ALMINE RECH

Allegories

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In a recent interview, artist Vaughn Spann (American, b. 1992) remarked, “Abstraction maps reality.” The four monumental paintings on view, all from the series Marked Men, represent the convergence of abstraction and figuration in Spann’s art. Rendered as a grid, each panel features a prominent ‘X’ at the center of the composition. Vibrant paint—from sapphire to sky blue, crimson red, fire orange, and marigold yellow, to blush pink and emerald green—emphasize Spann’s lattice of kaleidoscopic color. A combination of pigment and housepaint, the artist works the surface of the painting on the floor of his studio, building texture withing the picture plane, and then completes the work upright on the wall.

The X serves as a stand-in for the body and represents both personal and collective experiences. Created in a variety of hues and form, the X ranges from prominently visible to camouflaged or hidden. In Spann’s paintings, the X serves as a portrait of the everyman who has been targeted in racial profiling. It reflects self as well as the unknown or anonymous person. In discussing the inspiration for the Marked Men series, Spann shared: “I was stopped and frisked for the first time while I was an undergrad student…I was walking home from studying at a friend’s house. Cops pulled me over. Four other cop cars came by. They put me against a gate, and my hands are up, split. That same gesture echoes the X. And, for me, that’s such a symbolic form, and so powerful to this contemporary moment.”

Spann’s paintings illustrate a breadth of art historical and contemporary art influences, from the colorful abstract paintings by Stanley Whitney and Brice Marden’s lyrical yet minimal canvases, to Pop art icon Andy Warhol. Although each painter offers a uniquely different approach to art making, the grid and notion of repetition or seriality unites the artists. Both a formal and narrative choice, the containment of the grid heightens the image’s meaning or allegory. In discussing his grid paintings, Whitney once remarked, “There is freedom in setting limits for one self.” Spann, greatly inspired by Whitney, builds on this sentiment and adds, “…with freedom comes responsibility.” In this gallery, Spann’s Marked Men series signifies the artist’s dedication to social activism while paying homage to art history.