BROADWAY

John Riepenhoff
Surround
November 4 – December 19, 2026

Broadway is pleased to announce *Surround,* a solo exhibition of new paintings and ceramics by Milwaukee artist John Riepenhoff. This is the artist's third solo presentation with the gallery.

Umwelten and Qualities of Attention in John Riepenhoff's Paintings
by Michelle Grabner

Mary Oliver occupies a contested position in American literature. Beloved by a vast readership yet frequently regarded with suspicion by the literary establishment. Her writing has been criticized for its accessibility, sentimentality, and seemingly uncomplicated reverence for nature.

With this reservation in mind, I want to consider John Riepenhoff's new paintings alongside Oliver's writing, specifically a line pulled from *Upstream* (2016), a collection of essays reflecting on her formative experiences of wandering through woods, observing animals, and immersing herself in the rhythms of the natural world:

"Something is wrong, I know it, if I don't keep my attention on eternity."

For Oliver, attention becomes less a means of acquiring knowledge than a way of displacing the self from the center of experience. In her poem "Wild Geese," (1986) the invocation of the "family of things" proposes kinship without equivalence, situating human existence among innumerable other forms of being.

Something similar occurs in Riepenhoff's longstanding engagement with the sky as both a natural phenomenon and a conceptual proposition. His practice approaches abstraction not as a departure from nature but as an extension of its processes, allowing observation, intuition, and environmental conditions to participate in the formation of the image.

The new paintings, collectively titled *Skies* (2026), shift from celestial constellations toward more diffuse atmospheric systems. Their accumulations of color, dispersed marks, and fluctuations in luminosity evoke clouds, haze, and changing light patterns, yet never resolve into stable conditions of representations. Instead, they sustain an ambiguity between atmospheric observation and the autonomous language of abstraction.

The repeated elliptical strokes and shifting densities of the new paintings recall the rhythmic fields of postwar abstraction, particularly the work of Joan Mitchell and Alma Thomas. Mitchell's translation of landscape and remembered sensation into gestural structures offers one precedent while Thomas's systematic accumulations of chromatic marks suggest another. Riepenhoff moves between these approaches, balancing the expressive potential of gesture with an environmental logic of repetition and differentiation.

In *Skies (twilight)*, deep blue forms diminish into increasingly fine particles of color, while *Skies (stratus)* organizes muted tones into horizontal atmospheric bands. Elsewhere, emphatic strokes gather and disperse across the surface, producing fields that oscillate between pattern and depth, material gesture and immaterial sensation. These paintings do not simply depict environmental conditions. Instead the compositions ask what it means to be immersed within them.. They invite an embodied experience of atmosphere in which spatial and chromatic relationships are understood through sensation as much as through visual recognition.

Jakob von Uexküll's concept of the *Umwelt* is at its core an articulation on how different species inhabit distinct sensory worlds within shared physical environments. Ultraviolet wavelengths, magnetic fields, vibrations, and frequencies beyond human hearing constitute perceptual realities unavailable to human experiences.. These alternative organizations of sensation and intelligence find a suggestive parallel in Riepenhoff's abstractions whose shifting densities and chromatic relations evoke an environment that exceeds any singular perceptual framework.

The great horned owl decoys accompanying the paintings extend this proposition into sculpture. The owl's acute hearing and low-light vision suggest a sensory world fundamentally different from human experiences of darkness. Yet the ceramic object itself perceives nothing. Instead the decoy is a surrogate of another intelligence. It also introduces the possibility of a nonhuman spectator, complicating the assumption that representation is organized around human perception.

This proposition acquires particular urgency within a contemporary painting culture frequently characterized by an abundance of accomplished yet immediately legible images. Signature styles, recognizable historical quotations, calculated gestures, and seductive palettes can establish a painting's cultural and transactional value before any sustained encounter with the work takes place.

Riepenhoff offers an alternative ethic rather than simply another aesthetic position. His abstractions are neither demonstrations of stylistic novelty nor assertions of subjective sovereignty. Instead, they acknowledge an environment whose material and perceptual complexity remains indifferent to the distinctions through which culture organizes value. Humans, birds, insects, and other organisms occupy the same physical space without inhabiting the same sensory world.

His paintings might also be understood as propositions about the instability of looking itself. Their refusal of fixed horizons, stable scale, and conventional spatial hierarchy unsettles the anthropocentric organization of the visible world. Abstraction here becomes an ecology of attention.

Where Oliver's writing proposes an ethics of sustained attention to the natural world, Riepenhoff's paintings complicate that attention by acknowledging the limits of human perception. Their densities, interruptions, chromatic vibrations, and directional shifts suggest the activity of an environment that cannot be fully apprehended or represented. Painting becomes analogous to weather. They areaccumulations of atmospheric events.. What emerges is an understanding of abstraction as a practice of perceptual humility, one that recognizes the world as more complex and more sensorially abundant.