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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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GUNTHER FÖRG

Lead Paintings

by David Rhodes

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When Günther Förg's monochrome paintings first appeared during the mid-1970s, they seemed to be, at least in part, a rejection of the expressionist and figurative tendencies of *Das Neue Wilden* (The New Wild) German painting emerging during those years. He experimented with using wood as well as different metals including copper and lead, but by the early 1980s, Förg's increasing interest in photography led him to abandon painting altogether. On returning to painting later in the 1980s Förg had, as he once said, "come full circle." The nine acrylic paintings on lead that comprise his recent exhibition at Skarstedt Gallery date from between 1986 and 1990, exactly the time of this return to painting and to using metal as a surface. Förg had been an admirer of both Edvard Munch and later Georg Baselitz, and described the monochromes he made in the 1980s as an "attempt to explore a contradictory clarity of form with an expressionist handling." This synthesis of two apparently opposed approaches is central to the paintings presented in this exhibition.

The paintings are presented over two floors and in three galleries. In some, the lead is only visible at the sides, acting as a ground, while in others it is exposed as a constituent part of the composition. In either circumstance the lead adds a heaviness and density to the color, especially in those cases where the exposed lead was left outside in the rain before being used and thus exhibits the effects of oxidization. Förg has commented on this—together with marks and scratches already present on the surface—as it provided him with something to work with or against in starting the painting. Two colors cover the entire surface of "Untitled"(1986), the earliest



painting here—a cobalt green bar at the upper edge and a cobalt blue beneath. The marine color and horizon line recall sea and sky, while the horizontal brushwork—the paint applied directly on the surface of the lead sheet— brings to mind the movement of water.

“Untitled”(1990) is architecturally associative. A vertical rectangle of exposed lead extends from top to bottom on the right side whilst a dark red and a white segment are stacked on the left. There is an illusion of looking past one side or the other into a distance. The vertical rectangle appears to be like the side of a building or frame of a window and the horizontal where the lower dark red meets the upper white like a view out onto the landscape. Förg goes beyond the rhetoric of high modernism and actively combines, or reintroduces, directly associative attributes. The vertical “Untitled”(1990), in the street facing, upstairs gallery, at 110 ¼ by 63 inches, comprises two vertical white bars that clearly reference the “zips” of Barnett Newman. The extent to which the lead surface is reworked, perhaps with a water



Gunter Förg, “Untitled,” 1990. Acrylic and lead on wood. © Estate of Gunter Förg. Courtesy of Skarstedt, New York.

loaded brush—the water left to oxidize—is such that what would be simply a ground becomes an assertively articulated area. This gestural space is the articulation of a response to sensations of space and scale. Once established in the painting, the viewer may respond to this also. Anyone seeing this exhibition will not fail to make the connection between these paintings and the forms used by both Blinky Palermo and Ellsworth Kelly. For Förg, as for Palermo, American abstraction was important and in particular, one can also add Newman—the vertical “zips,” variegated edges and large scale—to this context.

Neither quotation nor critique of originality is intended in any of Förg’s work, whether it be his sculptures, photographs, or here in these paintings. The paintings



amount to synthesis that allows for a great deal of freedom and insofar as they combine the stylistic elements of geometry and expressionism, it is the sensuality of painting that is foremost and never eschewed. To quote Förg in 1997: “Really, painting should be sexy. It should be sensual. These are things that will always escape the concept. I think painting is a resilient practice; if you look through the history of painting it doesn’t change so much and we always see it in the present. It is still now.”