

Monday, September 22nd, 2014

Our Secret: Hidden Master Painter Paul Pagk

by Adrian Dannatt

Paul Pagk: Oeuvres Récentes at Galerie Eric Dupont

September 6 through October 26, 2014

138 Rue du Temple

Paris, +33 1 44 54 04 14

Group show at (harbor) Regina Rex

Opening September 21, 2014

221 Madison Street (between Rutgers and Clinton streets)

New York, 347 460 7739

Material Way at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at the Borough of Manhattan Community College

September 30 through December 1, 2014

81 Barclay Street (at West Broadway)

New York, 212 220 8020



Paul Pagk, installation view of "Paul Pagk: Oeuvres Récentes," at Galerie Eric Dupont. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Paul Pagk.

A cult figure, a painter's painter, the critic's favorite, Paul Pagk is an artist whose import is whispered rather than shouted, a secret shared by connoisseurs, his name like a clandestine password amongst an entire younger generation now exploring abstraction. His appeal — for students, graduates, artists, and other initiates — is understandable because Pagk's work is all about doubt as well as strength, about uncertainty and perhaps even a deliberate clumsiness, the chance of the marvelous in a mistake, the freedom to make a mistake and remake it. A painting by Pagk is almost an exercise in thinking aloud. They allow us to see the artist slowly make up his mind and then shift, like a giant ocean liner changing course, leaving the rich wake of its decision trailing through blue water, the long process of composition left as a physical presence.

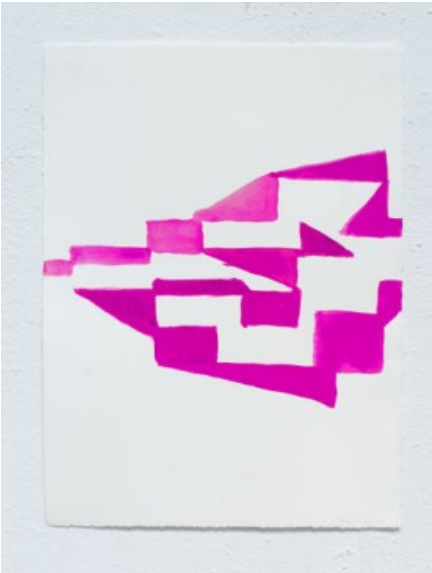
Paris has always been a center of gravity for Pagk; as an itinerant Anglo-Czech child he attended the storied École des Beaux-Arts. He was a precocious young student and went on to live the full mythic bohemian life in a squat studio worthy of Louis-Henri Murger. Thus although he has been based in downtown Manhattan for the last 25 years, and is considered a quintessential New York artist, Pagk's work somehow maintains a European resonance, a sort of Parisian "punctum," which makes his exhibition of recent work here resoundingly right. His show at the generous Galerie Eric Dupont, in the Marais, is pure Pagk: both absolutely straightforward and oddly unsettling, off-kilter. Pagk's work can also be seen in group show's at Two Two One and the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at Borough of Manhattan Community College.

The artist hung the show himself, and has laid out with great care the relationship between the works, all the contrasts and continuities in his *oeuvre*. Their procession is established with a simple sight line from the entrance right through to the large back room, which contains the biggest paintings. To arrive there one moves through a small



Paul Pagk, *Untitled Yellow, Pink and White*, 2013. Oil on linen, 70 x 70 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Paul Pagk.

antechamber with a few smaller canvases. That room is followed by a long, luminous gallery with a wall of pinned, unframed drawings, some in pink gouache, others of graphite, and others with pure pencil or ink lines. They use many of Pagk's common devices: geometric painting with a free hand and loose edges, occasionally employing reiteration of compositional elements in horizontal tiers across the picture plane. Many have diagrammatic compositions that resemble circuits or the lines of sports fields. Several of the untitled drawings have anxious hashmarks repeatedly scratched into their surface. They're set next to a small oil painting, *Untitled Yellow* (2014), and face a large painting *Untitled Yellow, Pink and White* (2013). The varied works in these two rooms can be sensed at the same time as the dramatic final chamber with its imposing presence.

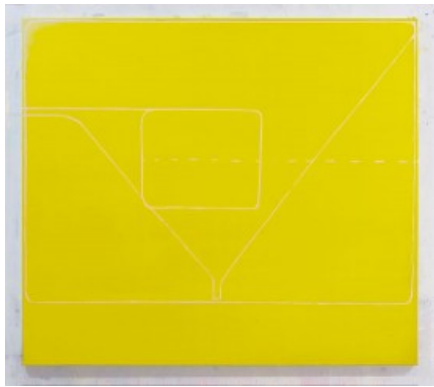


Paul Pagk, *Untitled*, 2014. Gouache on Arches, 15 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Paul Pagk.

The two rows of drawings, challengingly asymmetrical, with eight on the top row and seven on the bottom, and *Untitled Yellow*, challenge any grand gesture, with their intimacy and hesitancy, their off-hand elegance, thumb marks on the white paper — all these accidents and accents which are perhaps carefully plotted, the secret “plot lines” indeed that run through this whole exhibition from beginning to end. This sequence is in fact infinitely subtly calibrated, like a musical composition, suggesting that all of its cumulative elements are contained in the last large works, even if we can no longer recognize them under the weight of their palimpsest of paint. We can make connections, if we concentrate, between the shapes and contours, the reversible geometry of these works, as they share a clearly connected language, a grammar not of ornament but intent.

The Pagk Paradox remains: work that is both seemingly casual, gestural, spontaneous yet also deeply pondered, solemnly crafted, weighted, freighted with their own history. The last room rewards us with heavily worked, multi-tiered large oil paintings (each 65 by 74 inches). *The Meetin'* (2012), *Untitled White Yellow and Grey* (2013), *High Tide* (2012-13), and the bright fuchsia *Once Above*

Once Below (2008-14) have delicious, glossy patinas built over months from layer after layer of hand-mixed paint, decision after decision, their white scumbled lines like contrails through the sky.



Paul Pagk, *The Meetin'*, 2012. Oil on linen, 65 x 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Paul Pagk.

Pagk is not aiming for consistency but for a more challenging sort of complexity. He balances the sheer smoothness of certain surfaces (as in *Once Above Once Below* or *The Meetin'*) against the rough-hewn, clotted and dense presence of other paintings (such as *High Tide* or many small paintings like *OGLS 128*, 2011). He asks us to follow his path as if it were continuous, kept moving beyond the picture plane and extended invisibly, structurally, through the whole gallery space, a mesh of infinite, intangible perspective. Perhaps this is part of Pagk's appeal to a young generation of painters: his work seems at first rooted in a long tradition of old-school abstraction (American AbEx and European movements from Constructivism to Support-Surface) but then reveals itself to be an open system of free-floating signifiers altogether appropriate to the contemporary digital environment. Even the sheer surface of Pagk's larger paintings have something of the deep sheen, the reflective (in every sense of that word, giving space for reflection) smoothness of those screens before which many of us now spend our lives. But these are handcrafted, infinitely meticulous and altogether human screens porting the presence of all the many stages of their making.

Pagk plays between the “worked” and the provisional, mistake and certainty, the heroic and the throwaway, the build up and the letdown. As a result, his work contains a kind of layered time, a deep map of its own making, as if all the marks ever drawn between the Etch-A-Sketch of 1962 and the latest iPhone app were still extant, eternally present, tangible somewhere at some unfathomably distant, unlocatable level, within the surface of the very screen.



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