

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Artext
Fall 2002



AMONG THE PROJECTS currently simmering in Mark Grotjahn's studio is a book documenting notations made on matchbook covers. The notes include affirmations, self-imposed rules and limits, observations on human nature, key words, bits of strategy, and warnings, all there to be accessed in cigarette breaks during hours-long poker stints in casinos. It's no surprise that Grotjahn has an above-average fondness for playing poker. He has always struck me as someone looking to play a situation, but not in the sense of pulling a stunt or scam. Rather, Grotjahn aims to understand the limit-

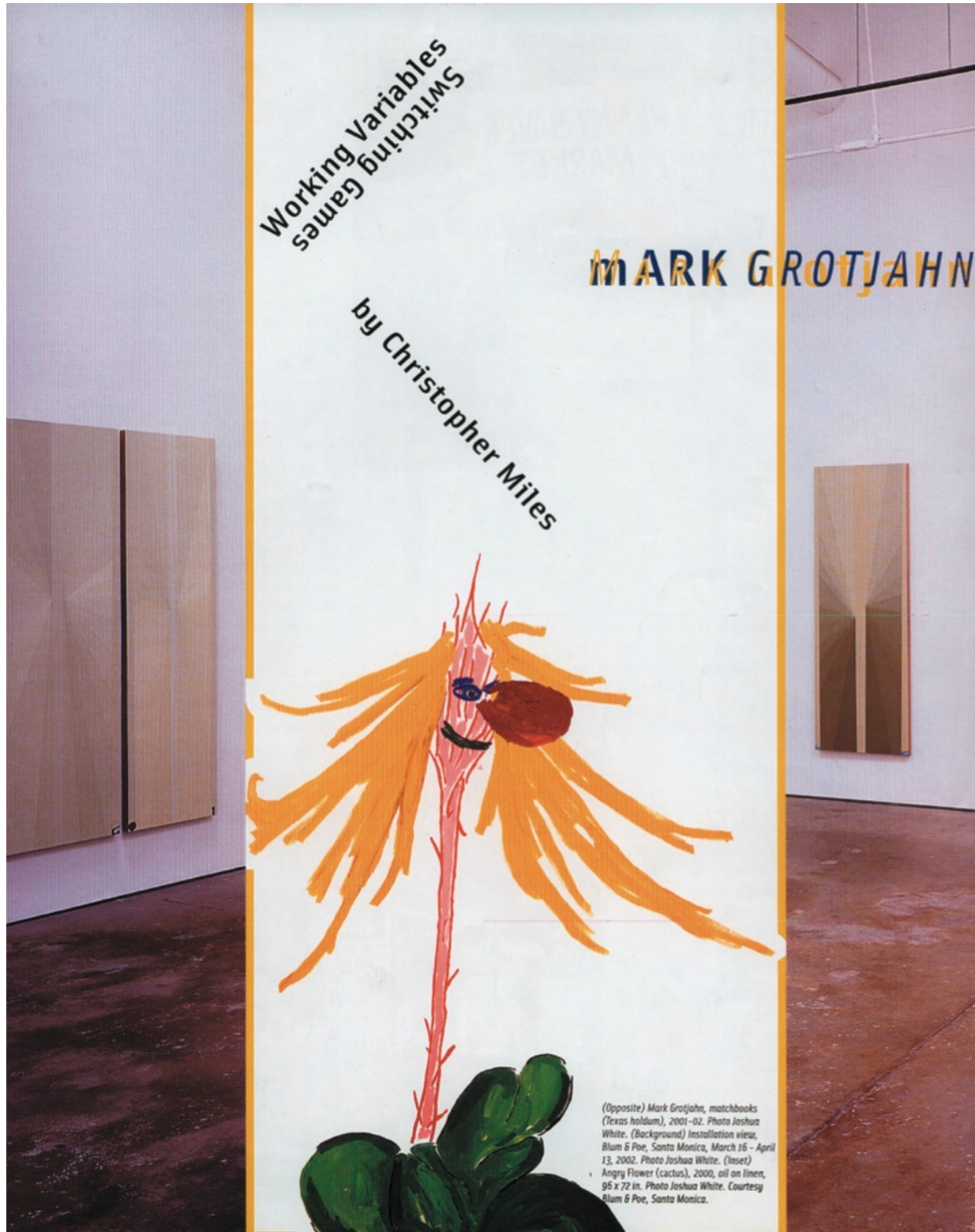
ations, pitfalls, and opportunities of any scenario, and how the employment of skill and logic— informed by experience and knowledge, balanced by chance, and tempered or thrown down by intuition, inhibition, recklessness, desire, and fallacy— might yield a result. In short, Grotjahn is someone who is always playing the variables in his head. Playing poker, working all the variables, defines much of Grotjahn's MO—in life, in the casino, and in the studio.

