



STAGE LEFT

Megan Francis Sullivan on Birgit Megerle at Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna

If an imaginary line could be traced around three outer elements of this exhibition – a color photo at the entry, a patchwork curtain on the back wall, and a text that occupies the page of a press release – what happens in between is definitely a painting show. By preserving the conventions of painting (a series in oil on linen, in consistent sizes, hung flat on the wall, with proper distance between works), the installation permitted theatrical cues to move in and out, setting a platform for what was also outside of it.

"Suite" was the show's title, and the introductory image, "Untitled (Invitation)," (all works

2015) offered a bright tone for entering the space, a photographic print of a hand holding a musical triangle against a blue sky dotted with sunlit clouds. The instrument's shape pointed to the first canvas, a geometric composition of overlapping triangles, set aglow by the use of contrasting and complementary colors. The layering of pastels in washy but careful strokes induced a sense of hovering, as one's eyes reached for a handrail of space and dimension, but were instead kept adrift. On an adjacent wall was a variation of the composition, this time a bit squatter and with different colors. Titled, respectively, "Suite I (after Bruch)" and "Suite II (after Bruch)," the paintings performed something of a bait and switch: they act visually as abstract paintings,



while referring specifically to compositions of the American painter Robin Bruch, whose 1970s–80s drippy geometric canvases and works on paper have recently appeared in various contemporary contexts. This recognition brings a realization of looking at a painting of a painting, allowing complexities of authorship and viewership to emerge. For one, Bruch’s work belongs not to a canon but to a more sideline or specialized knowledge. Part of a ’70s New York scene, she showed in contexts such as Klaus Kertess’s Bykert Gallery, which also exhibited Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, and Bill Bollinger. After Bruch left New York in the nineties (entering relative obscurity), her work could only be found in the odd reference.¹ This changed in 2012, however, when, via a show

at Berlin’s Mathew Gallery, her painting was reintroduced to a broader public.

In execution, Megerle’s paintings are as alien to Bruch’s as they are proximate; where Bruch’s brush is jocular and gestural, Megerle’s is floaty and precise: straight lines and rounded edges appear almost sci-fi. Paintings based on other paintings have a firm tradition in art history: homage, study, parody, fetish. Most often, such canvases are made after renowned works, and in some way aim to either affirm or critique established authority. What is special in Megerle’s use of this operation is that she sourced a ‘re-emerging’² artist. In turn, this accelerated, almost spontaneous³ playback acts to destabilize the security of historical narrative. Perhaps in paint-



Birgit Megerle, "Suite II (after Bruch)," 2015

ing "Bruch," Megerle also makes a portrait of what is disseminal?⁴

Hung between the Bruch-inspired works another painting, "Living Currencies," showed the head and bust of a woman in a pose of concentration, looking intently but serenely through large spectacles to an unseen audience. The figure, rendered in mostly grey tones, is set within a sea of colored paint marks that swirl in from the background and carry over, as a few highlights, into the hair and skin. Many would recognize the figure's face as that of Christine Lagarde, current managing director of the International Monetary Fund. Part of Lagarde's job is to oversee the IMF's research of worldwide social demographics, and to make prognoses about future economic trends and developments. She is a cool and stylish spokesman who proposes that advances towards gender equality be linked to an urgent economic imperative.⁵ The reach of ethical conviction is limited, she has argued; real change can only arrive through market viability. While writing this text I was forwarded some recent facts and

figures on the art market⁶ which show that the art world, too, is ripe with such market potential.

