

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Phaidon
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Why Mark Grotjahn swapped his art for shop signs

Learn how the Gagosian artist overcame artistic difficulties by exchanging his paintings for grocery store notices



From Mark Grotjahn, Sign Exchange, 1993-98. Image courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

Think of it as a painterly version of writer's block. Years ago, before Mark Grotjahn found success with his colourful, mandala-like abstract works, the artist struggled with his subject matter. The Californian painter and sculptor, featured in our great book, *Painting Abstraction*, knew he wanted to paint, but found the right picture eluded him. Every image seemed to overdone, or loaded with artistic theory. In desperation, he turned to something that, in the painter's own words, "I loved".

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

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From Mark Grotjahn, Sign Exchange, 1993-98. Image courtesy the artist and Karma, NY

He decided to paint signs. Not clear, Warhol-style logos, or iconic Standard Oil signage, like Ed Ruscha. From 1993 until 1998 Grotjahn chose simple, vernacular corner-store, liquor-shop and café notices, copying the bright, hand-rendered images as best he could.

He liked the signs because, as Jerry Saltz quotes the artist in his wonderful review of Grotjahn's show, Sign Exchange 1993–98, Grotjahn saw that the signs "had an audience, they knew who their audience was, and they knew what they wanted to say. Their signs were functioning."

Indeed, the signs were a little too perfect. Try as he might, Grotjahn could not get his same level of simple semiotic perfection as his local corner-shop salesman. In a moment of revelation, the painter realized what he must do: swap his work for the signs he loved so much.

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Throughout the mid-nineties, Grotjahn exchanged his painterly copies of shop and restaurant signs for the originals he admired so much. To sweeten the deal, Grotjahn would bump up the colours in his versions, and occasionally correct spelling mistakes. For the most part, the business owners agreed.

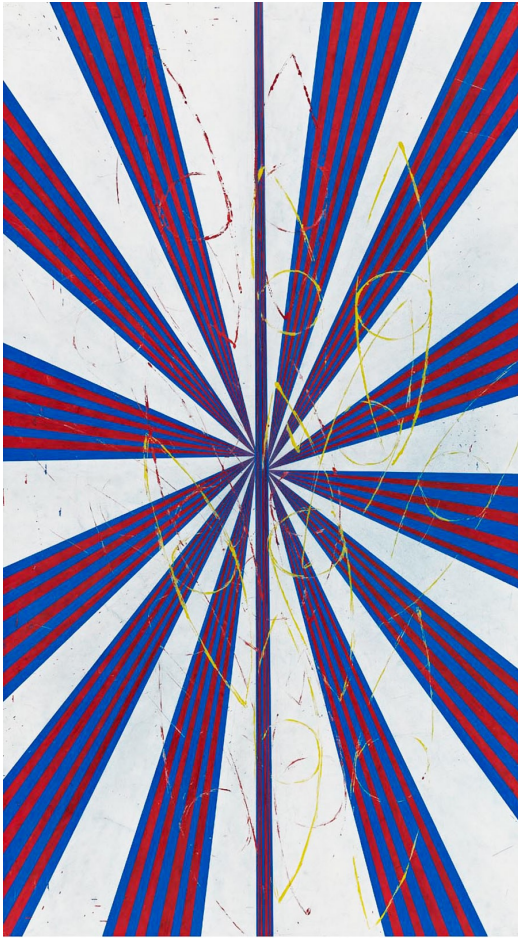
Grotjahn brought his sign exchange project to an end in 1998, around the time he established his clear-lined, kaleidoscopic abstract style of painting for which he is now known.

However, until 7 February, Karma gallery is showing Grotjahn's collection of liquor and grocery notices, at its Great Jones St Gallery in Manhattan.

The exhibition serves as a kind of counterpoint to Grotjahn's Gagosian show at 980 Madison Avenue, Untitled (Captain America), which features newer abstract works and runs until 20 February.

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Mark Grotjahn, *Untitled (Captain America Drawing in Ten Parts 41.17)*, 2008–09 (part three), color pencil and oil on paper, in ten parts, part three: 85 5/8 × 47 5/8 inches (217.5 × 121 cm) © Mark Grotjahn. Photo by Douglas M. Parker Studio. Image courtesy of Gagolian

Indeed, in his review, Saltz suggests that Grotjahn's latter-day abstract works owe much to his years spent copying signs, noting the "gritty surfaces, acidic color, irregular lines, puncturing surfaces" that both styles share.

Viewed together, the shows demonstrate the few degrees of difference that lie between pop and abstraction.

For more on Mark Grotjahn's place within abstract art get *Painting Abstraction*. For further advice on overcoming artistic blocks, take a look at *Akademie X*.

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