

Matthias van Arkel

Altered Measurements

Clear Painting

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Grey, Purple, Without Red, Open, Small, Large, Lucien Freud. A gradation, a color, an absence, a space, a size, a qualification, a man, a history, a personality, a legacy, a burden. In just a few words, in a succinct list not much longer than a haiku – and even these molecular words are themselves compacted into two letter elemental symbols – Stockholm and New York based Matthias van Arkel (b 1967) speaks so directly that one may not even recognize that his language is also a cipher. With his new body of work, *Altered Measurements, Clear Painting*, his second exhibition with Cecilia Hillström Gallery, he returns to a series of wall based works that expand upon lines of conceptual inquiry, including sculptural and spatial problems, that he has explored since he began working with silicone rubber in 2004.

By imposing systematic strictures upon his process, van Arkel creates a nuanced series of seven new paintings that each share the same height, but vary in width, depth, density, process and color. Although each painting enjoys its own autonomy and operates by its own internal logic, they beg to be compared to each other. As pairs and trios seem to begin to resolve themselves, the next piece complicates things and introduces more questions. van Arkel is unsatisfied at merely making paintings, and instead makes allusions to science, politics, history, philosophy and magic through a concise vocabulary of material and color. Although a declaration is made in the exhibition's title that these works are paintings, there's not a drop of oil or acrylic to be found in any of them. Using a process of rolling out chunks of malleable silicone, van Arkel creates elongated, flattened marks made of colorful rubber that often stand in as ersatz brush strokes. Additionally, these paintings are not made on canvas. Instead, the strokes have their own substance, rigidity and strength. As strokes physically overlap and abut one another, they form their own structure. Expression is also utility. Color is also function. It's as if impasto has declared independence from the now superfluous canvas and jettisoned it like a spent solid rocket booster.

Painting OP turns out to be an unexpected pun. It's immediately obvious that it's the most loosely assembled piece, having the most negative space in the series. It is quite literally the most open. But is the perspective head on or from above? Is this a barrier or a surface? What lies beneath? Beyond? In a glance, it looks like a bunch of dirty gym socks lying on the floor. In another instance, it calls to mind the Great Pacific garbage patch, each stroke clinging to its neighbor in an endless swirl of cast off excess. Painting OP looks wet. It appears to be dancing. It is both metallic and moldy. Cheekily, it looks like a Dan Colen painting made of sad colored gum. The piece playfully teases, remaining consistently open to new ways to relate it to art history, the everyday, and ourselves.

Painting PU, Painting GR and Painting WR are all color studies, albeit from very different origin points. Painting PU appears as if someone has torn up a section of flooring made of deflated balloons. A monochrome by name only, Painting PU is not just purple but a full range of cobalt, lilac, International Klein Blue, concord grape skin, super ball, Grimace, bruise, codeine cough syrup, and Blue Razz Berry Blow Pop. Because a new color can be produced by pressing any two silicone strokes through a roller, there is almost infinite tonal variation in Painting PU. Conversely, Painting GR's color is flat, matte and uniform. Whereas Painting PU is a squishy riot of frozen and stained skin, Painting GR is an orderly network of tunnels densely folding around one another. Each constituent piece of Painting GR looks less like a gestural brush stroke than a hollow tube of color; open conduits for painting's endless possibilities to travel through. A sense of scale cannot be resolved. The soft, switchback folds could be those of a brain, a tapeworm, or a desert landscape. The painting feels corporeal and cold simultaneously. Concepts like micro/macro and interior/exterior have collapsed. All of the tight spaces between the material lie in shadow, creating a complementary composition of negative space. This monochrome painting, made up of flat, even color has become a dizzying study of chiaroscuro. Painting WR seems to want to be taken at face value. It is indeed without red. Yet one also struggles to find much of anything that can be described as orange, purple or yellow here either. When these colors are picked up, they seem indeterminate, covered over or compromised. Then, red seems to assert itself, however subtly, in several of the strokes of the painting. A slash of bold crimson lurks sinisterly beside a muted grey, but once spotted, insists on being fixated upon. Finally, it occurs that three of the other paintings would more accurately bear this work's title.

Again playing on the exhibition title, Painting SM and Painting LA allude to problems of size in two works that actually share the same measurements. Small and large describe the size of each stroke of color, giving Painting SM a much denser, frenetic composition. Even though they share the same dimensions, palette, material and process, the two works have a very different character. In many ways, Painting SM appears larger than Painting LA, as van Arkel cleverly exploits the optical illusion various densities create. In both works, the strokes are amassed so tightly that no hint of light or the wall behind it peeks through. In fact, both works give the impression that they continue infinitely into the wall and that the part of the piece that is visible is only the slightest glimpse at enormously long bales of color and energy. Small and large then cease to have any meaning at all.

Finally, Painting LF, is comprised not of flesh tones, but of the colors that painters like Lucien Freud have used to portray flesh tones. Some of the strokes look sick and sag and droop down the piece. Others twist and turn like offal. Breasts, scrotums and foreskin are unavoidable projections, giving the piece a Freudian slip of a different sort. These colors are off, they belong to a different time. Alice Neel or Phillip Pearlstein would know what to do with them. But they also remind one of Yeezy's hyper-luxurious dystopic fantasy future now. An elastic, kinetic amalgam of flesh reaches in both directions through time. Through his sensitive material research and experimentation of form and color, van Arkel acts as a spirit guide to channel the legacy of painting and help it cross over into the clear realm.