

ARTFORUM

Gerwin, Daniel. *Rema Ghuloum: Philip Martin Gallery*.
Artforum, January, 2025.



Rema Ghuloum
Facade (Dusk), 2024
Oil and acryla-gouache on canvas
23 x 20 in
58.4 x 50.8 cm

Water, fire, and air played starring roles in Rema Ghuloum's latest exhibition, with most of the paintings dominated by a single element. *Manam*, *Still Morning*, and *Reflection (Night)*, all 2024, were water-kindred paintings saturated with cobalt blue and ultramarine. *Zahra*, 2023–24, and *Flame*, 2024, were fiery, suffused with hot-pink, orange, and amber shades. *Sunshine*, 2022–24, felt airy, as it was predominantly yellow and far less dense than its siblings. *Deep Sea*, 2022–24, was divided horizontally between water and fire: Azure, green, and purple occupied the upper third, while all was ablaze below. Brushwork, paint pours, and the edges of the underlying stretcher bars were all visible on the canvas but blended into a unified visual field. This show extended the artist's interest in creating large, abstract fields of scintillating color that stimulate not only the retina but the meat and bone, like the ringing of a gong.

Ghuloum's pictures are often described as ethereal, hazy, and gauzy, but they are gritty as a gravel road. Sanded down to pigmented silt, the paintings are built from countless layers that slow viewers' perceptions. Vibrant hues that have accumulated over weeks and months produce an archeological sense of time that speaks of memory held deep in the nervous system, and indeed her marks meander and crisscross in ways that evoke synaptic webs or the body's internal tissues. Ghuloum's process of repeatedly applying and abrading color aptly mirrors how recollection is ground in the mill of consciousness until we can no longer separate our pasts from ourselves.

Three works departed from the rest, composed of tightly packed vertical brushstrokes and titled *Facade* (subtitled *Red*, *Yellow*, and *Dusk*, respectively, all 2024). They recall Morris Louis's stripe paintings of 1961–62, though that artist made each ribbon of color with a single paint application, whereas hers create a palimpsest. However, these artists' differences exceed their affinities: All of Ghuloum's pictures have a rind of thick paint along the edges, sourced from whatever is left at the end of the workday—she scrapes up unused oil colors and deposits them along the canvas's perimeter, one at a time. This accretion documents the hues mixed along the way and also functions as a repoussoir device, holding the foreground while allowing our gaze to proceed into pictorial space. Through optical mixing, the prismatic range of color applied to each canvas resolves to a single dominant impression at a distance: From eight feet away, the paintings come across as near monochromes, while, from up close, it's as though she put a rainbow through a blender and transferred it to the canvas without losing any of its brilliance.

I view Ghuloum as a descendant of California's Light and Space artists—she grew up in the Laguna Beach sunshine, after all. Her paintings recall James Turrell's portal-like installations of glowing depth, and her canvases reimagine the atmospheric of Larry Bell's cubes. Her paintings share a similar meditative spirit—her palette suggests light filtering through a cathedral's stained-glass windows, linking them to centuries of associating radiance with divinity. Earth colors are conspicuously absent in her work because their lack of translucence kills luminosity and because spirit is immaterial while bodies are earthbound.

How you feel in front of her work depends on what's going on inside you. Sometimes I am elated in the presence of her paintings; other times I choke up with a grief for things I cannot always identify. Ghuloum's pictures do not give much away, but they are ardently personal. Two of the works are titled in her parents' native Arabic: *Manam* means "dream" (her mother chose the title), and *Zahra*, her grandmother's name, means "flower." Over the past decade her art has moved steadily away from imagery of any kind, as she eschews earlier abstract shapes or any other specific forms. At this moment, when artists are expected to be political, ethical, or conceptual, Ghuloum stands out for her engagement with the erotics of art, which is to say that her pictures are experienced bodily—you do not so much look at them as sink into them, and they do not submit themselves to interpretation any more than an ocean swell.

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