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MARK GROTJAHN'S WAKING FORMALISM

I called some paintings "perspectives" but I'm not interested in perspective; I called some "butterflies" but I don't think they are butterflies; I call my sculptures "masks" but they are not masks. — Mark Grotjahn

Words By: Lydia Earthy

A few weeks ago, American artist Mark Grotjahn posted a series of Instagram stories which followed – to humorous effect – the artist trying to catch a small, indiscernible creature (a bat?) in his kitchen.

The renowned painter, whose exhibition history is international and more than extensive (including shows at The Whitney, The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Portland Art Museum, and the Royal Academy in London), whose work has been acclaimed by the art industry's top critics (Jerry Saltz, Roberta Smith, Douglas Fogle), and who will exhibit for the ninth time at Gagosian this September, here provides a fantastic metaphor for a method common to many abstract or conceptual artistic movements – the exquisitely wrought process of trying to capture the indescribable. For the impressionists, this was fleeting moods and scenes, often of rainy Parisian streets; for the abstract expressionists, this was the final signifier; the ineffable; God. Here, the artist with the bat in his kitchen is also, handily, a metaphor for the viewer's attempt to understand Grotjahn's work, who for the past three decades has continually sparked debate about representation, mimesis, and meaning in his work.

Grotjahn's paintings are motif-lead. His upcoming show at Gagosian opening on the 29th September is entitled *Backcountry* and presents a continuation of his most recent body of work – the Capri series. The original series was inspired by an invitation to exhibit at Casa Malaparte – a famous example of modernist architecture designed by the writer and filmmaker Curzio Malaparte – and this most recent iteration melds his original body of work with his time skiing off piste in an entirely different landscape: Old Snowmass, and the wild backcountry of Colorado.

The works combine two primary modes of mark making: sweeping, parabolic curves that dominate the background of the canvas in insistent, primary colours; and small, lozenge-like 'slugs' applied with a palette knife that team atop his paintings to create small, impasto armies of paint. Some critics have speculated the wrought surfaces of his cardboard-covered canvases to be historically inspired by the volcanic landscape in Capri, but this is where any visually motivated vehicles of interpretation end. Instead, the works appear to be in insistent pursuit of a particular way of painting, one Grotjahn has compared to athleticism – referencing the physical process of cutting through textured surfaces, like ice-skaters, and comparing his way of working to 'firing'. These metaphors take on renewed significance given the works in *Backcountry*, whose limited palette of black, white and red euphemistically alludes to the movement of a skier in the mountains. Here, however, the power of motif, the artist's communion with the canvas, and the continual, painterly exchange of stasis versus dynamism trump reference to any physical landscape.

Indeed, Grotjahn's practice displays a fraught relationship with realism. His roots in conceptualism may to some extent explain this. In a 90's, LA based project entitled 'Sign Exchange', Grotjahn exchanged painterly replicas of run-down shop signs by real restaurant and shop vendors. Here, the artist capitalised on the potency of the object and subverted ideas surrounding art and viewership: his exchanged signs remained in shops, as the originals went on display in the white cube. Much like his LA contemporaries (Ed Ruscha, Vija Celmins), his works were and continue to be frank in their content, offering a clearly demarcated scope and an almost darkly comic impassiveness. Perhaps this is what has led several critics to rely on exterior, critical frameworks to interpret his works. Writing about the original Capri series, Alain Elkann compares his 'overwhelming vortices' to the dynamism and speed of the futurists; Robert Starr reads him conceptually, and Barry Schwabsky reads him as both connected and 'concomitant[ly] different' to the abstract expressionists. Common to all of these movements, however, is a modernist sense of purpose, drive, in some, even, propaganda – components that fall short of describing Grotjahn's unique mark making.

Where journalist Alain Elkann reads Grotjahn's broad practice as completely 'absent of irony', I think it is more useful to think of Grotjahn as ironically earnest. His upcoming show, *Backcountry*, continues this frank, conceptual approach, where 'coded' interpretations of art and art criticism are mocked by his painterly insistence in material. At the centre of Grotjahn's practice is a belief in formalism – the idea that paintings can be self-contained, and derive from continual experimentation in medium and form. He has spoken widely on his love for the non-objective – distinct from abstract art, which literally means to 'take out', or detract. Instead, Grotjahn relies on painting to build systems and structures which have no external reference point. This is made abundantly clear by his speaking on the subject: not only has Grotjahn told Gary Garells that he found in his abstract paintings 'a certain graphic form that I could stick with and see how far within that system I could push it', but he even goes so far as teasing the viewer with useful comparisons. Grotjahn invokes and withdraws comparisons to real life objects, telling the viewers "I called some "butterflies" but I don't think they are butterflies; I call my sculptures "masks" but they are not masks."

In a contemporary climate that places increasing weight on zombie formalism – a pejorative term coined by Walter Robinson to mean increasing and often meaningless formal innovation (the Queen made from pieces of toast burnt to various degrees, etc.) – Grotjahn's insistent and limited motifs present a renewed argument for non-objective art. I'm not sure what the opposite of a zombie is – alive? Waking? But the bat is in the net – Mark Grotjahn's waking formalism relieves viewers of the uncomfortable process of interpretation through a playful sense of ironic earnestness in his work.



Mark Grotjahn in his LA studio creating works for Backcountry.



Mark Grotjahn, Untitled (Backcountry Capri 54.79), 2022, Oil on cardboard mounted on linen 55 1/2 x 68 3/8 in, 141 x 173.7 cm © Mark Grotjahn, Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio, Courtesy Gagosian



Installation View, *Backcountry*, 2022, London, Courtesy of Gagosian and the artist.



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Backcountry runs from September 29th - November 5th, 2022 at Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London