

Mark Hagen

A Parliament of some things

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Mark Hagen's paintings are made by pushing black and white paint through lengths of rough burlap onto glass planes supporting sheets of wrinkled wrapping plastic, lengths of packing tape, geometric configurations of cut tile, etc. Once the paint dries, the fabric is pulled from this textured surface, taking its negative imprint on what will be its facing side. This is only a cursory overview of the process, but no matter how assiduously it is explained, it will remain baffling, and this is because these works, which we see frontally as all paintings are seen, were literally composed backwards. The artist can only predict the result to an extent—although increasingly more so over time—and this element of uncertainty is carried over to the beholder. From the point of reception, every visual effect is likewise subject to reversal, as if drawn through the hard shell of the skull, the moist folds of the brain, the charged chute of the optical nerve. To relate to vision in this embodied way is implicitly to divorce it from the phenomenal world. In other words, that which is blind in Hagen's process is also blinding, although it has everything to do with how we actually see, with how much or little, based on our physical and mental predisposition.

The gradient schemes that he favors are produced from just two tubes of paint, yet between them generate infinite variations of gray, distinct colors that cannot be told apart, that inevitably sink into the continuous experiential wash. The radiant, prismatic frames of anodized titanium that enclose this latest series of works might at first appear to supplement this experiential lack, but in actuality only serves to further expose it. As physics stands to remind us, the chromatic richness we make out there corresponds to only a minute fraction of the entire electromagnetic spectrum, and those colors included in that narrow bandwidth are then further reduced to the ones we can name. Between all color and no color, the plenitude and the void, these paintings foreground our sensory limits to suggest what exceeds them.

What we see is only what we recognize. In the words of Novalis, "the eye sees only eyes," or to put it somewhat less poetically, it sees only those parts of the world that are directed toward it, and that in a sense look back. So what of the rest? Hagen summons the model of the monochrome painting as the teleological end-point of the modernist drive toward essentializing, holistic reduction as a kind of ruin, a thing that can only reflect on totality through its absence. If it looks back, then it is with at least one eye closed, and here we may note the significance of the haptic component. Surface incongruities register visually as highlights and shadows, yet also exist as objective, protruding form. Paint is deployed as a sculptural medium in a process of casting and molding that plainly infringes on the virtual nature of the graphic or pictorial arts with the felt presence of what is actually there. This makes for a perplexing categorical hybrid, while also pointing outside art altogether, and calling up analogies to the earth's topography as well as its densely layered underworld of soil and rock, crystals and fossils. A fascination with geological form, ranging from the inchoateness of mud to perfect mineral symmetry, has played a key role in this work from the outset, and it also serves to direct attention beyond our immediate purview—in this case out into the millennia.

Hagen's paintings integrate elements of sculpture, and the same is true vice-versa. The paintings are determined as such because they hang on a wall, and the sculptures, in turn, because they stand on the floor, but both are essentially planes loaded with a mixture of visual information and material form—a kind of bas-relief. Earlier freestanding works were pieced together like masonry walls from small brick-like units of found supermarket packaging cast in concrete. These newer ones are instead cut from 4 x 8 foot sheets of honeycomb aluminum into irregularly gridded shapes with interlocking edges along which they may be rotated this way and that. Somewhat like prehistoric monuments subjected to a cubist spin, they boast a greater dimensionality, but one derived from a flatter source, and imminently collapsible back into it. As a finishing touch, these constructs are clad in thin sheets of anodized titanium, which endow them with the same shimmering rainbow effect as the aforementioned frames and thereby reinforce their painterly aspect. In this way, materials, tools and techniques are passed between a range of formats—painting and sculpture, but also product design and architecture—establishing a legible continuity between one work and the next, as well as between art and the world outside it.

Alternating between models of mechanized standardization and craft-based customization, Hagen's works highlight their production process in their finished form so as to appear before us as fragmentary and provisional instances of some larger development. Compositional patterns are repeated, but also continually varied, here inverted and there upended, with elements added or else subtracted. The guiding system and logic can only be grasped in gathering increments, as it is being composed, so to speak, on the fly. Accordingly, ideas are not imposed upon things, but are rather arrived at through negotiation, which implies compromise. The subject must occasionally cede to the will of the object and even take its side against his own. This of course is what process artists have always done, but Hagen does so somewhat differently, for here there is no pretense of releasing the object or treating more ethically, in a more ecologically sound manner, let's say. The "parliament" of his title is a contentious place, one where consensus can only be sought through a mutual probing of the black holes in our agency.