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View of “Rudolf Stingel,” 2007 Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

Rudolf Stingel

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO (MCA CHICAGO)

THE AUSTERELY MINIMALIST interior of Chicago’s Josef Paul Kleihues–designed Museum of Contemporary Art may never have looked so good as when lit by the fluorescent hues of Dan Flavin’s neon retrospective in 2005, but until now—that is, until the arrival of Rudolf Stingel’s current installation—it had never been put to such good *use*. For this, his first large-scale survey exhibition in the United States, Stingel seems intent on emphasizing the distinction between the logics of appearance and purpose. (It is precisely this dialectic that has motivated his twenty-year investigation into what he calls the “subject of painting,” by which he means both painting as a subject, and the subject as constructed by painting.) And so, to start things off, Stingel has wrapped the expansive heights of the museum’s atrium in a soft, gently reflective silver skin of the building-insulation material Celotex (*Untitled*, 2007). Further adapting the architecture to his purpose, he has lowered the ceiling with a similarly wrapped cornice that blocks most of the natural light from above, illuminating the scene instead with the diffuse glow of an oversize and absurdly ostentatious chandelier. Putting on full display the baroque theatrics that animate the spectacular heart of the modern museum with this updated *Galerie des Glaces*—turning the building inside out, in a manner of speaking—Stingel invites visitors to partake of the theatricality inherent to the museum’s reperforming of itself by writing on the newly silvered walls. And they do: END THE WAR repeatedly, insistently, pops out of a scrim of more desultory notations to the effect that so-and-so was here (Kilroy making an inevitable appearance among the Emilios and Saras). Sometimes the pens or fingers have dug in deeply enough to expose the Celotex’s crumbly tan underlayer, while foreign objects—ID cards, keys, nickels, dimes, paper-clipped ribbons—project from the insulation’s surface, where they have been stuck by viewers who devise increasingly resourceful means

(e.g., paper airplanes) of reaching the wall's upper regions. Through these layers born of accumulation and destruction, the tableau brings to mind Leo Steinberg's prescient notion of a "flatbed picture plane," that is, of the picture's surface as a greedy receptor of data, of things culled from the worldly detritus that more properly modernist painting, with which Stingel's practice often flirts, labors to eschew. Here, the surface of what Stingel insists is a painting is made both to mirror and to *be* the surface of the world.

Whereas forty years ago the artists' group BMTP (as in Buren, Mosset, Toroni, Parmentier) affirmed its avant-garde status by defiantly averring, "We are not painters," Stingel finds equal gravitas in confirming that he is nothing but. The distinction is central to understanding his project, and especially his Celotex installation. If the point of this rather dramatic incursion into institutional space were only to challenge the museum's alleged political neutrality, by making it frame the kind of sloganeering that it might prefer remain outside its walls, we would be right to say, "So what?" Similarly, if Stingel's ambition were simply to provide a participatory venue for graffiti, we would remind him, as one reviewer did, that a local pizzeria has beat him to it. But *Untitled* works, and works hard—in conjunction with the elegantly distilled selection of objects and installations with which curator Francesco Bonami limns two decades of Stingel's practice—to draw our attention to the material, painterly locus where reality and spectacularity might be said to collide. It is this locus that is at issue in the goopy surfaces of the Styrofoam paintings that bear the erosive impressions of Stingel's acid-coated shoes; in his wall- and floor-based carpet pieces; in his early, impossibly beautiful "silver paintings," made by pressing a layer of gauze into wet pigment, spraying over it with metallic paint, and then removing it; and even in his recent Photorealist self-portraits. And it is this locus, Stingel's stubborn exploration of painting suggests, that haunts art's never-ending engagement with the strictures of modernism and its corresponding preoccupation with the political parameters of figuration versus the transcendent ambitions of abstraction.

