

Making the Spirits Dance

Mark Grotjahn's sinews of paint take on lives of their own.

By Jerry Saltz



(Photo: Courtesy of Anton Kern Gallery, NY (Artwork from left, Untitled [S 1 Full Frontal Face 41.25], 2009/2010; Untitled [Side Swiped and Carved Face 41.32], 2009/2010))

Mark Grotjahn's large new paintings abound with torrents of ropy impasto, laid down in thickets, cascading waves, and bundles that swell, braid around, or overlap one another. Noses and mouths appear in kaleidoscopic furrows. Eyes, too—sometimes in clusters, other times alone. Often these eyes are gouged out, opaque, blank, like those of some simian being or blind oracle. There are echoes of Cubism here and Vlaminck's Fauvism, of mid-century abstraction, German and neo-Expressionism, rock painting, folk art, and fabric design.

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I'm tantalized by the facture and physicality of these paintings. What Grotjahn (pronounced *groat-john*) paints doesn't stay put on these variegated surfaces; instead, it shifts around the involuting centerless space. You can discern the ways in which this work is made, yet no formal system appears. (I surmise that the artist himself is sometimes caught off guard by what he's produced.) His strangely shamanic art gives me a remnant of the *pow* I get from those ancient eternal faces in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

The winding rows of oil paint have been carefully laid on, wet-on-wet. Sometimes these lines look like colored grubs or raffia, in tones that are rich and saturated, ranging from mauve and apple to emerald and blood red. I think of magic carpets and magnetic fields. I spy networks of Martian canals and landscapes folding over themselves. I glimpse one of painting's oldest purposes: the uncanny ability to conjure beings and invoke spirits.

I also take pleasure in the so-called negative power in Grotjahn's work. That is, I love his paintings for what they are not. Unlike much art of the past decade, Grotjahn isn't simply working from a prescribed checklist of academically acceptable, curator-approved isms and twists. His palette isn't only the voguish trio black, white, and silver; images aren't taken mechanically from newspapers, the Internet, or other media; his paintings aren't comments about comments about Warhol; they're not coolly ironic. These qualities don't inherently make Grotjahn's art brave or even good (although it is good). They make you realize just how locked-in and unsurprising so much market-driven work has become. Happening upon his paintings is a wild surprise; you're reminded of the pleasures of the open, the out-there, and the untamed. It is the best show by a mid-career painter that I've seen in a long time.

Nine Faces

Mark Grotjahn

[Anton Kern Gallery](#).

Through June 25.

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