

The New York Times

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in March

Want to see new art in the city? Check out Miyoko Ito's singular abstractions and Martin Kippenberger's brutal self-portraits.



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LOWER EAST SIDE

Jake Berthot

Through April 15. Betty Cunningham Gallery, 15 Rivington Street, Manhattan; 212-242-2772; bettycunninghamgallery.com.



Jake Berthot's "David's Clearing," from 2003. via Betty Cunningham Gallery

A New York City painter famed for his cerebral abstractions moves to the country and starts painting trees, which everyone considers an unforgivable betrayal. It's a funny cliché about the rigid boundaries of pictorial content, a reversal of the supposed progression of the artist, who's expected to get over sunsets and do something serious, like Cubism. Maybe Jake Berthot wasn't aware of the wisdom, or didn't care. His emotive, nearly monochromatic paintings of the 1970s both resisted Minimalism's incursions and softened them, remaining loyal to the modernist ideas of gesture and feeling, until he abandoned them for the landscapes of the Catskill Mountains.

Except Berthot's landscapes weren't really of the Catskills, or anywhere else. Where his early paintings, accounting for half of the 20 on view here, employed notched edges or central columns to shift their focus, inviting the eye to linger over a naturalistic palette of oxidized greens and rusted zinc, his late work (the other half, from 1996-2014) redoubled that strategy through multiple vanishing points, violating the concrete parameters of real space. These pictures wear nature like a feint — loosely rendered fields whose loamy browns and ochers contain only the hint of a spectral birch or sunlight leaking over a ridge, their organizing grids left faintly visible, like a ghost — a pastoral of the mind.

Berthot was a restive artist, and it's tempting to view the paintings he made toward the end of his life, as he dealt with illness, as vibrating between serenity and dread. But that would do his vision a disservice. He was grappling with the void from the start. *MAX LAKIN*