As *Untitled* endures over the coming weeks, it will accumulate more and more additive and subtractive marks, perhaps so many that its surface—and it is, in a sense, all surface—will be destroyed. And yet, even as this destruction transpires, the material form of the painting lives on through the underlying yellow foam, which bears witness to the scratching and inscribing that has revealed it. The process is complicated: The painting is created only as it is destroyed, and the more advanced its ruin becomes, the more its reality and autonomy as a painting is

asserted. As if to make this point emphatically clear, Bonami includes in this exhibition two finished paintings made from segments of previously installed Celotex, dated 2002; we are not told where they were initially installed, though the German names and phrases scratched into them suggest a vague provenance. These segments are framed in aluminum and protected by museum signage instructing Please Do Not Touch, as if to underscore the provisional status of the work in the atrium. Those already familiar with Stingel's work will recognize the Celotex installation as one of the artist's stock maneuvers, repeated, in defiance of the fashion-frenzied pace of critical reception, in multiple materializations at multiple sites. At the time of its first iteration, in 2001, at the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Trento, Italy, Stingel claimed to have been surprised by the vandalism, now a central component of the work, to which the installation was subjected. But he had also covered the floor, thereby already revealing intentions to implicate viewers in a physical, though less deliberate, interaction with the Celotex, as their shoes inevitably wore through the fragile membrane to expose the fleshy foam beneath.

By this point, Stingel had long been interrogating the implications of what critics have described, with varying degrees of approbation and disdain, as a populist project engaged either (again, depending on the critic) in democratizing artmaking or in acquiescing to its spectacularization—a seeming contradiction that bespeaks the elusive nature of the artist's ventures beyond painting's conventional spatial and social purviews. More than a decade previously, he had composed a small artist's book, *Instructions*, 1989, that led readers, step-by-step, through the process of making one of his "silver paintings" (which were exhibited alongside the booklet). Photos of a woman's hand, going through the motions, complemented the text, literalizing the double meaning of the word *manual*. His Buddha-Shiva hybrid of the mid-'90s—a figurine about twenty inches high, variously cast in bronze and rubber—enshrines this methodological production, clutching in each of its six outstretched hands one of the prescribed tools: brush, eggbeater, spray gun, etc. (At the MCA, the bronze version of the sculpture is displayed high on a pedestal far from the silver paintings, as if to imply that all the paintings in the exhibition, however virtuosic they might appear, owe something to the rote procedural strategies of these early works.) Beyond the art world, untold numbers of New Yorkers know Stingel from his carpeting of Grand Central Station, *Plan B*, 2004, and the media circus that surrounded it. Here, Stingel's use of factory-produced flowered carpet bore directly on his assertions that art is about the possibilities brought about by displacement,

both of materials and of viewers' perceptions—a claim echoed by the perceptual effects of much of the work on view at the MCA. In one carpet piece (*Untitled*, 1991/2007), a room-size, sound-muffling swath of Tang-colored rug covers the floor of a gallery, turning the space into something of an optical illusion, fun-house style. As your eyes labor to overcome the contrasts of the orange and white, you get the uncanny impression that you are standing in the center of a peach-hued, curvilinear space as opposed to an orange-and-white rectangular one. The normally white cube seems to convulse, shifting back and forth between consensual reality and a more subjective, experiential truth. As a result of this oscillation, the viewer is displaced to another space and, by implication, to another temporal order, one less constrained by Euclidean rationalism—all without leaving the room. The resonance with the translocative ambitions of Color Field painting can't be ignored. At the same time, however, viewers here physically impact the work, leaving traces of their earthbound footsteps across it. Subject becomes object; art becomes object *and* subject.

In Stingel's oeuvre, in other words, the viewer's actions are not so easily reduced to the kinds of participatory, "democratized" aesthetic gestures with which they might superficially be compared, nor can they be blithely placed under the sign of the spectacular. They are primarily about capturing emblems and traces of the real in what Chrissie Iles, in her catalogue essay, calls the otherwise "pristine space" of painting. Indeed, for the MCA retrospective, as he has done elsewhere, Stingel brings this synthesis to bear not just on painting, but on the museum and on the institutional apparatus and its framing operations generally. In his 1963 poem "Questions of Painting," Marcel Broodthaers asks: "Is the painting of Frans Hals / done with poisonous matter? / And the one of Goya? / . . . / Have these paintings a perverse odor / like the monstrous praise of which they are victims? // Is it to critics that one should / address these questions? / Or to the organizer of exhibitions?" Some forty years later, we might say that Stingel's answer is to point to the equivalence that more properly animates distinctions between painterly "matter" and all that wrecks meaning upon and around it. He collapses pictorial space into exhibitionary space, so that their relationship to the viewer becomes equivalent, and equivalently site-specific. This is clear in his transformation of the MCA's magisterial atrium into a giant surface for marking. It is also clear in the pair of doorways he cuts between three principal galleries, two of which are filled with his decorative damask wallpaper paintings. Around each doorway, Stingel has installed an elaborate molding of reflective black lacquer. These apertures generate another optical

