

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Art in Review; Mark Grotjahn -- Blue Paintings, Light to Dark, One Through Ten

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Anton Kern Gallery
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea
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Mark Grotjahn's title for his show of new paintings describes it accurately. The artist has hung nine paintings in a semicircle of blue that begins and ends in darkness. The 10th painting hangs alone, altarlike, in the back room. The cycle starts with inky midnight blue and fades into a royalish blue at the center before circling back to black.

All the paintings have Mr. Grotjahn's signature "butterfly" composition. He uses this term because their carefully measured surfaces (so thickly painted that they appear sculptured) are covered in hundreds of fine lines that emerge from a spot at the core and spread to the canvases' edges in a fanlike pattern.

The point where the center lines converge radiates a hint of orange, catching the viewer's eye and engaging it in a push-me, pull-you vision game. The glowing orange spot pulls your gaze into the center of the painting (as in a Renaissance painting by, say, Masaccio), while the linear striations that compose the "wings" lead it back out to the peripheries.

Because of the subtle ways Mr. Grotjahn deploys color and line to play with perspective, it isn't immediately obvious that the lines originate not solely from one point, but also from an inch-wide stripe that splits the painting down the middle -- just like the vertical band in Barnett Newman's zip paintings.

Clement Greenberg, referring to Newman's zips, once wrote that "only the color-deaf focus on the stripes." Like Newman's paintings, Mr. Grotjahn's emanate an otherworldly light. But his use of the butterfly form turns them into a cruciform structure, suggesting, in a literal versus metaphoric way, that God is present in the details.

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