

art

Fabian Freese at Lazy Susan Gallery (New York City)

Jonathan Goodman

Fabian Freese's short show at Lazy Susan Gallery, a small space in the Lower East Side run by a collaborative of four curators, was truly a gifted exhibition. Freese, who is German and who lives and works in Wuppertal, finished his art education in Essen in 2011. This was his first solo show in New York City. Right now he is doing extraordinarily well, with five galleries all over the world committed to his work. Recently, it has become quite clear that the idiom of contemporary art is being internationalized—there is no particularly German, French, or Italian art the way there was in earlier times, during the 19th and 20th centuries. Freese's show demonstrates this internationalism; his exhibition of small paintings, spectacularly clean and well designed, exists without particular reference to his native Germany. The works push the idea of representation into a further recognition of how cities, for example, can be overlaid with the abstractions of colored vertical stripes in an attempt to distance or even alienate—perhaps the best word for Freese's effect is the German verb *entfremden*—the viewer from his or her experience of urban life.

By now, most of us living in cities tacitly acknowledge the emotional distancing needed to maintain clarity in an environment of constant change and economic pressure. Spaces showing art in New York have become so expensive that cooperative efforts or moves to neighborhoods that are relatively difficult to access, such as the Lower East Side, are preferred. Indeed, a number of Chelsea's major spaces have set up satellite galleries in the Lower East Side; it may be that they will become the flagship sites of the galleries, once committed to Chelsea. Freese's combination of urban representation, in the form of photographs, and abstract effects document this growing estrangement between the market and the art world. His one-off monochromes, along with altered photos, display an awareness that contemporary art can restate approaches to art that took place a generation or more ago. Indeed, the variety of Freese's practice, including the minimalist paintings, suggests more than a bit of irreverence as it faces the conventional New York modernist audience, who saw the (brief) establishment of monochromatic abstraction some forty years ago. But the contrast between the old and the new is not as important as Freese's openness to materials, imageries, and interpretations. He is a gifted artist who is committed to a broad spectrum of expression, centered on imageries taken from city life.

The show, curated by On-Verge magazine editor Jill Connor, contrasted brilliantly with the often lax output of new American work. It might well be too clean and sharp for those New Yorkers raised on the casual rhetoric of abstract expressionism, but for me, Freese's esthetic is related to the earlier explorations of the Bauhaus and the movement's sense of order: the artist often prefers to compose sharp delineations of buildings and abstract patterns, which are often imposed upon the image. In *Parade 01—Disneyland Orlando* (2015), we see a parade in Disneyland, covered heavily by reddish squares and triangles and one green square in the middle. Freese has taken the animated scene of a festive

crowd and come close to caging it within a severe geometric pattern. It is an image of exuberance and restraint, figuration and nonobjectivity. Here Freese puts forth his concept of a dual design, based on external reality and abstraction. The scheme of the squares and rectangles distances us from the apparently innocent play of the parade performers and bystanders. This raises our awareness of the artificiality of the parade, occurring within the sterile paradise of Disneyland—it is the visual equivalent of one of Brecht's characters turning to speak directly to the audience so as to break through the wall of disbelief.

But Freese goes even further in his distancing of the real with more or less monochromatic paintings. In the spray paint-on-canvas work *Green on Faded Dark Blue and Pink* (2015), he offers a treatment of the color pink, which merges on the right with a dark blue that gradually becomes darker, leading to a thin line of green on the right edge. This work is pretty much a pure version of color, minimal in its effect. As an image, it could not be further from the Disneyland piece, for its reference is not contemporary but historical, going back to the time, mostly in the 1960s and slightly before then, when paint was revered for its own sake. It might seem hard to justify the motive behind such a painting—why would Freese jump to the past when his sensibility is so clearly new? Perhaps it is the gap, in time and style, that he wants to refer to. In any case, the abstraction is a beautiful painting, proving that no matter what an artist's intentions may be, it is the final product that convinces us of his worth. Freese's efforts convey this notion very well indeed.

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