

BRENT WADDEN

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By Maggie Barrett

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Stand inches away from a Brent Wadden canvas and the work takes on a similar monumentality to a Clyfford Still painting. The edge of a given shape seems to drop into a bottomless void. A few steps back, however, with the canvas in full view, these shapes form a pattern—those canyons are now part of a flat surface without depth. From this distance the eye skates from swatch to swatch, absorbing the variation in surface color and texture. All of the eight works on view oscillate, at times assuming the flat surface of a geometric design, at others, the depth of a landscape.



Brent Wadden, “Big BW” (2015). Hand woven fibers, wool, cotton and acrylic on canvas, 107 × 82”.
Courtesy of the artist, Peres Projects, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Brent Wadden is a Vancouver and Berlin-based artist who has shown work in Berlin for nearly a decade; this is his first solo show in New York. He works on a loom to create geometric woven “paintings.” All the works on view are large-scale weavings, measuring six square feet at the smallest. Each uses a pared-down palette, including three or four

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colors. His titles, like “Blue Wine” or “Tangerine Teal,” straightforwardly refer to the palette in the work, reflecting the artist’s emphasis on formal over conceptual concerns. The weavings are tight and methodical. It is hard to know while looking at them if they were made by human labor or a machine, but the occasional imperfections—a bulge or a gap in the weaving—hint toward the former.

The bulky seams that join the panels emphasize the work’s handmade quality. “Avocado Salmon” (all 2015) for example, is a medley of pinks and beiges. The pinks form a mountain range across a beige sky that is then inverted in the lower panel; in the bottom third of the canvas, the mountainous forms appear as reflections. The different shades of pinks and beiges lend the work lightness. At times the canvas feels more opaque and at other times, more translucent. The avocado green referred to in the title only occurs in the seam that joins the middle panel to the top one. Its unique color in the composition calls attention to itself, and is roughly hewn. Because it runs horizontally across the painting, it creates a horizon line in the image. But it also functions to give the painting a physical presence: the seam looks like something you might see on a duffel bag at an army surplus store, reinforced and strong. This seam is the crux of the work: it is the moment in which the oscillation between monumental scale and geometric pattern occurs. It is because of the seam that the work can be large, but its roughness and color pulls the viewer out of the illusion that this could be a landscape and onto the surface of the painting. The seams thus emphasize the craftwork and labor behind the paintings.

The tightness of the weaving similarly pulls the viewer close to examine Wadden’s handiwork. The weft is narrow, not wider than a quarter inch in most places. The tight and intimate quality of the weaving defies any physical expressiveness that an Abstract Expressionist painting would have: these works are slow and meditative and there is no sense of speed. The repetitive mode of creation invokes a Buddhist Thangka painting that can also be large in scale but made up of tiny components. A Thangka painting, too, does not contain the personal expression of the artist; it is, rather, a form of meditation and the paintings are the result. The meditative quality in Wadden’s work imbues the canvases with a similar restraint rather than exuberance.

“Big BW” is a composition of six black triangles held in place by six white triangles. From across the room, the viewer sees the six central forms and their imperfect angles—the shades of whites and blacks, the intentional mismatching of the panels. But it is up close that the joy occurs in the viewing. A piled fabric completes the middle white shape that differs in texture from the rest of the whites in the piece. One soon notices that the black forms, too, are woven of many varied yarns, at times specked with yellows, reds, and blues, at others pitch-black, velvety, or double-knotted. The tiny details one can spot by slowly looking—such as the barely visible red thread in the bottom white form—is a similarly meditative experience one imagines occurs in the making.

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Brent Wadden, “Avocado Salmon” (2015). Hand woven fibers, wool, cotton, and acrylic on canvas, 107 × 82”. Courtesy of the artist, Peres Projects, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Last spring, Wadden was included in a group show at Pace Gallery, curated by Nicolas Tremblay, titled *Mingei: Are You Here?* The exhibition presented traditional objects rediscovered during the Japanese folk art movement of the 1920s, known as *Mingei*, which celebrated the rustic imperfections of handmade objects. The movement occurred in post-industrialized Japan as a reaction to the values of the day: speed and technological advancements. The works in the *Mingei* show—made by a range of rural artisans in pre-industrialized Japan to contemporary artists such as Anni Albers and N. Dash—shared a quiet steadiness that is the result of slow labor. Brent Wadden’s work, too, has a serenity imbued in it that is a welcome change of pace from our speedy city. A trip to see the show requires the viewer to slow down and take in this slow work.