



ART REVIEW: Deininger Paintings Form Eloquent Story at Marianne Boesky Gallery

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by Charles A. Riley II

Were my office or apartment closer to Chelsea, I would make it a point to drop in a few times on the current Marianne Boesky Gallery exhibition of paintings by Svenja Deininger, Viennese sorceress of subtlety, if only to confirm the long-term appeal of its initially seductive first impression.

The title of the show, “Untitled/Head,” is a nod to the title used by Philip Guston for several paintings made during his shift from abstraction to “the thing” in the late 1960s. This exhibition of a dozen abstract paintings—in a suave palette of slate blues, burgundy, chartreuse and other distinctive tones—is eloquent on so many levels that neither the images posted with this review nor the scant background information available in English about the artist can do it justice.



Installation view: Svenja Deininger, October 17- November 14, 2015 Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York © Svenja Deininger Photo
Credit: Jason Wyche

Despite the “American” color-field look of the artist’s work as glimpsed from the street through the glass door, Deininger’s aesthetic is European through and through. Her exhibition track record starts in Essen and Cologne in 2002 and runs through Berlin, Vienna (annually), Dusseldorf, Brussels and Rome. This is her second New York show, after being included in group shows in Chicago and Ann Arbor. She was born in Vienna in 1974 and maintains her studio there. She studied at the Kunstakademie Dusseldorf under Albert Oehlen and then at the Kunstakademie Munster. The critical literature written in English to augment these biographical details is as spare as her geometry.

The generously proportioned white rooms of the Boesky Gallery’s Chelsea space are part of the deliberately architectural propositions made by the works, all of them untitled and made this year. “My work can be like a sentence,” the artist told an interviewer last year. “It is about combining single paintings in a space like there are single words in a sentence, and finally a story.” The syntax and pacing of this elegantly hung exhibition includes not just the polysyllabic nouns of the large

verticals (90½ by 59 inches) but small-scale conjunctions of shaped canvases (a mere 11 by 8¼ inches in one case).



Installation view: Svenja Deininger, October 17- November 14, 2015 Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York © Svenja Deininger Photo Credit: Jason Wyche

The undulating red figure of one of the most prominent pieces in the series, projecting like a Barnett Newman field but graced with swaying hips reminiscent of a blue nude cutout by Henri Matisse, veers toward and away from the medial axis of the work, squeezing a sliver of pale blue for all it is worth. At the margins, a beaded vertical of that red toys with one of the many shades of white that offer a *continuo* to the paintings as well as their relation to the space.



“Untitled” by Svenja Deininger, 2015. Oil on canvas, 90 1/2 x 59 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. (c) Svenja Deininger. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Deininger’s whites would take a separate essay to anatomize—chalk, plaster, cream and a range of greys suffuse their plaster-like surfaces. One piece, a more complex vertical statement, uses veils of browns and blacks alongside a shifting sequence of blue shapes. These shapes are locked together in a way that reminded me of the “marriage of contours” pioneered by Le Corbusier in his Purist still lifes, except that these skirt the issue of abstraction and figuration by functioning as both. The most basic of the large verticals surrounds a field of greenish-mustard (I thought of Robert Mangold’s zones of burnt umber) in a meandering black line, outside which two delicately calibrated whites filled the right margin.



“Untitled” by Svenja Deininger, 2015. Oil on canvas, 90 1/2 x 59 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. (c) Svenja Deininger. Photo: Matt Grubb.

The level of the work that defies reproduction in an image is its three-dimensionality. One of the large vertical paintings in the Boesky exhibition builds white forms and an undulating black line into a box, the glossy black border of the raised edge defining fields of white and grey.



"Untitled" by Svenja Deininger, 2015. Oil on canvas, 80 1/4 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. (c) Svenja Deininger. Photo: Matt Grubb.

One of the simplest works appears to be a tripartite array of an undulating corner form with a pale blue upper right corner bounded by a straight diagonal. On closer inspection, layers within the forms create the crystalline interiors of a Lyonel Feininger seascape. Absorbed in the clean arabesques carved by those interior edges, tracing the stepwise ascent from one level to another even within a color field, I craved a tiny insight into the studio practice that produced them. Did she cut thin wooden or cardboard guides or were there thick paper cutouts involved?



"Untitled" by Svenja Deininger, 2015. Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York. (c) Svenja Deininger. Photo: Matt Grubb.

Customarily in situations like this the benighted viewer turns to a press release. As a tour guide, I have resorted many times to a one-pager mercifully left at the desk, desperate for clues to the encoded meanings of (usually installation) works that I am supposed to "explain" to the people trailing me from stop to stop. The press release in this case was a model of disingenuous tact, waving a rhetorical wand in the direction of the painter's secret mystique: "She begins with layers of base coats and one abstract form—sometimes a shadow, other times a memory—proceeding almost magically, often without visual brushstrokes or gestural styles." We're back in Oz; no real clues there.

So I approached the desk at the gallery, where the smile greeting my query was not unfriendly. "You know," I was told, "it's just really solid technique." Chastened and subdued, I pulled the brim of my fedora down on my furrowed brow and headed back east to my lonely office in the October drizzle.

BASIC FACTS: “Svenja Deininger: Untitled/Head” remains on view through November 14, 2015.

Marianne Boesky Gallery is located at 509 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011.
212-680-9889, www.boeskygallery.com.

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