

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

The Seen
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MARK GROTJAHN // BUTTERFLY PAINTINGS by Deborah Doering

Butterflies – and Grotjahn’s work – may be seen as transformational entities, quite appropriate for new beginnings. Curator Douglas Fogle has selected 15 of Grotjahn’s seminal paintings from public and private collections to illustrate the evolution of the artist’s work, created between 2001–2008, currently on view at Blum & Poe’s inaugural exhibition in their newly opened space in New York City. The thickly painted canvases radiate outward from a central line segment – a type of winged dance often occurs between viewers and the canvases, creating a symmetry between the material and the experience. The installation is intimate and individual, each smaller gallery within the space displaying no more than four or five canvases. The body-proportioned canvases are animated and energized by the viewer – Grotjahn’s airy and atmospheric surfaces motivate observers to move their bodies in space from side to side, as well as bending, stooping and stretching, in order to see the play of light on his thick application of paint.



Mark Grotjahn. Installation view, 2014. Blum & Poe, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles.

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In *Untitled (Black Butterfly)* from 2002, the close observation of oil on linen contains large varieties of black: black-blue, black-lavender, black-sepia, and black-red segments, among others. Grotjahn's butterfly moniker is derived solely from the formal qualities of the paintings; all the works displayed in this exhibition are variations on a theme, using compulsive repetition to experiment within a delineated set of conceptual rules. In all of the canvases on view, the striations that emerge from the center spine are vertically framed by equally-weighted painted sidelines, as if to contain the centrifugal force emanating from the canvas' center and provide a balance to whirling-dervish focal energies. The formal qualities of his work reference a history of geometric modernism, including the works of Malevich and Mondrian. While it differs from a modern conception of the spiritual, the exchange between the work and the viewers themselves takes shape as a rapid back-and-forth, push-and-pull of physical-mental sensations, resulting in a more connected and unified body-mind, or some other state of elevated consciousness.

Approximately half of the canvases on view employ a typographical element, acting as a visual counterforce to their abstraction. In these paintings, one's eye is drawn not to the center of the canvas, but to the bold forms that appear incised at the edge of the surface. These letterforms reveal the earliest, most thinly painted surface, indicating that the Grotjahn planned from the very beginning to include his monogram, and sometimes other typographic imprints, such as numeric references, in his work. In *Untitled (Green Butterfly M. Grotjahn 03)* from 2003, the monarch orange typography against the bright, shiny, grass green of the oil pigment is jarring. It appears as if the center force is either pushing away the signature or drawing it in, or both simultaneously. The tension between the rigid formalism and the pop-treatment of the text is a tug-of-war in form, color, and concept.

Grotjahn's visual war may relate to his Los Angeles roots. Indeed, several of the artist's biographers narrate stories of his early California conceptual sign making practice, a practice that included going from store to store and meticulously copying graphics from local establishments. Grotjahn would then invite an exchange between himself and the owners – his copy of his handmade sign for their original. The energy in these works radiate not from the center seam, but rather from the typography itself, a trope that in each case references the artist, his name, his individual authorship, and his concrete identification in the art market. The attention to Grotjahn's letterforms brings forward an exchange between the dualities of the ethereal body-mind – or perhaps better-termed as “the concrete,” or more brashly, “the market.” In this regard, the exhibition acts as a contained experience of “the butterfly effect,” – where the seemingly innocuous act of viewing a painting has the potential to make hurricane impact on the other.

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