the mind doubts the eye. Are the purples actually different, or is the red fringe playing tricks? Three skinny paintings from 1986 appear to gaze in towards the center of the room. But, approaching them individually, their personae fade away. Despite their vertical formats, all three paintings contain horizon lines. A crooked black segment grounds the bottom of *Messenger’s* (1986) red field, while a thin strip of red rests atop *Prodigal’s* (1986) purple. Not only does this juxtaposition play with the relative value of the two reds, it pushes the figure ground relationship to its absolute limit, relegating the painting’s tension to the edge of the canvas, forcing the viewer to crouch down or tilt their head up to view the action. Similarly, the square format paintings, such as *Prospect* (1991) and *Run Child Run* (1986) consist of dense fields of color with slight blips of contrast running against the bottom edge of the canvas.



Anne Truitt, *Engadine I*, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 108 inches. © annetruitt.org / Bridgeman Images / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

These paintings insist on the meditative quality of their content. Truitt intensifies the resonance of these fields of color not by doing away with form and line, but by pushing it to the periphery. In another journal entry, she describes the first time she witnessed violence. In her childhood garden, she would peer out through the fence to look at “the whitewashed clapboard back wall of a shed housing the grocer’s chickens. Violets grew profusely under its eaves. Nourished by chicken droppings, enormous, sweet-smelling blossoms burgeoned from thick-springing leaves.” When the grocer comes out to slaughter the chickens on the stump next to the shed, she describes the scene as “violets in the foreground and off to the left the matter-of-fact wielding of death.”⁴ The violets are what hold Truitt’s attention in this foundational memory, either because of their vivid color or the mere fact that they draw attention away from the chickens’ slaughter. Nonetheless, there is an acknowledgement of necessary contrasts in this passage: the flowers grow out of the waste produced by chickens, which are then slaughtered for sustenance. It is Truitt’s specificity of vision that focuses her unwavering gaze on the violets, without erasing the unpleasant actions both peripheral to the flowers’ placement and integral to their existence.

The show’s four horizontal canvases are installed in the back room, promising an exploration of latitudinal experience, a simplification which quickly faltered in my mind. The horizon line in *Brunt* (1974), when examined up close, reveals bleeding of both the brown and black layers into each other, suggesting a back and forth struggle with both fields. The sense of movement here is vertical rather than horizontal, a contest between two strong forces weighing upon each other. The

paintings are full of these contrasts between force and dimension. In the movement of one's head to view the crest at the top of *Morning Wave* (1986), the expanse of blue rushes out of the confines of its narrow canvas. The later paintings are even mounted on rounded stretchers, so that a bevel gracefully guides the paint from the face of the paintings to their edges.

Engadine I (1990) offers the most subtle shifts in perception. On the first viewing, under artificial light, the diagonal separating the two fields was sharply defined, throwing the composition off-kilter. On subsequent viewings, under the natural shifting light of two cloudy days, the fields were more hazy, seeming to overlap into each other. In another sequence from her journal, Truitt describes a recurring dream of night-swimming with an unknown lover. "We are the same temperature as the water. Its purple folds our purple into itself, under and over. But we remain ourselves."⁵ What is the inherent difference that allows for two colors to remain separate once pushed against each other? What else is the color infused with?

On the subject of straight lines, Truitt wrote "We never see them unless we make them ourselves; even the apparently straight horizon of the ocean against the sky curves if we see it from the air."⁶ If these lines are not found in nature, then they must relate to our bodies. In drawing a line, we locate ourselves not only along latitude and longitude, but in time, and in other imperceptible dimensions. Just as specific colors carry personal meaning, so too can specific degrees of spatial orientation—the awkward angles in which we shift our bodies to see, to embrace, or to hide.

Up close, *Engadine's* colors waver in the shifting light. Stepping back slowly, the canvas appears to have been hung crooked. I blink and realize my spine has aligned with the diagonal. For a moment, I am parallel to Truitt's axis. Then, I readjust, back to the present.

Notes

1. Anne Truitt. *Daybook* (Pantheon, 1982). From the 2013 Scribner edition. 27-28.
2. *Daybook*, 47.
3. *Ibid.* 48.
4. *Ibid.* 76-77.
5. *Ibid.* 81.
6. *Ibid.* 74.