The solo exhibition by New York–based artist N. Dash that’s currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, registers first as an experience of minimalistic beauty. Large paintings hang in carefully cultivated dialogue, and as one moves through the space, two distinct types emerge. Some are geometric abstractions; others involve two panels joined by a third substance such as oil or acrylic. The others derive from photographs of cloudy fabric sculptures magnified to many times their original dimensions. Most of the works are executed in a restrained palette of grey, white, greens, and blues, with the exception of a single recent painting bright orange and a drawing from the artist’s Commencement series of the same hue. There are no labels on the walls, and the majority of the works, all of which date from 2018 and 2019, are untitled.

The plot thickens when one understands how the images of the fabric sculptures came about. Art historians use the word “facture” to describe the processes that artists employ to create paintings. Facture typically refers to ways of applying paint—with brushes for sages, but also a variety of other tools, ranging from palette knives, sprays, cane, and spokas to the tools that astonish Jackdaw’s Pollock to drip paint into his floor-mounted canvases. When it comes to facture, N. Dash represents something unique. The artist creates small pieces of cloth at all times and knits them constantly. This “renewal manipulations” continues until the individual fragment achieves what the artist considers to be an appropriate state of semi-disintegration. It’s these bits of string or cloth that are then photographed and enlarged before being screen printed onto an oil-based ground. For an ongoing series of works on paper titled Connect, Dash touched and folded pieces of paper until they reached the desired state of frayed readiness, then saturated each piece with a single intense color before affixing it to the wall, unfurled and unestruck.

The effect of the show multiples upon encountering the knowledge of its unique facture. The large geometric abstractions invite closer scrutiny; attention that in turn reveals the presence of other substances imbued with tangible references to the body and the earth. Addi Goldberg in northern New Mexico meets the pigment in several works, adding both surface texture and a reference to the ground beneath one’s feet, now transferred to the wall for consideration. The magnifications, too, act as devices to force questions about mortality, and about the role of the gesture in painting. Is the weathering a fragment of cloth, own as this scale and the fine mechanics, fundamentally different from the brushstroke or merely another version of it?

Once observed in the facture of a single painting, this principle of the displacement of materials proliferates. A pair of large white vertical panels in work from 2018 are joined by a stock of salvaged cardboard corner protectors. Aha, frames, graphics, and agricultural netting all belong in the artist’s hybrid lexicon of culturally determined materials. Together they form a complete set of meaningful units, each contributing to the totality of reference.

The more one becomes aware and expanded the fascinating exhibition, the more the work returns that investment as insightful and aesthetic experience. Dash’s approach is one of rigorously self-aware and profoundly personal, shocking to reinvoked motion of art and yet fully engaged by the canon of abstraction in painting. The ordinary associations we have with crying – consumption, walls, the last step before discarding – are reversed. Dash cervices to create, not to destroy.