

Los Angeles Times

LUKE BUTLER: "The End" is Just the Beginning

Written by Christopher Knight

June 26, 2014



Luke Butler, "The End IX," 2012, acrylic on canvas (Charlie James Gallery)

Seven crisp new paintings by San Francisco-based Luke Butler continue his tantalizing exploration of media imagery, this time in fanciful movie stills for films that don't exist. The theme is "the end," but that's just the beginning.

Today, movies almost never close with a statement that it's over -- the End -- which used to be a cinema convention. Ed Ruscha's 1980s and '90s Gothic-style paintings of movie closing cards are elegiac, but Butler's are more ironic: He includes "L. Butler Pictures" (plus cryptic dates in Roman numerals), which describes what you're looking at.

Painted over scenes of dreamy skies or a churning, troubled sea (look closely and you might see a tiny swimmer), some in color and some black and white, "The End" is painted in various ways: as a dissolve, a three-dimensional object or a text casting a shadow. The fluid sky- and seascapes have borders rather than extending the picture to the canvas' edge, which emphasizes a similar tension between a flat painted image and a painted object.

The 19th-century American fool-the-eye, still-life painting tradition of John Peto and William Harnett gets extended to include movies and TV. (Death scenes from "Starsky and Hutch" and "Star Trek" -- the latter among the standouts at the 2011 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art -- are in the rear gallery.) Deceptively simple, Butler's paintings are quiet engines for daydreaming contemplation, which is pretty much what one does when gazing at clouds or sea.