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L'Orientaliste on the Continent: Robert Janitz in Berlin

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Report from... Berlin

Robert Janitz: Oriental Lumber at Meyer Riegger

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Friedrichstraße 235 (between Hedemannstraße and Rahel-Varnhagen Promenade)

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Installation view, "Robert Janitz: Oriental Lumber," 2014, at Meyer Riegger Berlin. Courtesy of the gallery.

For his first solo exhibition with Meyer Riegger, Robert Janitz shows a selection of his three favored forms: a plant sculpture made from cut sheet metal, a suite of portraits of the backs of heads and a selection of large format abstractions made from layered paint, wax and flour. Far from being disparate or eccentric modes, these three archetypal forms actually gather themselves around figuration as a unifying idea. Janitz work is indebted to de Kooning's early black-and-white abstractions as well as the canvas-works of the Actionists from the 1960s. "Oriental Lumber" is an eccentric exhibition that shows an artist who flits back and forth between serious abstract painting, wordplay and dada-like witticism.

Janitz has cited his plant sculptures as a Duchampian gesture but in the context of this exhibition, *Margiela Fontăna* (all work 2014), seems more of an ironic commentary on glossy, "finish fetish" Minimalist sculpture. It is larger than an average human and placed casually in the middle of the gallery as a houseplant would be. Its sleek and polished surface makes it something of a decoration, though its slightly sagging silver fronds give it something of a comic, Oldenbergian character. The towering plant stands in for refined taste and a pristine sensibility, a possible counterpoint to the comparatively messy paintings.



Robert Janitz, *Audrey Hepburn as Dr. Double aka The Ornithologist*, 2014. Oil, wax, flour on linen, 63.5 x 51 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Berlin.

On one wall of the main gallery, five paintings were hung close together, four of these were “portraits,” and the fifth was an abstraction the same size and format as the portraits. A messy grid of chalky white on black, *Proprement Dit* hung there among the portraits like an imposter, daring us to draw distinctions between it and its representational counterparts. The heads are amalgamations of coiled brush marks, calico surfaces and impasto patches. These link us to the abstractions by way of brushstroke — but far from being personifications, the portraits are empty signifiers. They are featureless, generalized and flattened. One possible reading is that they conjure the anonymity of urban life. In Berlin or New York, we leave our homes and studios and file into the conveyor belt of faceless heads: the back of the head is in effect a “blank canvas” or a space for projection. The anterior portions of the brain are the oldest and most primitive. Our basest necessities are addressed by the function of the hypothalamus, the brain stem (the brain’s *houseplant*?). In *Audrey Hepburn as Dr. Double aka The Ornithologist* Janitz clues us into the projection game that he is setting up. The two-shapes-and-a-background that comprise this small black and orange canvas could be a Hollywood icon, a cartoon character or a bespectacled bird-watcher (a surrogate for a compulsive gazer). Without access to an identity the surfaces become what they really are: combinations of shapes, textures and colors. Janitz puts the infrastructure of the portrait in place but it merely dangles over the paintings’ surface like a thin veil.



Robert Janitz, *Rhythmische Klangformen: Eine Studie*, 2014. Oil, wax, flour on linen, 264 x 203 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Meyer Riegger Berlin.

The remaining walls of the gallery showed Janitz large-scale abstract paintings. These works are physical insofar as they reveal both the action and the substance of their making. But theirs is a kind of physicality that is not seductive or rewarding. We can see that Janitz moves the viscous flour-wax-paint solution across a painted layer with a very wide house painter’s brush. But this is perhaps more of a commentary on utility (what good is a painting, anyway?) than it is about experiencing pleasure or delight in the painted surface. The surface of a painting such as *Rhythmische Klangformen: Eine Studie* ends up appearing more like an X-ray than an action painting. This association is aided along by the interplay between the jet-black painted ground and the yellowish paste-wash that is thinly applied in muscular vertical swathes. The cords of build-up that run up and down the painting’s surface in wide intervals creates a sequence of bone-like partitions in which blank, grey surfaces are carved out. These “empty” zones in the paintings are something like hollowed out reliquaries or porticos where one might insert an icon (think back to Audrey Hepburn’s cameo) or an image of a saint. At times, the striated towers that fill these surfaces appear like processions of solemn, hooded figures.

Janitz titled the show after the hardware store in Bushwick where he shops. He is interested in workmanlike materials, ungraceful products like glue and wax. These materials have become Janitz’s stock and trade and when he began to use them there was a sense of discovery and experimentation in his work. I get the impression that Janitz would like to move beyond these washy/pasty paintings into a form that combines his interests in craftsmanship, figuration and sculpture — but here he has settled to show three types of work that each make use of one or more of these elements. Anachronistically, the work here points us away from painting and into the realm of performance. This exhibition is Janitz’s first in his native Germany, so it makes sense that he would exhibit a cross section of these varied works. He flirts with relational aesthetics with his *Oriental Lumber*, a custom-designed pair of Nikes that he wears in the press image for the show. The sneakers are a fitting metaphor for a restless artist who seems to need to move around a lot.

