ALMINE RECH

Zio Ziegler
Reverse Paintings

Sep 12 — Oct 31, 2024 | Brussels

Almine Rech Brussels is pleased to present *Reverse Paintings*, Zio Ziegler's second solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from September 12 to October 31, 2024.

When thinking of time, we often think of a timeline and focus either on planning the future or reflecting on the past, rarely considering the present. Similarly, when contemplating our lifetime, our viewpoint considers the endless fractals of decades, days, and seconds without understanding the fixed point, its impending end. Perhaps our brains are wired to the laws of thermodynamics, specifically entropy, so we're incapable of fully comprehending such a terminal point. And without an exact moment, looking at things in reverse is virtually impossible. However, art provides a rare opportunity to bend such a viewpoint. By compressing our ways into artifacts, art allows us to see our decisions cataloged and examine the trend lines and choices made over time.

An example of such a perspective is Piet Mondrian and his groundbreaking trajectory. Looking at his most iconic works, one wouldn't consider the sacrifices required to achieve that simplicity. Yet, looking at a lifetime of work in reverse, we can almost distinguish each deliberate decision - every trimming of a branch, doubling down on a motif, and reduction of a hue that allowed the ultimate simplicity of form to be achieved. So, however surprising, it makes all the sense that Zio Ziegler cites Mondrian as a major influence for his Reverse Paintings, a series of works comprised entirely of sacrifices in aesthetics, labor, or anything else extraneous to the essential form.

Over the last decade, I've witnessed Zio Ziegler's practice evolving from tightly rendered gouache paintings to gigantic murals, from bronze sculptures to florid maximalist panels. Continuously letting each in sequence give way to the next evolution of form, Ziegler's 'reverse paintings' feel like a logical continuation of this movement. They are made through indulgence and then carved into being with restraint as if building the temple to destroy the idol. And if art intends to mirror nature, the sacrifice could be a sign of bounty, especially knowing that nature favors simplicity through evolution. In that sense, the reduction, editing, and cutting of form accelerates the evolutionary journey of simplification. With shards of form echoing through layers of heavy oil paint and factions of labored moments sitting as an invisible foundation rather than a composition component, in 'Reverse Paintings', we see a giant tree cut at its core, revealing rings that resemble years.

And it's important to underline how consequential some of these sacrifices must have been, both personally and professionally. Besides perpetually and indicatively resisting fitting most labels he has been working under, one of Ziegler's qualities that struck me early on is how fearless and driven he is about his mark-making, experimenting, and producing work in general. The dense surfaces packed with tight marks or dynamic strokes with no room to breathe are an obvious testament to this. From ink-on-paper illustrations over paintings and murals to sculptures and installations, his approach keeps modifying as he searches for the right image worth making. The new loose, figurative paintings stem directly from controlled, flat surface Mandala-like compositions that at some point got interrupted with gestures. These gestures were introduced to show that the intention and the process were two different things while allowing the depiction of two sides of the narrative in one image.

Instead of following the traditional painterly modus operandi, the intention was buried in the process, underneath layers of the rummage for the right synthesis and resonance. “I'm not going after an end result, but after a process that might crystalize in a moment,” Ziegler mentions, explaining how the perception of painting moved from being tight, controlled, and obeying the laws of image-making to a new territory that feels fresh, improvisational, and way more personal and honest. The inputs developed stylistically over the last 15 years, such as precision, linework, forms, color, etc., are crucial navigation tools leading to this elusive goal. Metaphorically, while searching for a moment that is hard to repeat or recreate, he took on the role of a jazz musician improvising toward a fleeting moment of purity, balance, and harmony.

However, such an approach is not customary in a world that favors the instant and the predictable. The established, traditional painting process required follows a typical and immediate pathway - artists sketch, outline, and underpaint to build toward an ultimate near-term result. Yet, the problem with tradition is that it is repetitive, limiting, and unexciting, often optimized for creating a product. The confluence of these constraints does not allow for uncertainty or radical departures and a biodiverse layer of experiments within the commercial template. In turn, much of the maker’s personality, emotional state, or the atmosphere of their surroundings that once seeped into the work are now vacant. And the fewer anomalies exist, the less the artist can sacrifice in order to reach for simplicity. So it was Ziegler’s status as an outsider, a muralist, and a maximalist that allowed the foundation of capricious experiments to amass. What seemed fractured through a linear lens now appears as a bedrock for his new paintings when viewed in reverse. Now, when Ziegler carves into his past, the marks yield complex work that requires a painstaking, Jenga-like removal of support pillars. Familiar with reversing the framework of viewing and experiencing the artwork through creating murals in public space, the reverse paintings aim for the form that hangs on the fundamental lessons gleaned from years of exploration.

“My exploration of painting, of what strong form is, made me re-evaluate that paintings are not aesthetic - they’re emotional,” Ziegler explains, adding, “beauty and aesthetics are merely an optimal probabilistic distribution.” Since the interpretation of something so common and familiar has changed significantly, the new, almost science-backed process starts with a grand intention that keeps getting refined and refined. To some extent akin to fractal patterns highlighting the complexity and natural order in Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, the refinement occurs by adding new layers of oil stick marks, but strictly within a figurative template. Instead of a single image, an abundance of visuals, sometimes multiple paintings, end up on top of each other, pushing everything to the edge of obscurity. The repetitive layering results in material buildup, a mass of dissolved visual information filled with scars representing the moments of giving up on the idea. During this stage, Ziegler fights the tendency to hold onto the “tricks” and instead succumbs, leans in, and embraces the entropic chaos beyond rational thinking. The goal is the intangible feeling of oneness, achieved while relinquishing to the laborious technique and essentially forgetting the painting process. Such an innate approach creates an infinite web of diverging and converging paths used as the foundation for the final image, tapping into the parallel coexistence of multiple realities. It also complies with quantum mechanics theories, demonstrating that painting can exist in multiple states, like anything else in nature, until it is observed and the conscious mind forces it into a box.

From this point, the process makes an unexpected U-turn - the raw material built from their amalgamation is reverse painted to a form that defines the final picture in the vein of artists whose process involves sculpting the abundance to the essential (Terry Winters with his scientific expanding on a snippet of natural life and the repetition of examining a form or Susan Rothenberg with her dynamic compositions and bold gestural brushwork). The idea to avoid conscious decision-making and bypass the conventional dynamics and structures of the creative process comes from the ambition to harness the integrity of spontaneous, immediate gestures. As all the ad-lib layers homogenize within the same foundation - the figure - the finished work contains its untold stories, dramas, excitements, serenity, and frustrations that, although hardly visible, genuinely shape it. Similar to the way that Piet Mondrian moved from being inspired by the landscape to stripping it all back and working with a grid as the main guide, Ziegler is taking the complexity of the figure and pulling it back to the rawest, most fundamental and essential elevation of that form. Ultimately, the uncertainty and a gamble of sorts fuel the quest that manifests the fundamental aspect of human nature to keep exploring, strive for new goals, and push things further. A pursuit which Carl Rogers summarized by stating, "The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination."

- Saša Bogojev, writer and curator