

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Modern Painters
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Mark Grotjahn: Drawings

by Terry Myers

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Mark Grotjahn's decision of a few years ago to rotate the axis of his perspectival paintings from the horizontal to the vertical not only expanded the field of their quite literal point-of-view, but also deftly pulled apart anything in the anonymous visual aspects of these particular pictures of his that could be used to pin them down. (There are other bodies of his work that squirm in many different directions.) Going vertical also facilitated the use of the word 'butterfly' in his titles, a point of reference that conjures up the specimen -- a category of objects that aligns with the tangible yet slippery, mad scientist look of his overall enterprise. Moreover, it recalls the chaos-theory notion of how the beating wings of a butterfly might have a significant effect on something happening on the other side of the world. And this story has some connection with how Grotjahn's work engages our current version(s) of abstraction: focus here equals distraction there. In the seven new colour pencil drawings in this exhibition (all 2004), Grotjahn has opened up his work even further. Five of the drawings are 'butterflies' of some type with six, eight, or ten 'wings'. Each 'wing' is an attenuated, razor-sharp triangle made up of his trademark one-point perspective stripes; each stripe is a single colour, cleanly outlined in black. (I emphasise 'cleanly' because the drawings also carry the wear of their making in a manner that comes across as honest, if ever so slightly winking, since they also arise from his making smaller, separate drawings on top of these works.) Outlining is a key component, largely because Grotjahn has also drawn several vertical lines that travel across the height of the paper and lock the butterfly triangles into place. Even with such a structure, however, what makes these drawings particularly successful is their ability to look as if they are capable of a wide range of motion: ranging from the upward lift of Untitled (colored butterfly white background 6 wings), the downward float of Untitled (colored butterfly white background 10 wings), or the seemingly windswept yet frozen motion of Untitled (large colored butterfly white background 10 wings). The fact that these effects can happen when what we're looking at actually has nothing physically to do with a butterfly, let alone with actually looking like one, makes the drawings all the more refreshingly opened in the face of their systematic nature. This attitude is supported by the two remaining drawings in the exhibition: Untitled (large/medium black water), and Untitled (large black flower). Each has been made with a dense, velvety covering of black pencil that, moving from edge to centre, bringing us back to earth once again and to that powerful point of focus around which all of Grotjahn's work dances.

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