Random elements of an artist's biography and private activity (ritual or process) too

often are used to inflate the artist's work, so Grotjahn's passion for cards is raised here with some hesitation. It seems prudent to stick to what is evident in the work, but in Grotjahn's case, what is and isn't work gets more difficult to categorize, as he tends to be involved with multiple activities he thinks of as his art. And though he personally downplays direct connections between gaming and his studio goings-on, he nonetheless refers to the former as a "conceptual living practice." The issue of Grotjahn's gaming thus seems admissible in this case, not necessarily as cause or source for the work—even though gaming directly yielded

2021 S WABASH AVE
CHICAGO IL 60616
+1 (312) 226 2223

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the matchbook notations—but as a point of entry or overlay.

In most varieties of poker, you're dealt a hand, and, given the rules of the game, given what you have, what you might be able to do with it, and what others in the same game might be able to do with what they've been given, you try to figure out whether or not you can make something out of your hand worthy of staying in the game. The difference, of course, is that with cards at least everybody knows for certain what a winning hand is in any given scenario, no matter what the stakes. But with art, the rules keep shifting, the rules of one game tend to get applied to another, the deck is evolving and growing before one's eyes, with the cards constantly morphing, dying off, and being reborn, so that playing a hand (even a very good one) that has been played before is something one does with some trepidation. Even the word "player" has its share of negative connotations, and I am careful to note that I have none of these in mind when I refer to Mark Grotjahn as thus in this context; certainly, as a player in art, he has found success in doing what he could never do in the casino. In art, a hand can be made into a winner by finding its place amidst multiple players and the ghosts of players past, or among strategies and hands canonized, revered, and retired. It can be played while switching between games or straddling

them, transferring the rules of one table to another, making up or amending a few rules along the way, and defining the work's own winning status. Art is, essentially, a place where Grotjahn can use his talent for working variables, and where he can run his own game.

As documents, the matchbooks offer a window onto the process of weighing options or calculating probabilities, and avoiding the errant thinking that goes into Grotjahn's life at the poker table; but as art objects, or as the building blocks of an art project, they reveal how a similar thought process plays out in the development of the work. They are objects the artist acquired for simple use and then enhanced for further utility, and in so doing added to them the information and marks that made them compelling enough for the artist to then "find" them as ready-mades—as a kind of Jekyll and Hyde folk art made by someone else who just happens to be himself—and present them as objects of contemplation or appreciation. If one reverse-engineers their coming into being what they are, one finds that the matchbooks are born of questions they continue to beg.



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(Opposite, above & below) Mark Grotzahn, Penny Saver Market, 1993, sign exchange, performance views. (This page, top) Angry Flower (big nose, baby moon), 2000, oil on linen, 96 x 72 in. Photo Joshua White (Bottom) Untitled masks, 2002, paint on cardboard. Photo Joshua White. Courtesy Blum & Poe, Santa Monica.



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(Above) Mark Grotjahn, installation view, 1998, Blum & Poe, Santa Monica. (Opposite) Untitled, 2001, oil on linen, 72 x 48 in. (viewed 90 degrees CCW here by request of artist). Courtesy Blum & Poe, Santa Monica.

What is a ready-made, and can you make one? How can you find what you've already made? Wherein lies the creative act, and at what point and why do the objects become compelling? What are the implications of self-appropriation? In short, to conceive of the matchbooks as art, Grotjahn did to take advantage of the chance "finding" of what he already had, and to recognize how the production or presentation of these objects as art could play out in an arena already well-versed in discourses of the ready-made and appropriation, as well as self-portraiture, outsider art, alter egos, ideas about art as clues to the artist's psyche, and the grander themes of internal strife, human struggle, conquest, and battling fate.

A one-time exposure to Grotjahn's work might lead one to believe that the artist is aiming at a combination or overlapping of games, but in fact he is usually playing one combination here and another there, moving from table to table and shifting between sitting out and investing heavily in projects that coexist, fade away, or crop up again later, but always amplifying his talent for play. The first of these is a series from the mid-'90s in which the artist found handmade signs he liked at restaurants and small businesses he frequented. He then made his own signs with similar dimensions, information, style, and imagery, and traded these with the proprietors, exhibiting their signs in galleries while his signs were shown on the walls and in the windows of these businesses. This practice, which weaves a web of connections between Pop art, realism, conceptualism, appropriation, and institutional critique, adding a human touch to all of the above, finds an echo in a later series from 1996, in which Grotjahn

produced plywood sculptures that, were they not empty, could easily have functioned as the sort of homemade display stands one finds in retail stores—a florist's tiered flower stand, a grocer's produce stand, a basic magazine rack. Again, such an appropriationist strategy is pitted against realism, but also minimalism, while formalism follows function, and found objects and fine craft merge in competent duplication that is generic while suggesting idiosyncrasy and originality. It isn't long before one has no idea at which game table one is placing bets, as with an ongoing group of paintings and drawings based upon the harmlessly comic and sometimes racy doodles by Grotjahn's grandfather. These doodles, which clearly were inspired by the sorts of cartoons one might find in vintage society or gentlemen's magazines, function as a sort of outsider Pop art. Grotjahn's use of the doodles as source material, meanwhile, forces conclusions that don't seem to add up. Is this appropriation (intended to perhaps question the valuation of expressive artifacts), exploitation, homage, spirit-channeling, or a simple instance of the artist recognizing great material when he sees it? A similar resistance to categorization, a refusal to let you know which game is being played, shows itself in Grotjahn's gestural paintings, which leave you unsure if you're looking at abstractions or folk/expressionist narratives; as well as his recent series of paper masks, which present themselves as generic tribal masks without a tribe—lying somewhere between the representations of the primitive you might find in old ethnographic displays, Picasso, or other Euro-primitive painters, and Disneyland jungle rides or early *Scooby-Doo* episodes.

