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Originally published in a catalogue to accompany the exhibition Paul Dignan: Raised Ranch, at the Thames Art Gallery in Chatham Ontario. Jan. 13 – March 5, 2017. Curated by Sonya Blazek.

Paul Dignan: *Raised Ranch*

The first thing that strikes you, looking at Paul Dignan's new series of paintings, *Raised Ranch*, is the eccentricity of the shapes. No familiar rectangles here, but rather complex polygons, all unexpected angles, as if a series of triangles has been fused together on the wall. Yet, for all their strangeness as shapes, twelve of the fourteen paintings that comprise the *Raised Ranch* series (at least as of this writing) are octagons, though none of them has the familiar, regular shape of a stop sign. The shapes are so different, in fact, that it is only after counting the sides that one sees the mathematical consistency of the forms.

The second is how they appear to shimmer, as if they are vibrating on a very low frequency, a bass hum that you can almost feel in your bones. These paintings are destabilizing, they make one feel off-kilter, as if the room is shifting. Then, finally, you settle on the lines, on the virtual spaces in the paintings where the surface seems folded or bent: complex internal geometries reminiscent of origami, except for the gaps in logic, the places where the painting is just flat, juxtaposed with tonal areas that strongly suggest space—illusion next to fact next to illusion.

In 1884 Edwin Abbott wrote the satirical novella *Flatland*, a mathematical fancy (and biting social critique of the Victorian establishment) about a world that existed in just two dimensions. Visited by an inhabitant of a 3D world called "Sphere," the protagonist, A Square, is forced to try to fathom what space might look like, how it might feel. The space in these paintings feels like an inhabitant of Flatland trying to imagine architecture. These works reduce to the role of A Square, trying to comprehend space as containing a mysterious "depth" as well as the familiar height and width.

As complex as Dignan's paintings are, they are also very simple. Most of them feature two colours, with added white to create tones from the base colour. The lines are precise, the same width, and there is no varying: straight lines are the only formal element, no curves, no interruption of the formal logic of proceeding from point A to point B in the shortest possible time. Simplicity, the sculptor Constantin Brancusi maintained, is complexity resolved. The push and pull between simple and complex, between resolution and dissolution, is what creates that destabilizing feeling in these

paintings—their logic, so precise and almost crystalline, always feels on the verge of slipping away. One wants, intensely, to see something in these works, to find an image where there is none. Resolution will not come that way.

That desire is understandable, of course. After all, we see by translating light into images; humans are hardwired to make sense. Perhaps that is why these works can feel so initially disorientating, and while, after prolonged, active, looking, they are so satisfying.

Because this is not random chaos, we do not need to make a conscious effort to find created order in these works, this is not some sort of Abstract Expressionist-inspired -inspired mess from which one has to make an effort to find sense. No, the underlying logic and internal consistency of these works are right out in front of us—they are ordered and disordered all at once. Deciphering the logic, following the intellectual pathway that Dignan has laid out (and inevitably stumbling into dead ends and having to start over again), is part of the pleasure of these works. And one can't exhaust them—they remain visually engaging, challenging and surprising with every view. That, too, is a key factor in their visual richness, and yes, their beauty.

The underlying logic and sustained intellectualism in approach are hallmarks of Dignan's paintings, and have been throughout his career. The work has always been rigorous, has always taken the act of painting and the act of looking as extremely serious business. These paintings were preceded by two other series, *Waiting Room* and *Deck/Backsplit*, and it is in looking at the two preceding series that one sees the inescapable logic in the development of his new work. In talking with Dignan in his studio, watching him pull out the earlier work and hang it on the wall, there was an “aha” moment; the works just clicked. All of this work is current, from 2015–16, and while each series is a distinct entity, fully capable of standing on its own (as evidenced by this current exhibition), nonetheless, seeing them together was deeply informative.

The Waiting Room series is made up of small panels, all the same size—16 inches high and 12 inches wide—each based on one colour and grey. The twelve panels all feature a central figure made up of parallel lines of a colour (and a tone of that colour) and grey lines. In most of the works the upper right and lower left corner of the panels are cut out, showing just grey triangles. This leaves a complex central image, and most of them have eight sides. In writing about *Raised Ranch* on his blog, Dignan says, “when I was looking at the previous *Deck* or *Backsplit* paintings in the studio I was constantly imagining what they would look like with particular sections/areas removed.” Interestingly, it is the *Deck* and *Backsplit* paintings he cites, when the *Waiting Room* images visually already have sections

“removed.” The *Deck/Backsplit* series are of two sizes: 48 by 36 inches, or 24 x 18. Despite their being titled either “Deck” or “Backsplit,” there is no discernible difference (at least to me) between the two bodies of work. They each are made in both sizes, for instance; they each use two colours and two tones; and there is no longer any grey. They all are strictly rectangular. The space in these works is more complex, with sections appearing to float above others, figures and grounds switching places in the foreground and background as one’s eyes roam over the surface.

Raised Ranch is the culmination of the experiments and the thought that went into the two previous series, but it is not a replacement—like the architectural features he uses as his titles, they are another iteration of structure in space. As a viewer, you leave with a heightened sense of the space that you yourself occupy. Dignan’s imaginary spaces make the actual space we inhabit more palpable, as if he has made air visible. For us Flatlanders, he has made space make sense.