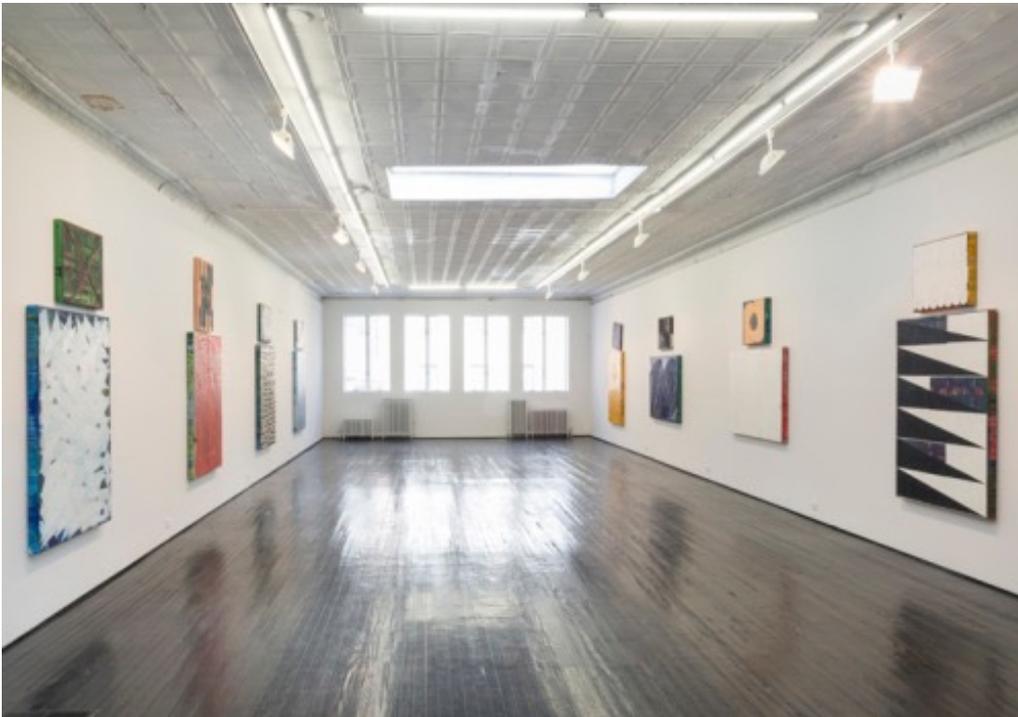


People painting people, abstractly

Jacin Giordano

While there were plenty of great shows on exhibit this past weekend in the LES and Chelsea, two painting shows really stood out to me—Clara Brommann at Nicelle Beauchene and Mark Grotjahn at Anton Kern. Both artists seem intent on proving that there is still room for invention when it comes to abstract figuration. They each approach figurative painting with a critical eye and full awareness of the history of abstract painting; fusing the two genres with a sly sense of humor and a celebration of paint's physicality.

Clara Brommann's exhibit *Headpaintings*, consists of eighteen oil paintings shown as nine vertical diptychs. In each diptych one small painting representing a head hangs atop a larger painting, which represents the body.



While Brommann's interest in depicting the human form through abstraction is clear, she seems equally interested in dissecting the history of abstract painting itself. She is utilizing as many tools and tricks as she can find—beautiful patterning, thick luscious layers of paint, thinned peeled portion of exposed canvas, hard edge taping, scraping and accumulation. The accumulation of material and style within her paintings evoke the heavy gravity of history and her use of diptych appears to be the only way that these paintings can support the weight of one another.



HELAU, 2015 Oil on canvas, 20" x 23 3/4" and 55" x 39 1/2"

In one painting titled *Helau*, the head of the diptych is tilted at a diagonal as if the pressure of painting's history is too much to bear and so the figure gives in with a quiet shrug. The title *Helau* translates as a greeting during the festivities of German Carnival and has associations with warning off evil spirits. In the case of Brommann's paintings, this coy tilt of the head throws off the expected rhythm of the exhibition and at the same time allows for any perceived weight to fall by the wayside.



DICKICHT, 2015 Oil on Canvas, 20" x 23 3/4" and 55" x 39 1/2"

Mark Grotjahn's exhibit *Painted Sculpture* is made up of about eight or nine works. As the gallery's press release describes: "In a radical act of transformation, Grotjahn takes the most casual throwaway material, the cardboard box, and turns it into the most solid and noble of art mediums: the pedestal-mounted bronze sculpture. With their rough cutouts for eyes and mouths, glued-on cardboard tubes and toilet paper rolls for pipe-like noses, and ripped cardboard surfaces for texture and definition, these assemblages resemble primitive, child-like masks" (press release from Anton Kern Gallery)



INSTALLATION: PAINTED SCULPTURE

I've become tired of hearing about the overused idea of blurring the line between painting and sculpture, as if that adds anything to either form. Having said that, though, Grotjahn's new work is truly refreshing in its ability to draw from equal parts painting and sculpture.

Perhaps one of the main reasons Grotjahn is successful in his attempt is because of how spatially shallow the works are. They seem to have the exact depth of a stretched canvas. These "paintings" don't hang on the wall, however, they are freestanding atop of a pedestal.

The only part of their form that seems to occupy a significant amount of deep space are the cartoonishly long "noses," smack dab in the middle of the mask-like faces. The noses protrude at exactly head level to the viewer, so as one approaches the works you run the risk of being "poked" by the fully erect Pinocchio-esque facial feature. The sexual overtones are clearly intentional here...perhaps even as a reference to the abstract expressionistic fashion in which Grotjahn is applying paint. Pours, globs and strokes of paint standing in for postcoital emission? The long nose (or sometimes noses) on each piece certainly brings Pinocchio to mind (after several of his lies have been discovered).

One has to wonder then, what is the lie here? Or perhaps more accurately, what is the revelation here? I'm reminded of a quote from Pierre Bonnard that I will, no doubt, inaccurately summarize here as: a painting is made of a thousand small lies that come together to form a single truth.