

Wingate Studio

Flash Art



Sebastian Black, “Poor little cursor (philtrum) [...]” (2015). Courtesy of the Artist and C L E A R I N G, New York.

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Sebastian Black C L E A R I N G / New York

Sometimes a joke is so bad we have to laugh despite ourselves; that is the spirit Sebastian Black sets up with the title of his exhibition “Tales I Knows.”

Returning to his favorite motif of a deconstructed cartoon puppy face, Black plays on the words “tails,” “eye,” and “nose” in an ironically self-referential way. But just like a running gag that keeps getting better the more you hear it, these signature paintings, as well as the “Period Pieces” also in the show, push us to go beyond the recurring waggery to think about what exactly it is that gets us.

The light-hued abstract paintings are puzzles of colored shapes that look like geometric abstraction or Cubism. Black complements the reminiscent aspect of the works with short tales that serve as long titles, stuck to the backs of the paintings. Take Poor little cursor (philtrum) flickering weekly on the tundra. Tap tap tap. Are you cold in there? You need a big Russian hat (nose). Can you do that dance I wonder? The one with the kicks and the splits (mouth)? Got any letters for me? Am I not a worthy stage (muzzle)? (2015). Embedded within this piece of super-short flash fiction (of all the titles, this is the shortest) are hints as to how to read the puzzle: if you begin with the philtrum, that groove above the lip, then move on to the Russian hat nose, you can begin to put together the components of a puppy face. If you’re like me you failed, but this is undoubtedly part of the humor.

The face of the puppy may have been recognizable in past iterations of the series, but in these works any clearly identifiable image has been subsumed under more stylized compositions. The effect of this further push toward formalism, including the associated linguistic tropes, is to not only heighten our desire to get the punch line, but also to understand the pictorial and rhetorical devices at work and their power over us. They might be stronger than us after all.

by Aaron Bogart