



Exhibition // Beth Letain: 'The Company She Keeps' at Peres Projects

Article by Jack Radley in Berlin
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Whose company does Beth Letain keep? She maintains the assertive markmaking of Franz Kline, with more restraint, and the calculation of Donald Judd, with greater viscosity. Letain employs an almost Albersian understanding of color relations, without spelling it out, and revels in the offkilter frivolity of Jean Arp's collage, without purporting chance. Her animated color blocking and respiring negative space evoke none other than Sadie Benning (and, accordingly, the title of her exhibition posits an implicit femininity). But in 'The Company She Keeps' at Peres Projects, Beth Letain is distinctly her own party. To say her work is derivative denies its authenticity; to say it is devoid of reference refutes the artist's command of the past.

Letain's compositions teeter, and their tantalizing cropping suggests systems that exist beyond the canvas. Although we perceive the squareness of her gestures, we cannot discern where her brushstrokes begin. The paintings encapsulate an act beyond linear time that reveals the hand of the artist, but not the trajectory of her mark; we are left to appreciate the wisdom that engenders her forms. We can divide the show into three categories: the monochromatic brushstrokes whose geometries feel almost architectural against their white background, the di-chromatic rhythms that transfigure two colors into many more, and the less-convincing striped fields whose hues overwhelm the paintings, leaving us gripping brief glimpses of negative space squeezed to the bottom of the canvases.

Letain's limited palette feels limitless; her vibrant hues of greens, reds, and blues are saturated, but distilled. In 'Track and Field' Letain establishes horizons of pink and mint that set into smokey purples. Conversely, a translucent cerulean vibrates off an opaque candy red in 'Every Other', not to create violet, but discord; we witness a cropped striped sweater whose thick, dissonant fabrics create a discomforting image. 'Boa Constrictor' manifests an intriguing labyrinth that is both confined and open, with several points of entry for the viewer. Letain leaves us negative space to insert ourselves, which makes the striped field works, with plenty of paint, feel more obtrusive than inviting.

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Beth Letain frolics in a minimalism that is messy yet emphatic. Her canvases are whimsical, but never childlike. Though geometric in form, the essence of her work is quite corporeal; as viewers, we constantly fit our bodies between her thick, gridded marks, imagining the world beyond the canvas edges. Letain's paintings are calculated and cleverly cropped; her ladders and labyrinths operate under a queer rationality. She often expends many canvases for a single painting until she finds the perfect composition. Letain, an avid reader, couples phrases from literature logged in her brain with the images she creates, once the moment of association strikes; the artist says she could never leave these paintings untitled. Though minimal, her work is not obtuse, and its sincerity strikes in masterful chords of harmonious logic.

