ARTFORUM

Zak Prekop

Suzanne Hudson · 2012

Zak Prekop, Two Colors, 2012, oil and paper on canvas, 72 x 48″.

The works in Zak Prekop’s second show at Harris Lieberman—sixteen canvases limited to a range of white, black, cobalt, tan, and yellow—may at first register as positively anodyne, yet they instantiate surprisingly nuanced optical and material effects. Operating within parameters he sets for himself (and through which, by extension, he seems to allegorize the notion of possibility as manifested therein), Prekop works with limited implements and strategies. Many of the paintings employ collage: namely, brown paper bags, dismembered and splayed across a support, or heavy paper, affixed to the reverse side of a canvas so that it shows up on the face as subtle relief. Prekop also relishes the palette knife, using it to produce seemingly factureless expanses of unmodulated color, which sometimes become the ground for patterns applied with a stencil. Exemplary in this regard is Untitled (Blue and Dark Blue), 2012, in which stenciled diagonal and vertical lines achieve a cockeyed grid interrupted by painted and collaged monochromatic segments set adrift across the image.

Despite his attention to process, Prekop undermines the long-cherished modernist pretension to utter referential facticity; self-reflexivity need not imply transparency. Indeed, most works, even when we have a rough sense of their genesis, do not readily disclose the means of their making. (Prekop’s use of the palette knife exemplifies a process that conceals itself.) Untitled Transparency, 2011, for instance, builds from physical incidents on both sides of the unpainted linen, and further supplies illusionistic

signs conjuring the support, such as painted stretcher bars that echo the real thing. There are also red lines obscured by smears of tan paint that nevertheless appear unbroken, as Prekop has affixed strips of paper to the rear of the canvas that extend them across regions where they are hidden. The difficulty one has parsing the works is part and parcel of why we keep looking at them. It took me a while to understand Four Colors, 2012, too— perhaps in part because of the canny title. It turns out that Prekop slathered black paint on a canvas, flipped the canvas over and restretched it, and used the amorphous stain that appeared on the opposite side as the basis for a composition in pastel hues, as though a call and response to the Rorschach that occasioned it.

Untitled Collage (with Black Ground), 2012, is marginally more forthcoming: Prekop attached a large piece of paper to the rear of the canvas and excavated a semicircle that rotates away from the sheet, with the cutout assuming a void. the work's staging of positive and negative space is also present elsewhere, due to consequences of layering and choices of palette. Two Colors, 2012, a case in point, quivers with the intense interplay of equally high-pitched yellow and white. Since the yellow paint trails off—it is intermittently thick and thin—it appears, in some places, to mix with the white. Neither color can therefore serve as stable figure against which to posit a ground. Which is to suggest that Prekop's sensitivity to the aleatory (as coincident with and as a precondition for the contingency of his audience's perceptual experience) keeps his experiments from becoming pedantic exercises—rote compositions coming together as a signature style— or a kind of anesthetized formalism. They bristle with the prospect of emergence and effacement, and take risks in the hopes of reward.

—Suzanne Hudson