ALMINE RECH

Peter Halley
Recent Paintings

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The monographic exhibition dedicated to the work of American artist Peter Halley is a colorful breach that opens in the midst of January, countering the grayness of long winter days. Far from this, his strong and vibrant palette radiates an intense energy. One that does not fade but stands absolutely out.

Born in New York in 1953, Halley's work is a reflection of the metropolis' explosive social contrasts, a city built on an urban grid layout made of sharp angles. From this environment arises a meditation on structure, confinement, and constrained circulation. His paintings —"cells" and "conduits"— thus become metaphors for a hyperconnected but compartmentalized world where the individual inevitably maintains their isolation. Since the 1980s, Halley has developed a persistent geometric language nourished both by minimalism, the nascent digital culture of the time, and urban iconography inspired by his immediate surroundings.

Peter Halley's work appears within the lineage of the New York School and, more specifically, in the wake of abstract expressionism, which he stands in opposition to, refusing to reduce the work of art to its purely spiritual dimension. Halley constructs himself in opposition to this vision: analyzing contemporary society and its mechanisms of control through geometric abstraction. From this perspective, he explicitly engages with European theoretical currents, particularly French philosophy of the second half of the 20th century. The influence of thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Baudrillard, whom the artist acknowledges, is evident. Finding resonances with structuralism, the artist associates repetitive geometric forms with the question of control and social order through technology, architecture, and urban development.

The bond with Europe is also evident on a more formal level, in line with the research of the Italian group Memphis with whom he shares a number of inspirations and concerns that were central at that time: a rupture with modernism, the integration of a vocabulary derived from pop culture, the valorization of new industrial materials, the use of expressiveness tinged with humor, and attention to social transformations through new connectivity, situating these approaches within a common horizon.

In light of this, the heritage of Bauhaus must be mentioned- the German school and movement of the early 20th century that dissolved under the pressure of the Nazi regime, leading to their emigration to the United States. Bauhaus had already initiated a reflection on modernity, examining architecture, technology, and society while thinking about decompartmentalization. Subsequently, Josef Albers is a significant figure in this regard; teaching at Yale University prior to Peter Halley's undergraduate studies, Albers represents an ambivalent modernist legacy.

We might also identify a correspondence with the work of Lygia Clark, who developed an abstract vocabulary rooted in the constructivist tradition, analyzing social conditions particularly through questioning the relationships between body, space, and systems. In both her work and Halley's, the geometric form serves as a conceptual pattern rather than as a purely visual entity. However, Halley distinguishes himself from these references— still marked by modernism and phenomenology—an approach he never directly invokes, although it implicitly traverses all of his work. Indissociable from the graphically distinctive work of Frank Stella, Peter Halley's research continually addresses social questions through experience, placing him in continuity with minimalist artists such as Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin, and certainly in the extension of Robert Smithson's post-minimalism.

On that note, the evolution of Peter Halley's work appears distinctly: the early works from the 1980s are characterized by an extreme economy: compositions that are very silent, reduced to merely a few elements, often monochromatic. Halley designates these works as "nominal," a term that underscores their minimal, declarative dimension. From 1989 onward, these conduits and channels multiply and no longer operate in a closed circuit but rather in a totally unreasonable manner. The colors—painted with organic and fluorescent Day-Glo pigments (characteristic of the second half of the 20th century), clash, bearing witness to an artificial and over-saturated reality. More expressive, they are designated as "verbal" by the artist. An escalating progression, absolutely linked to the artist's biography, Halley consistently produces an instinctive and thus subjective process.

Amidst this evolution, the exhibition presented at Almine Rech brings together recent works produced between 2023 and 2025, reflecting a renewed dynamic: the conduits have disappeared, the chromatic surfaces expand, and the contiguous spaces push their internal limits. Thus, the symbolism of the basement, with its binary and linear connectivity, gives way to more evasive structures, and through the deployment of these works into the space, the cells seem to multiply more unsettlingly and explosively, spreading to all fields. Peter Halley appears to shift from traditional network communication, reminiscent of the early days of the Internet and emerging technologies, to a broader transmission, the immeasurable space of Artificial Intelligence, which seems to disseminate everywhere thus without limits. The works seem to have become untamed, a kind of machinery out of control, signifying a world where the structures we have produced seem to propagate autonomously, reconfiguring space and subjectivities.

Two new pieces, *White Prison* and *Purple Prison*, specifically produced for this exhibition, stand out from the set of works presented at the gallery, revealing the artist's imagination in relation to the Mediterranean setting: these two more contained works, similar to his earlier production, show up with luminous backgrounds, reminding us of the blue skies beyond the prison bars. The artist steps out of his usual landscape and invites us to experience our own environment through his theorem. Critical, without ever giving into a pessimistic vision, Peter Halley pursues a tone that is both absurd and parodic, using the association of discordant colors as a gleeful disruption.

His canvases, saturated with bright colors, oscillate between smooth and hyper-textured surfaces, painted with Roll-a-Tex - a technique that simulates the inexpensive practices of construction and reveals its artifices, 'to disguise imperfections, hiding flaws and beautifying the surface'. It is this tireless play of oppositions that makes Peter Halley's work so surprising. While he develops a vocabulary around the concept of repression and confinement, notably through the direct association of his square forms with prisons, he deliberately chooses fluorescent colors to represent them.

Halley, with humor and precision, continues to question the relationship between modernist utopia and digital reality. His radiant works convey both a plastic energy and a diagnosis of the present: that of a society where color serves to mask walls, but also to escape from them.

— Stefania Angelini, curator