

## Mark Hagen

### CHINA ART OBJECTS GALLERIES

"Paleo Diet," the title of Mark Hagen's second solo exhibition at China Art Objects, plays on notions of primitivism from a very up-to-date perspective whereby only that which is most remote from the present moment holds out any promise of health. But in attempting to go back to basics, to ancient grains and bygone methods of cultivation and food preparation, we find ourselves all the more estranged from the natural world that we've gradually ruined. One registered the fraught relationship between our environment and ourselves immediately upon entering the gallery, thanks to the masking of the skylights with a film that split the sun's increasingly punishing rays into spectrums of color, at once sublime and ominous, that traveled through the space over the course of the day.

Dominating the gallery's first room was *The Alhambra*, 2013, a massive, canopy-like construction that occupied an uneasy zone between abstract sculpture and architectural intervention. This work is pieced together from regular interlocking units according to the endlessly adaptable logic of the space-frame templates developed by speculative hippie-era figures such as Yona Friedman and Constant in the aim of democratizing the architecture of dwellings. Today, however, the idea that such products of industrial standardization could possibly serve the expressive desires of the individual consumer seems somewhat dubious. Appropriately, then, the sleekly modular *Alhambra* greeted visitors in much the same manner as the frivolous decor of the hotel lobby or corporate boardroom, while simultaneously evoking the utterly unyielding post-and-lintel structure of prehistoric sites like Stonehenge.

Three smaller space-frame pillars, each titled *Ramada*, 2013, occupied the gallery's second room. Poised somewhere between Constructivist kiosks and cell-phone towers, these were partly sprayed with a rough, gray-brown substance consisting mainly of cement and pulped paper, a recipe printed in the pages of the *Y2K Survival Handbook*—which was itself thrown into the mix—as a home-construction tip for



View of "Mark Hagen," 2013.

end times. Once this coating is applied to the pristine lines of the underlying aluminum-and-steel skeleton, its excremental quality is thrown into sharp relief, and the tension between these two elements reflects Hagen's abiding interest in the often abysmal limits of techno-scientific positivism right alongside those of its aesthetic equivalents.

In particular, Hagen's works speak to the postwar period, especially the 1960s, when the modernist time line began to unravel. His grayscale paintings, six shown here, nod to the interim point between the fulfillment and betrayal of an artistic program given to radical reduction and the pursuit of objective autonomy. As Clement Greenberg, among others, cautioned, the work that has nothing left to show us but the stuff it is made of constitutes a dead end for advanced art, and Hagen plays out this dismal scenario to the point of parody by painting his monochromes back to front. He pushes acrylic paint through lengths of burlap into underlying arrangements of tiles, electrical tape, and plastic sheeting whose outlines are then topographically imprinted on the work's surface. Once the paint dries and this bric-a-brac is removed, the resulting compositions appear as ghost images, haunting the gross materiality of the underlying support with faintly shimmering allusions to a history of geometric abstraction. The willful blindness of Hagen's process carries allegorical implications: Turned toward the painting's backside in the process of making it, he enables the dyspeptic resurgence of those parts of the medium's past that have not been fully digested.

These ingeniously executed objects display an undeniable compositional integrity that one could easily appreciate in its own formal right were it not so alarmingly layered with historical reference. Also included was a stack of small polished cubes made of obsidian, which conflate the cool look of Minimalist sculpture with volcanic activity. Intimations of disaster abound, and yet, as Hagen well knows, the wreckage of failed utopias always becomes fertile ground on which to seek the next frontier. Every assault on a prior order of things also gives rise to alternate configurations, whether pragmatic (countercultural), eccentric (subcultural), or outright delusional (acultural). Hagen's newly made works double as recycled ruins, together constituting an archaeology of a future that might still be redeemed by the mud from which it is drawn.

—Jan Tumlir