

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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ART IN REVIEW

MARK GROTJAHN: 'Nine Faces'

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*Anton Kern Gallery
532 West 20th Street, Chelsea*

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Mark Grotjahn's new paintings are harsh, elegant things that enthrall the eye and splinter the mind. They emphasize painting as a psychic and bodily process fueled in part by the devouring and digesting of previous art to formulate a new synthesis. In particular, these large, vertical cardboard-on-canvas works appear to feast on the painting and sculpture of early Modernism, when abstraction and representation were not seen as mutually exclusive. Possessing a torrential force, they are not so much covered with thatches of thrashing, tensile lines as bursting with them, as with live, barely controlled wires.

On first sight, they might almost be large, colorful drawings made by slashing the surfaces in long, full-bodied strokes of crayon or chalk that have some of the directness of Pollock's drips. But the surfaces are also dense and tactile; as you approach they slow down. Up close, the lines are heavily textured, stuttering and multicolored, the result of a fairly careful palette-knife technique reminiscent of the French midcentury painter Jean-Paul Riopelle but without the unctuous flamboyance.

Pulling back again, you may notice ellipses and circles tumbling about among the lines, intimating eyes, nostrils and noses pushed this way and that by the onslaught and recalling the nominal masklike faces of early Picasso and Matisse, Jawlensky and Brancusi. Appropriately, one work is subtitled "Side Swiped and Carved Face 41.32."

Mr. Grotjahn, who lives and works in Los Angeles, has long used schematic faces as the starting point for his abstract paintings, obliterating their features as he develops the generally symmetrical butterfly-wing geometries for which he is known. Here rawness rather than finish prevails. The radiating, ricocheting lines never submit; the flaring planes never emerge. The faces hold their own, if just barely, to affirm in staunchly contemporary terms the human presence behind all art.

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