

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Painter Henderson jams on jazz improvisations for canvas

By Kenneth Baker

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Ellsworth Kelly's monochrome shaped canvases at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art show us one way a painter can recapitulate the powers of his art without nostalgia or pastiche.



Mike Henderson's recent work at Haines shows us another.

Decades of painting experience have taught Henderson to trust his materials. Echoes of the history of art seem inherent in the stuff of paint itself. His relaxed, generous, intuitive touch awakens them better than any theoretical posture could.

By avocation a jazz musician, Henderson believes in improvisation. His paintings' improvised character makes itself felt at every point, though his manner remains consistent. With palette knives he drags one color over another, usually wet on wet, occasionally scraping down an area or scoring it with striations.

A small picture such as "A Deer in the Garden" (2002) rings with echoes of Hans Hofmann's bright patchworks of color. Larger pictures may bring to mind more improbable predecessors, such as Nicholas de Stael (1914-1954) or even Paul Klee (1879-1940) at his most abstract.

These reminiscences bolster Henderson's work because he neither reaches for them nor effaces them when they happen to surface.

They can no more be avoided than can the memory of pieced quilts in some of the larger canvases, such as the deeply satisfying "Inside" (2001).

Henderson can overplay his hand with color or with surface fussiness, but his best work confers on viewers a truly liberating sense of entitlement to pleasure.