

ART

DECEMBER 11TH, 2018

Robert Janitz: Uptown Campus / College Robert Janitz

ANTON KERN GALLERY | DECEMBER 13, 2018 – JANUARY 26, 2019

CANADA | DECEMBER 14, 2018 – JANUARY 20, 2019

by David Rhodes



Installation view, College Robert Janitz, CANADA, New York, 2018. Courtesy CANADA. Photo: Joe DeNardo.

Both Anton Kern Gallery and CANADA present their first solo exhibitions of Robert Janitz. Now based in New York for some years, Janitz was living in Paris after leaving his native Germany and in so doing travelled somewhat against the flow—many artists moving in the opposite direction to Berlin. The two exhibitions differ in that at Anton Kern's Uptown Campus there are mostly "twisted box" paintings and at CANADA's College Robert Janitz, mostly "field" paintings together with three cast concrete bench sculptures. Semiotic play between image and process is present in all of Janitz's work and it's tempting to think of a link to the paintings of both Markus Lüpertz (tent paintings from the mid 1960s) and Günter Förg (abstract window paintings from the mid 1990s) who incorporated gestural painted surface and image without the specifically American post-war reduction of abstraction and process to purely self-referential ends. Both Lüpertz and Förg, of course, also extended painting into sculpture.

Prosaic actions—the arm's length, swift movement of a squeegee across a soaped windowpane or the use of a knife to spread butter on toasted bread—are brought to mind as

much as meditations on post formal modernist painting when viewing this work. Paint is typically brushed across the linen surface, up and down in broad rhythmic strokes, thick and opaque at the beginning and end of the gesture, transparent between. Even Janitz's paint incorporates flour with wax rather than other paint mediums, inviting more domestic reference. His benches—concrete forms that recall zoomorphic or schematic dogs as well as minimalistic sculpture or Brutalist architectural detail—lead us out from the virtual space of the paintings. Nonchalance and elegance, speed and subtlety, all come together in Janitz's work.

At Anton Kern the "twisted box" paintings present images of one or two tower-like structures, apparently placed on a surface as on the edge of a table. The paint handling is quick, cursory, and gestural; the forms seem derived from an imaginary model—one made with cardboard or on a computer screen, it is easy to envisage either. The paintings are illusionistic, and real only as painted surface. Take, *Liquid Conscience* (2018) for example, the two vertical structures twist animatedly, playful and almost mocking.

There is a gradient of color beneath the brush strokes that constitute the surrounding space of the boxes (a gradient much more visible in the “field paintings” at CANADA) that reads like screen-printing (a John Giorno or Japanese nineteenth century wood block, take your pick) or light glowing incrementally across a screen. Though there are geometric shapes, their forms are all absurdist play, supporting apparently whimsical painterliness that is one moment independently abstract, the next fitting in around a shape to indicate a form. Janitz would have his cake and eat it too, uninterested as he is in distinctions between representational painting and non-objective painting as such. Rather, presentations of what might or might not be illusion or reality, or both simultaneously, concern him. The color is somewhat greyed or bleached in appearance, pale but also resonant, not pretty or pure.

One of the “field” paintings at CANADA, *Pitch and Copper*, (2018) has a background gradient that begins at the bottom of the canvas as light purple and becomes gradually darker towards the top. On top of the purple layer, vertical strokes of vibrant blue cross horizontal strokes of the same width at both the upper and lower edge, cutting and mixing into each other. The tonal relationships read like a photographic negative—color transparency and light seem insubstantial, contrasting the thick suds of pushed around wax, flour, and oil paint aggregate. The three benches that sit in front of the painting at odd angles to each other share a humorously awkward elegance and similarly blunt fabrication. Janitz seems to be implying there is nothing straight forward about the seen world and our shifting semiotic regard of it. At the same time that he undercuts modernist deference with a dandification of seriousness, he doesn’t look away from painting’s capacity to capture our estrangement from a reality that is changing and challenging our ability to meaningfully engage with it.

CONTRIBUTOR

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DAVID RHODES is a New York-based artist and writer, originally from Manchester, UK. He has published reviews in the Brooklyn Rail, Artforum, and Artcritical, among other publications.



Robert Janitz, *Liquid Conscience*, 2018. Oil, wax, flour on linen, 80 × 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery.



Robert Janitz, *Pitch and Copper*, 2018. Oil, wax, flour on linen, 86 × 66 inches. Courtesy the artist and CANADA. Photo: Joe DeNardo