ALMINE RECH

Peter Halley
Three Paintings

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Almine Rech Shanghai is pleased to present 'Three Paintings' by New York artist Peter Halley, his first solo exhibition with Almine Rech and his first exhibition in mainland China. The presentation will showcase a new series of three paintings with interrelated compositions and a shared palette based on variations on the color pink.

The exhibition is composed of three new paintings of the same theme, style, and dimension, completed in 2021. The new paintings are a continuation of the themes that have preoccupied Peter Halley for the last 30 years. Grids and windows constitute the morphology and visual motif of the composition. However, these paintings of grids and windows are neither perspectival in the classical sense, nor are they autonomous based on the discourse of modern abstraction. According to Rosalind Krauss, in the classical narrative of modernism, grids are "anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real", serving as a paradigm for the "anti-developmental, the anti-narrative, the anti-historical". But in fact, the same grids that function to resist the invasion of discourse are producing new discourses at the same time. "The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."[i] Halley's grids and windows are located precisely in the point of intersection between "negation" and "creation".

Halley's goal is not pure abstraction, nor is he interested in imitating a specific object. As a formal element, grids are windows. To be exact, Halley attempts to extract an abstract geometric structure and mathematical logic from contemporary urban life, constructing a visual model for urban living. Through this conceptualized visual model, he dissolved the binary opposition between formalism and structuralism, surface and content, opening a new dimension to perceive reality -- the interior structure is overturned and transformed into a surface, while the surface form is interiorized into a deeper, recessed structure.

In the past thirty years, Halley's work has always focused on an increasingly geometricized social space. For an artist living in a mega metropolitan city like New York, he undoubtedly has a more profound experience. For him, this kind of urban living is not that much different from imprisonment. But the more devastating "catastrophe" is the way digital networks have reprogrammed and redesigned daily life, creating a more deeply seated imprisonment. Halley's paintings portray precisely such conditions of living, one that is formalized, structurized, and digitized. Features such as mechanical, monotonous compositions, flat, hard-edged style of painting, not only highlight the abstract style of conceptualism, but they are also determined by the geometric shape of the portrayed subject. It could be a close-up of a circuit board, or a visual simulation of cybernetics, a corner of a fantastical cityscape, or the elevation of folded architecture--Halley's neon palette represents the cityscape's neon lights and its dazzling sleepless nights. However, all this undeviatingly points to captivity, control, and isolation. Just as the paintings suggest, people, the spaces they inhabit, and their social connections are rendered abstract, standardized, and homogenous.

Norbert Wiener once said: “At this point there enters an element which occurs repeatedly in the history of cybernetics... the same intellectual impulse which has led to the development of mathematical logic has, at the same time, led to the ideal or actual mechanization of processes of thought.”[ii] As such, cybernetics does not intend to produce opposition. Conversely, it “functions as a nullifier of traditional dichotomies such as material/life and animal/human by reconstructing everything as difference/information; it is the horizon where "spirit" and "human" can no longer play their privileged, a priori roles”[iii]. For Halley, differences in composition and minute color changes merely represent differences in information. This demonstrates that it is not the formal and mathematical logic of abstraction that unifies technology and humans, but rather the pervasive deviations allowed within it. And it is on this point that “art gradually becomes both the subject of control and the informational tool that exacts control on others”.

In fact, art has always played a major role since the founding of Cybernetics theory. Pamela M. Lee’s recent research reminds us that it is cybernetics and art that co-created modernist and neoliberal ideologies in the mid-twentieth century[iv]. Therefore, we can infer that when Halley was exposed to such a subject, he felt a natural kind of kinship and self-awareness. Here, what he perceived was not so much a logic of social-physical space as a constructed psychological and spiritual space. The trinity of the three (interconnected) paintings -- including the three window-grid structures in each composition -- represents the way that cybernetics has long governed over our lives and spiritual realm as a new religion and mythology. The strong light emanating from the neon colors is not only an abstracted characterization of the real world and the artist’s biological response to it; like grids and windows, it also implies the way information and geometry are being shaped as the true religion of our time -- a so-called type of diffused religion.

Overturning the dematerialization of conceptualism, “new conceptualism” reiterates the cycle of commodity fetishism found in institutional critique through re-materialization and popification -- what Krauss calls the “aesthetic object”, at the same time endowing the theory with connotations and symbolisms of religion and mythology, in the attempt to escape such a cycle. However, Halley isn’t as concerned with how to reproduce and escape this cyclical mechanism, as with asking, how could life remain life in a world that is increasingly formalized and structured, imbuing even more profound meaning into these three paintings created during the pandemic. They are telling us the neon pink and purple found in the paintings’ backgrounds, along with the neon red, yellow, blue, and green in the details, are no longer the features of a lustful city, but a declaration of love: only love can motivate life to be liberated from imperceptible imprisonment and isolation, allowing snippets of it to be connected together, and also conjure up the potentiality of life to become life again. As such, the titles of the three paintings -- *Rushed*, *Law of Attraction*, and *Loveland* -- in themselves serve as the best annotations.

- Lu Mingjun, curator, Young researcher at School of Philosophy, Fudan University

[i] Krauss, Rosalind. 1979. "Grids". October. 9: 51-64.

[ii] Wiener, Norbert, Doug Hill, and Sanjoy Mitter. 2019. Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine. Cambridge: MIT Press.

[iii] Karatani, Kojin, Sabu Kohso, and Michael Speaks. 1995. "Architecture as metaphor: language, number, money".

[iv] See Pamela M. Lee␣*Think Tank Aesthetics␣Midcentury Modernism, the Cold War, and the Neoliberal Present*␣Cambridge␣The MIT Press␣2020␣pp.71-85.