At Dolby Chadwick Gallery, March 2013

Robert Kingston skillfully uses abstract visual cues to evoke shifting landscapes and dreamscapes upon which viewers can project their own meanings and mythologies. Kingston's arrival at these "scapes" is appropriately rooted in what he describes as "meandering journeys" that start with an initial, random mark. "I look at my work as the piling on of mistakes and hesitations," Kingston explains, "many artists are plagued by doubt, but I've learned to use mistakes and doubt as a source of power. For me, the more mistakes the better." The final paintings are a testament to these journeys of contemplation and discovery. Born of abundant layers of markings and gestures—as well as frequent erasure— Kingston's lyrical paintings present highly complex, fully resolved spaces.

Back in the '70s and '80s when Kingston first started painting, artists were preoccupied with creating thickly impastoed oil paintings. "Soho smelled of oil paint," he recalls, "it was a delicious, overpowering smell." Since Kingston's practice is predicated on spontaneous and improvised movements, he ultimately abandoned slow-drying oil paints in favor of water- based media. Acrylic paints are not only more conducive to his process of backing up and moving forward, they also enable him to move beyond questions of materiality and surface quality to focus instead on vision. Contrary to the practices of many abstract painters, Kingston foregrounds the effects of dematerialization in order to call forth his richly suggestive environments. He consequently likens himself to 18th and 19th century painters such as Tiepolo and Titian whose works are more concerned with realizing a vision of a given subject or scene than with the paint itself. Shedding light on his expectations for his own work, Kingston reflects: "I would like the painting to be like a hole in the wall where you might look or even fall into."

Kingston is drawn to references to ancient cultures, legends, and myths, as well as cryptic, long-forgotten systems of record-keeping and communication such as the scratches on the walls at Pompeii or Paleolithic cave paintings. The impact of paintings at Chauvet, Lascaux, and other subterranean spaces can be seen across Kingston's works, including the recent I Have Forgotten the Voices of the Animals (2012), which exhibits a frenzy of animal-like and organic forms that have been pared-down to their most basic, essential elements. As many of these markings are most accurately described as scrawls or scratches, Kingston is often likened to Cy Twombly. Twombly, like Kingston, was also captivated by the ancient world. His Fifty Days at Iliam (1972), for example, presents an abstract visual narration of the Trojan War as described in The Iliad.

Kingston's fascination with Greek history is likewise rooted in the myths and legends of the Homeric epics. Taken from a Robert Duncan poem written from the point of view of Achilles, the title of I Do Not Know More Than The Sea Tells Me (2012) confirms Kingston's affinity, if superficially, for the reputed seat of civilization. But this link is also deep and sustained. In Kingston's recent works, for instance, vibrant, crystal blues evoke the Mediterranean Sea and sky while an overall sun-bleached quality suggests blinding sunlight, whitewashed walls, alabaster beaches, timeworn temple columns, and tumble-polished rocks.

Though Kingston and Twombly share many similarities, Kingston’s practice has taken a different path in recent years. While the older artist experimented with complex and unorthodox spaces, these spaces exist mostly on the surface of the canvas. Kingston’s paintings, on the other hand, are more traditional in that they seek to open up broad swaths of deeply receding space. Space itself is structured in service of a vision—visions which ultimately manifest as dreamscapes and landscapes.

Frances Malcolm, 2013