Robert Kingston at Dolby Chadwick Gallery
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Art ltd.
by George Melrod Viewers lucky enough to have visited both the new SFMOMA, and the Broad Museum in Los Angeles, may have noticed, prominently displayed in both institutions, numerous works by Cy Twombly. Twombly is one of those artists whose work gains power viewed in groups; one sees his scumbly visual language not as constraining but as liberating—a concise, hard-earned idiom that is at once agitated and contemplative, primitive in texture and romantic in aspiration. Fans of Twombly should have no problem appreciating the raw, restrained lyricism of painter Robert Kingston. Based in Los Angeles, Kingston draws inspiration from Twombly in his own distinct vocabulary, which he has continued to hone and refine over a career of more than 20 years. With a lexicon of abstract scribbles, simple linear pictograms, and distressed expressionist smears, intermingling with allusions to venerable or classical sources spanning from Greek mythology and The Iliad to Turner landscapes, Kingston’s deceptively soft-spoken paintings cast a wide net. Spending time with his work reveals a surprising abundance of sources and glimpses of implied narrative: an expansive embrace couched within his seemingly reductive vocabulary.
The works begin with a muted, off-white acrylic field, a pliable arena within which Kingston works an improvisational process akin to jazz, adding and covering over penciled scribbles and other elements and symbols. What distinguishes these recent works is their increased references to landscape; washy tans, ochers and golds conjure hints of sands, or hills, or looming cliffs (or even flesh), swathes of aquamarineor teal suggest seas or lakes or skies, while patches of smoky gray call to mind rocks or shadows, or Twombly’s iconic blackboards. In between, clusters of painterly drips akin to waterfalls or rock formations, and brushy smears, add to the textural interplay. In Dragonfly (2015), these looser forms combine to evoke a natural vista over which a scribbly winged form hovers delicately. Silently the Birds Fly Through Us (2016) suggests a lake surrounded by rocks. In Windsong (2016), a tan rectangle stands amid horizontal watery fields, surrounded by a gathering of pictorial characters—blobby white ovals, gnarled gray scribbles, a flattened “T” shape, a folded rectangular pictogram. These diverse symbols reappear and vary from work to work: from the umbrella-like dome in Brunelleschi in the Wilderness (2016), to the seeming fork and upside-down wine glass in the effusive, horizontal, Going to San Francisco (2015). All these works seem to whisper at first, a subtle sirens’ call; but if one listens closely, their lilting, lyric poetry emerges full-throatedly from the mists.