"Beauty Fields," portraying another female media figure (Catherine Deneuve), quite rascally avoids merely celebrating the figure or inverting the image cult around her. Instead, taking a retro publicity photo as starting point, Megerle uses drably contrasting colors and tonal relationships to unravel both the figure and its ground. My first impulse was to find this work unappealing: an image of an outdated femininity in glum colors did not grant immediate pleasure. But such structural disruption serves to short-circuit immediate consumption or co-optation. As with the Bruch-inspired paintings, the viewer is left suspended in doubt: should he or she like these portraits or feel slighted by them? This quality is more often celebrated in the work of artists like Thomas Eggerer⁷ or even Felix Vallotton.⁸ Not forgetting Deneuve's famous role as an afternoon-only prostitute in the film "Belle du Jour" (her self-destructive performance contained its own transcendence of bourgeois domesticity), this

painting also connects an idea of “currency” to agency: an actor’s asset is an ability to switch roles.

Hanging opposite, the salutary work “Ante-chambre” was like a stage where different visual languages meet: an image of a young man, comic figures from the French cartoonist Claire Bretécher, floating blue symbols. The translucency of the paint layers made the images seem like they could be wiped away; Megerle’s easy and skilled application became its own platform. (Check out the way the collar of the young man has been rendered – the rounded curves are as fresh as a cartoon cat’s paw.)

Around the wall to the farthest part of the space was a playful screen, “New Theater Backdrop I,” where scenography and pictorialism entwined. A backdrop infers that action will take place before it, but this painting is also an artifact of past action; as its title suggests, it had been a stage setting at Berlin’s New Theater for the play “Hotel Moon.” The patina of place and social milieu is an essential aspect of all painting, part of its currency, and in the context of this show became yet another meta-cue that there is more to what we see than is on display.

Across from this work hung a final curtain, as if declaring “the end” to the ensemble, while suggesting the show itself be perceived as stage. What occurs within constructs a sort of compressed field of reference. Perhaps related to what is described in the exhibition text by Francesca Lacatena as “colloquial,” a conversational style – like a dialect – can embody ambivalence toward the authority of signs, can assert the potential mutability of values.

Birgit Megerle, “Suite,” Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna, April 30–June 6, 2015.

Notes

- 1 See David Reed, “Exchange,” in: *Blinky Palermo: To the People of New York City*, ed. by Lynne Cooke/Anne Rorimer/Pia Gottschaller, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 2008, pp. 111–129. This essay is not centered on a specific artist but describes a context in New York that Palermo encountered, and includes a photo of Bruch’s studio.
- 2 A genre of the twenty-first century, particularly some women artists of the 1960s and 1970s whose work was shown at the time, somehow “forgotten,” and then exhibited now within contemporary art contexts: see Sylvia Sleigh, Channa Horwitz, Lee Lozano, Carol Rama, Alina Szapocznikow, Margaret Harrison, Simone Forti, Judith Bernstein to name a few.
- 3 Interestingly, another younger artist Jana Euler’s “Men painted with two eyes (Leif)” (2014) clearly references Sylvia Sleigh’s “Paul Rosano Reclining” (1974), which was on the cover of *Frieze*, March, 2013.
- 4 In the book “Art History After Sherrie Levine” (Oakland 2011), Howard Singerman suggests the term referring to Derrida’s “Dissemination”: “a text about the impossibility of origins and beginnings” (p. 16).
- 5 See “The Economic Power of Women’s Empowerment,” keynote speech by Christine Lagarde, Managing Director, International Monetary Fund, Tokyo, September 12, 2014, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/speeches/2014/091214.htm>.
- 6 Maura Reilly, “Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes,” <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/26/taking-the-measure-of-sexism-facts-figures-and-fixes/>.
- 7 “I think I am avoiding consistency, harmony, or authenticity to enforce ambivalence and doubt.” Thomas Eggerer in: “A Fragile Artificiality,” interview with John Kelsey, *Mousse*, 41, 2014, pp. 154–161.
- 8 I had to remember a show of Felix Vallotton paintings at Michael Werner in New York in 2010, where I felt a similar unease. From the press text: “Félix Vallotton’s paintings do not give pleasure easily. In portraiture he is not a flashy virtuoso and his nudes are not ‘sexy’, at least not in any typical fashion.”