

# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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## Mark Grotjahn: Anton Kern

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Mark Grotjahn's latest works--a series of variously sized jewel-like monochrome canvases that toy with one-point perspective--are flat-out gorgeous. This should be said right off, since discussions of Grotjahn's work tend to leap quickly into speculation on what lurks (literally and figuratively) behind their surfaces. If there's a plumb line harming through this young artist's oeuvre, it's a love for and deft utilization of the opaque. But Grotjahn's taste for the impermeable is hardly delivered straight from the shoulder; a perverse formalism is his delicious decoy, both an homage to and usurpation of (by now amply deconstructed) modernist tactics.

No surprise, then, that Grotjahn has been discussed in terms of a handful of otherwise incommensurable artists (Andy Warhol, Alfred Jensen) and styles (Cubist, Color Field). A self-proclaimed appropriationist, Grotjahn absorbs and then contorts discrete breeds of modern representation culled from sources high and low--ultimately performing a roguish redistribution rather than a "deconstruction." In the mid-'90s, for instance, the Los Angeles-based artist painstakingly copied hand-and stencil-lettered signs he came across in his favorite bodegas and burrito joints (NO I.D. NO BEER is but one laconic specimen). He later gave his copies to the establishments' owners in exchange for the grungier but infinitely more auratic objects trouves-- ridding himself of the "artwork" at the very moment he acquired it through an absurdly hermetic barter. Grotjahn's practice, however tangible or abstract, remains at its core a conceptual endeavor, one that plays with opacity in a manner quite in keeping with Roland Barthes's mythology of the striptease: that the barely revealed is much more alluring than the out-and-out.

This hide-and-seek strategy was in full swing for the artist's first New York solo show, whose dozen kaleidoscopic paintings each focused on the complexities of a single (if multifaceted) hue. Opulent and lustrous, these tones exist somewhere between the industrial and the mystical. Taken with the composition of the canvases--in which monochrome bands emanate like the rays of the sun from two distinctly discordant vanishing points--the color choices called to mind neo-Impressionist methods that plumbed the "inherent" emotional values of line and color. Indeed, Grotjahn's canvases recall such constructions as Paul Signac's portrait of art critic Felix Feneon, *Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats* and

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Angles, Tones and Colors, 1890. Of course, Grotjahn's paintings, unlike those made by such proto-symbolist painters, are resolutely antirepresentational.

Or are they? Like all these canvases, Grotjahn's works are designed to flirt with the eye and plant ideas in the head. The paint--effusive orange, green, cream, black, or gray--is dense, sculpted by a brush that has left intentional evidence of its traces. Yet peeking out from beneath the thick facet of pigment is, in every instance, a second color: on the edges, between strokes, but, most important, shaping the hollowed contours of the artist's initials. Where so much classical painting opts to depict the pregnant moment just before a narrative climax, in Grotjahn's hands the canvas itself becomes gravid. These hints of yellow beneath green or pink beneath black offered the possibility (though by no means the only one) that id-driven expressionist strokes hovered just below a mathematically precise, if intentionally skewed, composition. But Grotjahn has wagered, I think successfully, that we don't really want to see what might lie there concealed. Wouldn't that ruin everything?

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