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Grotjahn's most recent exhibition at Blum & Poe was preceded by a quiet announcement featuring an image of one of his masks, which, though confusing in and of itself as to what game(s) the artist was playing, at least set the tone regarding which tables a viewer might expect to have in mind. The exhibition featured not a single mask, but rather the latest selection from the artist's ongoing series of untitled paintings and drawings, generally referred to as the Perspective Series." The works employ arrangements of solid blocks of color—long thin rectangles or bars and radial groupings of sliver-like shapes—butted up against one another. The results are paintings that oscillate between reading as flat, surface-centric, formalist abstractions, and

colorized, nonspecific studies in the illusionistic representation of deep space using one-point linear perspective. Most of these works involve multiple frames of what we might call scenes or frames within the same painting or drawing. In each frame, the long triangles are aligned to suggest parallel lines converging at a horizon line along the edge of a broad rectangle, vaguely referencing a broad expanse of land beneath the open sky.

Grotjahn's past perspective pieces have involved bold, full-spectrum colors and arrangements of frames in stacks, like multiple exposures on a roll of film. More recent works display reduced color combinations and grayed-out, monochromatic ranges, where the frames seem to turn on their sides, with their seeming parallel lines now converging either at a horizon as seen by someone who has fallen over, or at the vertical line of a corner, doorway, or other rectilinear void. When the converging lines in two side-by-side or sideways frames point toward the center of the canvas, the images suggest movement down a corridor, or a non-earthbound (perhaps not-of-this-earth) relationship to a horizontal ground, like flying sideways between planes. One tends to try to reestablish some kind of horizon by bridging the two vanishing points in these compositions horizontally, but often this is impossible. Instead, one perceives two simultaneous perspectives, each logical individually, but equally illogical in their coexistence within one perceptual experience. The works thus



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ce you to account rationally for the perceptual anomaly, either by
 ming them representations of a kind of warped space at the horizon,
 mentally fragmenting the images back into separate, likely sideways
 representations of space so you can get your head around what's going
 spatially, or by choosing to read the off-ness of the illusion as a
 nforcement of the abstract qualities and integrity of the picture plane.
 Once again, you're not sure where to place your bets with these pieces,
 t you do sense that Grotjahn, playing games you vaguely know, is
 netheless coming up with some winning hands. The works are formally
 gant, perceptually perplexing and fascinating, and conceptually
 nomical in an impressive way, in that while they don't seem to be the
 oduct of heavy project programming or theory-crunching, they
 netheless compel their viewers into a demanding cerebral situation.
 otjahn's perspective pieces make bold sense at a moment when walking
 : line between representation and abstraction has become a favored
 ctice in painting, particularly here in Southern California, but where
 : boundary in question has been investigated primarily by artists making
 ments of the composition resemble abstract shapes, marks, or lines,
 t also things from monkeys to splotches. Grotjahn, in not only bringing
 tial illusion into abstraction and vice versa, but actually using each as
 : basis for establishing the other, is again mixing the rules of one game
 h those of another—literally, using the “rules” of perspective to generate
 ract compositions while using the “rules” of formalist, nonobjective
 nting to describe space—and coming up with a powerful hand to lay on
 : table of contemporary painting. I'm not sure if Grotjahn would admit

it, or even know it, as I have the sense that his rule-flipping game play i
 at times almost instinctive or subconscious, but I have little doubt that a
 least some of the rules he's mixing here came from the gaming tables of
 Renaissance art, Cubism, Futurism, Abstract Expressionism, and Color
 field painting, as well as drives on Los Angeles' freeways or Bay Area
 bridges, sunsets on the West Coast or in the desert or Great Plains, not
 mention road movies, *Tron* and *Star Wars*, to name a few. There's a kind
 urgency and calmness to these works, as well as levity and depth, and thi
 has to do with both where you go with them as experiences, and where
 they're going with painting. They're certainly taking it somewhere.

In the meantime I'm still trying to figure out the game(s), the rules c
 which keep changing. Lately, Grotjahn has been working on designs for
 perspective-based sign for his favorite taco place in Los Angeles. His ne
 show might just be at the corner of Santa Monica and Virgil.

(This page) Mark Grotjahn, No, No, No (detail), 1994-95,
 pen on paper, 67 x 62 in. (Opposite) Untitled (Brown
 Butterfly), 2001, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in. Courtesy Blum &
 Poe, Santa Monica.

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