illusion: When you look through one and then the other, standing equidistantly between them, the objects they frame—the Buddha-Shiva figure on one end and a self-portrait on the other—appear flush with the lacquer frames, though they are actually at a significant remove. The galleries are thus perceptually flattened, the museum's space rendered two-dimensional, like the recessive spaces of a perspectival painting. That the moldings are as spectacularly excessive as the damask paintings, which both represent and *are* wallpaper, reminds us that Stingel's interest in painting is always about its placement and the theatrical performances that elaborate it from within and without. Simple, elegant, and direct, each of these two frames makes of architectural reality a painterly illusion in which the viewer, reflected in their surfaces, is caught. Reality and experience vacillate in an endless *mise en abyme* between the twin poles of representation and realization, perception and proof.

This vacillation culminates in the grand finale of a roomful of Stingel's Photorealist self-portraits based on snapshots taken by the artist's friend Sam Samore. Here, instead of indexical signs of the artist's presence, or our own, we are given pictures of Stingel, first seated in front of a candlelit birthday cake, martini in one hand, cigarette in the other, and then in varying states of unrest and melancholy in the nonspecific confines of a hotel room. White sheets and a tightly made bed provide a wonderful staging ground for the finesse of the paintings' brushwork. Exhibition guards marvel alongside viewers at the extraordinary endurance and ability to stay on form demonstrated in every inch of the canvases, painted, as so many Photorealist works are, by a team—Stingel and an assistant—in gridded sections according to schematic maps derived from the source photograph. When you step back from the paintings, especially those that are two or three times life size, Stingel, a man and, in the context of this exhibition, a painter, emerges in the crisp precision of photographic renderings. Up close, the images—grand, indulgent articulations of the artist *qua* artist *qua* subject—dissolve into the abstraction of brushstrokes, the kind of mark that has, by virtue of the set of parallels proposed by the rest of the show, come to be associated with other genres of vernacular mark making: the graffito, the foot on the carpet, the many signs of the real pressing up against and, finally, into representation.

In an antecedent gallery, Bonami has hung Stingel's most recent self-portrait, *Alpino (1976)*, 2006, a giant rendition of the artist's military ID-card photo, replete with official seal and staples. The different representations of the artist, one in his youth, *before* painting, and

others as he ages, clue us into the closely hewn sense of time and its passing that infuses Stingel's practice as well as the narrative of the exhibition. Reading the brushstrokes in the surfaces of the portraits, we are reminded that Kilroy, so to speak, *was here*; and in this accelerated epoch, in which the imperative seems not merely to go faster but actually to outpace time, this realization may, after all, be significant. A few weeks ago, a young scholar eager to put her exuberant stamp on the narrative of twentieth-century art informed me that the connection, long thought axiomatic, between the photograph and that privileged sign of presence, the index, was a thing of the past. Reared myself on the milk of this notion, I was anxious to disprove her point. What worse a time than now, I worried, when a state of permanent war depends on the compliant amnesia of both individuals and populaces, to jettison the possibility of reading the world through the traces that mark the passage of the real, like so many fragile footprints in the sand? But on thinking about her proclamation further, I decided there might be some value in it, insofar as it might proffer ways to rethink the history of photography and the supposed universality of its capacity to represent "that which has been." We know, after all, that this very representational capacity depends on the erasure of things, people, and places that were, in fact, not allowed "to be" in the photographic surface. Walking through the Stingel exhibition at the MCA, I wondered if it could instead be here, in the space of painting's expanded field, that we might think about returning to the purposeful project of registering the traces of bodies, precisely as they move through the spaces increasingly given over to the spectacle's appropriation of the everyday. Perhaps it is here too, in this most unlikely of places, that we might locate an opportunity to mend the spatiotemporal disconnect that otherwise separates our bodies from their perceptual experiences.

"Rudolf Stingel" travels to the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, June 28–Oct. 14.

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