ALMINE RECH

Mark Hagen
Nude Group Therapy

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Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels

Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to present *Nude Group Therapy*, an exhibition of new paintings and sculpture by Los Angeles-based artist Mark Hagen. This is the artist's fourth solo exhibition with the gallery, and his second at our Brussels space.

Nude Group Therapy takes its title from an entry in *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, initiated in 1972 by the Union of International Associations, an NGO research institute based in Brussels, Belgium, which artfully, ambitiously and systematically attempts to catalog the woes of humanity as well as the means of alleviating them. Ever since 2016 Hagen has titled his paintings after entries from the volume devoted to "Human Potential, Transformation and Values" such as "Nude Group Therapy," which reads in part as follows:

"Group nudity and its beneficial effects have been long accepted in traditions such as Nordic sauna... Such nudity is held to increase interpersonal transparency, remove inhibitions in the area of physical contact, decrease the sense of personal isolation and estrangement, and culminate in a feeling of freedom and belongingness. Nudity strips the individual of his ego pretensions and sometimes, of his ego defences."[1]

A possible step towards alleviating the toxic masculinity endemic in society, nude group therapy speaks to the potential for human beings to come together in a non-sexualized way, to accept and be accepted by others in turn, setting aside judgement and ego and clothes at the door. Hagen mines the encyclopedia for entries such as this that resonate with his work, in which he has consistently articulated an anti-hierarchical stance, borne out of his immersion in the worlds of punk rock and activism during his youth.

Greeting you as you enter the first gallery is Hagen's newest screen sculpture, a tribute to Eileen Gray's 'brick screen' made in Paris in 1921, whose lacquered wood units happen to be very close in size and shape to Apple's titanium laptops from the early 2000s. Hagen stripped these obsolete computers down to their casings, which he then anodized in a DIY process using phosphoric acid from soft drinks and household electricity, imbuing the titanium with a brilliantly coloured patina. Titled 'Homage to Sapphic Modernity,' the work critically acknowledges Gray's sexuality, counting her amongst the lesbian artists, writers and intellectuals—including Djuna Barnes, Radclyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein—who played a leading role in shaping modernism in Paris during the interwar period. Since the great war decimated the male population, it opened up new opportunities for women in every sector of society (including the arts) and with this increased influence and visibility came increased freedom and transparency in the expression of sexuality. Accordingly, it is not just to Eileen Gray that Hagen pays homage, but to the spirit of resistance to the hegemony of patriarchal hetero-normative society embodied by those emigré women in 1920s Paris, recognizing their dissident spirit as being integral to the emergence of modernity itself.[2]

Hagen started making screen sculptures in 2010, and has described his screens as being "seen as much as seen-through, allowing and impairing vision, acting as a filter or lens that becomes visually entangled with other objects and viewers in the room." That tension between revelation and concealment is symbolically heightened in this case by his use of eviscerated laptops, since computer screens could be said to both expand and limit our perspectival horizons at the same time. The boundaries of human perception are also a salient concern in relation to the alchemical process by which Hagen transmutes liquids like Crystal Pepsi and Diet Coke into a shocking array of hues. The intensity of the voltage applied to the liquid determines the thickness of the crystals that form on the titanium, determining the angle of refraction and the color you see. However, "the color you see" is also subject to your cultural, linguistic, and physiological predisposition, and even then, the range of colors perceptible to the human eye make up less than 1% of the electromagnetic spectrum, and thus the sculpture functions as a mimetic stand-in for the viewer, a *memento mori* of human limitations and biological presets.

Accompanying the screen in the front gallery is a body of new work made through Hagen's established method of pressing paint through burlap, in which he subtly disrupts repetitious geometries through the use of cropping and the unpredictable quality of his reverse printing process. Passing from the front room to the rear, we witness an evolution in Hagen's method as we encounter his new three-dimensional relief paintings. An elaboration and intensification of Hagen's previous paintings, they are a simultaneous exploration of image and objecthood. They were inspired by the folded paper experiments conducted by Josef Albers at the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, in which Albers famously asked his students to make artworks out of nothing but paper, challenging them to let the medium's inherent characteristics shine through in the finished artwork. Hagen's process begins with the creation of full-sized folded paper objects, which the artist painstakingly pleats into three dimensional patterns, although with intentional imperfections included in the form of small creases and crumples, which serve to highlight the material qualities of paper as per the Albers assignment. Silicone molds are then made of the paper sculptures, with the silicone picking up every minute detail in the form of the paper. Matte molding paste tinted with acrylic paint is then applied into the mold in numerous thin layers (in an automotive industry technique called "in-mold" painting), which once dried, is backed with fiberglass reinforced plastic. The painting is then pulled out of the mold and fitted with an aluminum mounting and cleat armature on the back.

Beyond drawing upon the legacy of Albers, the relief paintings invite comparison with the shaped canvases of Frank Stella and the monochrome works of Ellsworth Kelly or John McCracken. However, while those artists could all be characterized by their dedication to the consistent execution of an idea, Hagen makes a point of interrupting the visual logics of his own paintings by intervening with an asynchronous touch. Whether by cropping a geometric pattern to jar the eye, or by working subtle creases into his otherwise "perfect" monochrome reliefs, Hagen consistently breaks the mold by revealing the hand of the artist. By disrupting cyclical logics with linear escape vectors, his art expresses a deep faith in the human potential for radical social evolution; such as through nude group therapy, perhaps.

[1] Union of International Associations, ed., *The Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential*, volume 2, 4th edition (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag GmbH & Co. KG: 1994) 67.

[2] Jasmine Rault, *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011) 4.