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MARK GROTJAHN

December 17, 2018 • Mark Grotjahn on his latest show



Mark Grotjahn, *Untitled (Free Capri 50.59)*, 2018, oil on cardboard mounted on linen. 92 x 72 1/4”.

Mark Grotjahn’s latest exhibition, “New Capri, Capri, and Free Capri,” imbues abstraction with complexity and contradiction. For the paintings in the show, the Los Angeles–based painter executed monochromatic grounds with vivid yellows, pinks, and greens, as well as black and white oil paints. Then, he added impasto-rich lines formed from equally compelling hues and extended the somewhat loopy marks from side to side and sometimes from top to bottom across the cardboard surfaces. Meanwhile, vertically arrayed, gridded segments that suggest a cross between slugs and caterpillars project a rhythmic presence. The show is on view at Gagosian Gallery in New York until December 22, 2018.

I WAS OFFERED A SHOW at Casa Malaparte in 2016. I had four months to make a new body of work. Besides wanting to say goodbye to my series of “Faces,” I wanted to work small. Working small is harder in a lot of ways than working large. I also wanted to get back to something closer to nonrepresentational art.

I started making abstract art as a kid. I never drew a person. I made lines with a ruler, and I could color. I considered what I did as designs. My art teacher in high school introduced me to Wassily Kandinsky, and to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. I read it when I was fifteen and realized that you could tap into things with abstraction that you

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couldn't put any other way. I no longer think that is the case, but that is how I felt as a fifteen-year-old.

Then, when I got to the University of Colorado Boulder, where I was an undergraduate, I was introduced to neo-expressionism and '80s artists like Julian Schnabel and David Salle. And then I found Allan McCollum and was introduced to some political artists and Conceptualists like Adrian Piper and Sue Coe and Mel Chin. And I found Georg Baselitz, Mike Kelley, and Richard Prince. The first time I saw their work, I thought, "This is bullshit." I knew what they were trying to do. Then, in a matter of months, those last three, who could not be more different, became some of my heroes.

At the University of California, Berkeley, where I got my MFA, I had gone through a pseudo-political phase. I was sick of having to have a verbal or written explanation to understand my work. I went into the sign stuff because it was a way of communicating very directly. There was a picture of a hot dog, and it was a hot dog. There was a picture of a hamburger, and it was a hamburger. If it was a glass of beer, it was a glass of beer. It was like that. I wanted to communicate immediately and specifically with an audience. That's when the sign stuff happened. It was very direct, but it was also very real-life. It reached people outside of the art world, and it expanded my practice. It's one thing to know intellectually that there are no rules in art; it's another thing to "feel" it. So, everything opened up, and everything became possible. I went back to abstraction/nonrepresentation through that conceptual process.

I'd found a motif that allowed me to explore color. Once I had the motif, I learned how to paint it. I just had to go to work and committed to a process that ultimately led me to exploring one color at a time. You can take a light blue and slowly, as it goes clockwise, take it to a darker blue. It still appears to be a monochrome. The experience of making them was rewarding. That was the most I've enjoyed painting.

I had some small unstretched canvases, and I was allowing myself to get experimental. For the most part, I did it all with a palette knife. But in the beginning I used a brush. I used a brush to write my name; I used a brush to roll up some paint on the brush. And I would look at those rolls on the paintbrush, and I would think, "Are you going to roll that off on your painting?" And I would take another, and I would roll it off. It felt wrong; it felt indulgent in a way that was not interesting. Plus, it was easy and obvious.

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That was how it felt in the beginning. Then I let it dry; I looked at it, and it seemed like it was interesting.

During this time, from 2016 to the present, I made a lot of lines that did not feel right. And when a line does not feel right, either I paint over it or I scrape it. In this case, I started scraping the lines. As I scraped the lines, I'd look at the palette knife, and as I scraped, the slugs would form along the palette knife. I created different kinds of rolls than what happened with the brush. And they looked interesting. Actually, they looked more like caterpillars than slugs. They are beautiful as individual things. I would take them off the palette knife and cut them off of it. Then I would roll another one with a palette knife and cut that one off. I'd stick them on a painting to see what it looked like. Then I started deliberately scraping paintings so I could get slugs. What I now say is I'm "harvesting slugs." I would put them on a palette knife and line them up. I would string them at the top of a painting as if they were popcorn on a Christmas tree. I'd see how I felt about that. It was poetic and nice. I'd ask myself: "Where are you going to put them on this time? Are you going to put them on the top? Are you going to put them in the right corner like a signature? Are you going to put seven here, and two here?" Since I didn't like contemplating their placement, I ended up putting them exactly in the middle. And that was another thing or another question I would ask myself: "Are you going to make a grid out of them? Are you going to put that grid right in the middle of this nice painting?" Then I started making more and more grids. The grids got bigger and bigger. I was experimenting with that. It became a process of putting down some lines, scraping them, getting lines that worked. Splattering them. Putting on the slugs. Finishing the painting. Done. And that's how it is now. It's fairly systematic in the way that my series "Butterflies" is. Within the system, I'm allowed to experiment.

Seeing the show at Gagosian, I realize there's a lot of experimentation left. It doesn't fully have to be as systematic as I've made it. I see myself going into the fringes of these works. I'll refine and explore. That's where it's more automatic. I like less looking, more doing.

— *As told to Phyllis Tuchman*