

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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The Parallax view
by Jerry Saltz



Untitled (French Grey Fan 10 - 90% with Warm Grey
90% Butterfly 630), 2006, Colored pencil on paper, 61
1/2 x 48 inches.

Courtesy of the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, NY, and
Blum & Poe, Los Angeles

I used to underestimate the optical juju in the paintings of Mark Grotjahn (pronounced *Groat-john*). When he first showed in New York, about five years ago, I privately dismissed the art of this Los Angeles-based painter as alluring but repetitious, overly simple, and too op. Now I think he may be painting a sort of unstable parallax vision where space oscillates and perspective is disrupted. Whatever he's doing, I suddenly can't see enough of his work. The Whitney Museum's current lobby show, organized by associate curator Shamim Momin, of eight large drawings by Grotjahn—though it may feature too many monochromes and it's a real shame there are no paintings on hand—proves that even though this artist is repetitious, his work is far from simple. It is more than alluring, even a little insurrectionary in its implications.

Grotjahn's most common, but not his only, motif is a starburst pattern, a kind of pinwheel or radial butterfly configuration with the two wings sharing an off-center or slanting vertical axis. Imagine a

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view of a sunset through the viewfinder of a geometrizing lens, then rotate that image 90 degrees; that's Grotjahn's basic pictorial program. Essentially, he's rendering one of the oldest standardized drawings in the book—train tracks going back into infinity. But the subtle changes he renders make you see something you may never have quite seen before, even if you don't know you're seeing it at first.

Grotjahn's work appears simple, but its implications are radical. He paints and draws a sort of metaphysical-visual rift in the fabric of perspectival space. This slippage simultaneously activates and destabilizes how we usually comprehend topographic space. The way three-dimensional space is rendered on a two-dimensional surface is miraculous and efficient. It is also learned and artificial. In fact, one-point perspective had been around for millennia before it was supposedly "invented" in around 1400 by Brunelleschi, Alberti, et al.; it just wasn't of particular interest to audiences, who must have been bored by how rigid it was. Regardless, there is foreshortening on Greek vases; Egyptians experimented with atmospheric perspective, as did cave painters; Roman murals often employ strict vanishing points.

In actuality, perspectival space accounts for only a tiny sliver of the whole history of art; it was practiced in a relatively limited geographical area (Europe and America), and it began waning around the mid 19th century. To this day people associate it with "realism." Yet perspective is no more objective or real than the idea that the earth is the center of the solar system or that the sun is the center of the universe.

Because the vanishing points in Grotjahn's pinwheel—train tracks are located in two or more asymmetrical spots—one higher or lower than the others—the vertical strip where the two planes touch is no longer an endpoint but a mesmerizing optical and psychic opening. It is a threshold to a new dimension rather than a terminus. Grotjahn allows you to grasp that one-point perspective is a system that continually brings you to the same point and that this point asserts itself as optical law. Perspective is entirely about order and the psychological pleasure of the illusion of looking into space. One of the mad benefits of this maniacal ordering is that each person is also granted the demented, deluded position of being a god. You, the maharaja of all that you survey, are the fixed singularity that all things rush from or toward. It's very lonely, insanely Freudian, and likely has to do with fear, loss, and death anxiety.

Grotjahn undoes the insanity of oneness. By tampering with its visual clues (e.g., shifting and multiplying vanishing points, tinkering with the rhythms and widths of receding lines, altering patterns of repetition, playing with optical torsion), he eludes the authoritarian

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centrality of perspective and creates a sort of blind spot or civil war between spatial systems. In effect, Grotjahn outfoxes the ego-centered Ptolemaic rendition of the universe in favor of an unstable, enigmatic Copernican system of space, where centers are understood as subjective and always in motion.

In Grotjahn's world you follow one set of lines to the vanishing point, then do the same with the other. After repeated trips to these focal points the illusion of receding space breaks down and reconfigures as you begin to make out a visual-conceptual alternative to the rigid system you've always relied on. You experience a kind of reincarnated space. It's like living on a planet with two suns. In Grotjahn's retinal-cerebral wormhole, space recedes and is flat at the same time. Possibilities open and systems waver as seeing turns into something richer, less certain, and more alive.

For all this, Grotjahn's art is also fairly traditional and old-fashioned. He can come off as a latter-day formalist. Like Brice Marden's early monochromes, Robert Ryman's all-white paintings, Alfred Jensen's mathematical mandalas, and Bridget Reilly's arrays, Grotjahn's work is sensuous, thoughtful, and subconsciously disruptive. His touch is diligent and dogged, his surfaces burnished and raw; his palette recalls early-20th-century advertising, '60s graphics, and certain Dada works, especially Marcel Duchamp's last painting, *Tu M'*, a work from 1918 featuring color swatches streaking across the canvas.

Grotjahn is exploring a kind of space that is not photographic, observed, imagined, hallucinated, or perspectival in any way we're familiar with. It could be thrilling to see where this space leads to.

Hopelessly Devoted

The freight train of art history is long and winding. Its many powerful locomotives are somewhere far away, over the hills, obscured by the ridges of time and place. Yet the smoke from these engines is palpably in the air we breathe. Some of these engines are cave painting, tribal art, cuneiform writing, Persian miniatures, Neolithic stone carving, Egyptian art, ancient figurines, and Greek sculpture. Much closer in time—only a little over 800 years from here—are three gigantic pictorial engines that changed everything and threw the train of art history onto the track it's still on. These big three are Duccio, Giotto, and Cimabue.

The three Italian artists were all born within 27 years of one another, starting with Cimabue in 1240. At the moment, New York has the exquisite treat of having two Cimabues displayed side by side in a tiny room off the main entrance of the magnificent Frick Collection. In these two works you can behold the beginning of the end of the

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Byzantine way of seeing everything at once in different scales and various cosmic dimensions and the rudimentary start of perspectival space. One is a flagellation of Christ with the Messiah tied to a gorgeous salmon-colored marble column; the other is a portrait of Mary flanked by angels and holding her tiny beatific child. It is said that when people first saw these paintings they thought the figures in them were almost real.

Also in this walk-in wonder cabinet are eight devotional pictures, so called because of their small scale. I fell for four tempera-and-gold-leaf-on-parchment illuminations by Pacino di Bonaguida. The opaque colors and simple forms of these gorgeous scenes from the life of Christ fast-forwarded me right back on the train of art history, where I'm sure I saw Donald Judd.

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