

Jerry Allen: *Timeline*
Exhibition essay by Cole Thompson

For the postponement of electrostatic discharge

Jerry Allen's *Timeline* articulates the horizon as a site of potential energy, and through it I am reminded of the free-body diagrams I once grappled with in so many high school and university physics classes. In these diagrams, the forces enacted on an object are detailed and quantified to understand the forms of energy held within and exerted upon the object itself. Gravity and friction. Force and air resistance. All parsed out and calculated to determine the velocity of an object in motion or the conditions of its stasis. *What offsets the force of gravity exerted on the wrecking ball? Or, what is the potential energy of a compressed spring held down by the quivering hand?* The horizon does this as well. As an idealized form, it is a line of visual stabilization at the terminus of perspective; an abstracted point in the distance, never to be approached and inherently constituted by its distance from the subject. But there is also its material form: rippled, atmospheric, and geological. It is not a line at all, but a marker of the transition between matter. We can place ourselves upon it, even as new virtual iterations appear in the distance. And in this elastic interplay between the abstracted horizon and the material phenomenon, potential energy is formed. We see the concept of a line tremble under pressure.

Timeline does not simply illustrate, but rather embodies this notion of suspension between an ideal and a material reality. The series was initiated as an indexical experiment in restraint with a concise prompt: produce a single painting within the temporal confines of a single month. From the onset, *Timeline* took on a more-or-less consistent form that continues to this day: a horizontal arrangement of variously coloured bands culminating in a procession of horizon lines cascading across the surface of the work. Each month brings about a new combination of colour and line, but the process remains consistent. When *Timeline* began in 2008, the experiment was confined to monthly oil on canvas paintings. However, over the past seventeen years, parameters have shifted, and once rigid rules have been lax. Now, while Allen starts a new work at the beginning of each month, he does not restrict himself to the calendar's prescribed completion date. Further, the artist will often return to combinations and motifs of months gone by to rework them in new iterations. What started as a practice in discrete exercises has now morphed into a continuous process of filiation, where no singular work is ever fully resolved or shelved away.

In 2014, Allen made an alteration in the series' parameters to include a host of new mediums – all of which the artist considers to be drawing mediums – expanding on the earlier stipulation of oil paint and canvas. In the inaugural drawing *June* (2014), alternating bands of teal, violet and grey contain the spirited trepidation that only a fissure in the terms of a longstanding engagement can incite. Changes in density across the plane produces a pulsating sensation, and the work teems with the anticipation of a marked change in the artist's process moving forward. At the drawing's edges, Allen's mark-making extends past the principal areas in a manner that portrays the build up of static electricity awaiting a discharge through grounding. The work is a container of potential energy, suspended indefinitely in anticipation of forms to come. This buildup is made explicit in the minute interjections of negative space between the work's coloured areas. These small fissures convey a desire to come as close as possible without crossing over; they point to the asymptotic nature of the horizon itself, where one can only approach but never arrive. They live within the climactic moment before static discharge.

While one might attribute the frenetic buildup of the first *Timeline* drawing to the artist's shift in medium, it anticipates the emergent characteristics of drawings to follow. Working in vertical columns, right-to-left across the work's surface, Allen's drawings have become increasingly precise as a result of muscle memory and a consistent mark-making motion. However, the charge has not dissipated. In two works titled *March* (2024), for example, the regularity of the artist's cross-hatching creates a plane of consistency that the viewer's eyes move freely across. Yet, at the transitions between colours within the plane, close inspection yields a moment of friction, granular as it may be. At these thresholds, any illusion of clarified line breaks down and one becomes aware of a subtle, fuzzy overlay between colours. Like the physical horizon itself, there are no marks of delineation, only a hazy shift in the forms of material composition that come to yield the abstracted form we call 'line'. Here, line is a humming interplay of forms.

In my first phone conversation with Allen, prior to the writing of this essay, the artist mentioned a technical aspect of production that has critically informed my understanding of *Timeline*, as well as my own contemplations of the horizon as an area of study at-large. He noted that, despite the wavering and oscillating edges that determine the coloured areas of the works, there was never an a priori attempt at gesture in their making. And while the edges aspired to perfect horizontality, several physical realities impeded this aim: the position of the artist relative to the work, fatigue in the artist's hand as a result of repetitive motions, or the material properties of the medium itself. Despite efforts to achieve an abstracted line of clarity, a fuzzy reality unfolds. This differential manifests in a charge of potential energy, but it is a charge that one willingly suspends in service of a generative space of thought. It need not release nor resolve. Socked feet drag on the carpet and images are most endearing in the microseconds before coming into focus. The horizon is a tanline on a ring finger and magnets are held apart, quivering in attraction. The station crackles at the edge of transmission.