ARTFORUM

Zak Prekop

Jacob Proctor · 2015



Zak Prekop, Transparency with Five Colors, 2014, oil on muslin, 96 × 64″.

The nine new paintings in Zak Prekop’s third solo exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery carry on the artist’s idiosyncratic project of process-based abstraction. Notably absent were the collaged paper elements and painted references to stretcher bars that had become familiar motifs in the artist’s recent work. This is not to say that Prekop has abandoned his recto/verso investigations, however. The majority of the paintings in the show were begun by applying passages of paint to one side of the canvas—or, in most cases, muslin—which Prekop then turned over and restretched so that the paint is seen through the semitransparent fabric. These nonreferential forms provide the starting point for a series of complex, multilayered compositions that collapse, or at least complicate, distinctions between surface and support, foreground and background, presence and absence.

In the large-format Transparency with Five Colors (all works 2014), for example, Prekop first laid down a large swath of red paint, followed by a solid layer of black covering the back of the painting’s stretched muslin. Visible through the support’s weave, the Rothko-esque field of red hovers in the top third of the composition. On the work’s recto, a series of deep-red gestural marks are almost but not quite obscured, first by a layer of white, and then, where they overlap the red on the verso, by an additional layer of very pale blue paint, leaving thin, brushy rims of red visible around the shapes’ carefully contoured edges. A similar game is played in Transparency with Green and Blue, with the

addition of an overlaid pattern of tiny blue squares. Interruptions in their otherwise regular array imply that the dotted lines somehow sit simultaneously in the painting's extreme foreground and its extreme background, at once in front of and behind the picture plane. In both paintings, but especially in the latter, the areas of "raw" muslin appear to move forward visually, while the passages of white paint paradoxically retreat, effectively punching perceptual holes in the painting.

Deciphering Two Grids (Three Reds) and Two Grids (Red with Green) proves more challenging. In each, two intersecting diagonal grids weave in and out of each other while overlapping underpainted abstract forms. Due in part to the grids' chromatic similarity to each other, and in part to the topographic complexity of the other forms with which they also intersect, it is surprisingly difficult to keep their modules straight. Rather than simply intersecting, these matrices appear almost to shift or slide back and forth as the eye scans the painting's surface. If the precision of Prekop's virtuosic paint-handling and his resolutely analog choice of materials ground him firmly in a tradition that ties painting to modernist experiments in optics and perception, the work's visual effects additionally bring it into dialogue with processes associated with more contemporary media—for example, video-signal interlacing, which combines two temporally distinct images or "fields" of the same video frame in order to double the perceived frame rate without increasing bandwidth; or the use of layers and masking in digitalimage-editing software. At stake in each is the question of simultaneity.

—Jacob Proctor