

Beth Letain “Dumbbell” at Peres Projects, Berlin

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Beth Letain “Dumbbell” at Peres Projects, Berlin, 2024. Courtesy: Peres Projects. Photo: Jerzy Goliszewski

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Pursuing visual experimentation, “Dumbbell” builds upon Beth Letain’s ever-expanding methodology. Faced with the boundlessness of abstraction and fascinated by the possibilities contained within limitation, both in materials and in visual composition, Letain develops idiosyncratic systems and structures as a way of charting her field of action. While drawing from a deliberately limited pictorial language, made up of interlocking geometric shapes and saturated colors bouncing off a gesso ground, her work is anti-formulaic, and it is with a certain humbleness, imbued with playfulness, that she revisits the principles of her practice.

With this new body of work, Letain stretches the scope of her practice step by step, changing one variable at a time—whether it be a color, placement, or distance between two motifs—and observing the effects produced by each variation on the balance and harmony of her compositions. In “Dumbbell,” she introduces white paint into her palette, mixing it with her pigments to add more opacity to her abstract fields of bright colors—a gradual shift away from the more translucent materials that used to be salient features of her practice. This empirical protocol unfolds through a series of “what if” queries, where each painting attempts to answer a question raised by the previous one. As if toying with a control panel, she toggles certain parameters on and off and introduces new ones, so that her work is, each time, neither quite the same, nor quite another.

“Dumbbell” sees circular shapes infiltrate her lexicon of orthogonal forms, thus bringing in a new range of visual references. In these works, her increasingly intricate compositions suddenly evoke close-ups of fragmented lettering, inviting the viewer to contemplate what lies beyond the boundaries of the canvas. The exhibition leverages the spatial qualities of Letain’s painting, the artist employing composition and color to carve a third dimension into the surface of some of her canvases, while in others, a strip of gesso ground is intentionally left visible, serving as a reminder that her architectures are essentially thin layers of paint on primed canvas.

Letain’s work is a fusion of restraint and abandon. Testing the limits of logic, geometric forms, and minimalist abstraction, she embraces errors and uncertainties. Her painted shapes sometimes appear irregular, their edges uneven, or their surface built up with vigorous brushstrokes. This lends the works an immediacy that contrasts with her otherwise meticulous and labor-intensive process, and reflects the spontaneity of her preparatory work. Each painting begins with drawings in gouache or watercolor, hastily sketched on pieces of white paper the size of an index card, a format and technique allowing for a liberating casualness and uninhibited visual research. The subsequent transition to canvas is less a transcription than a translation, as the artist strives to recapture the emotions and sensations embedded in the initial drawing.

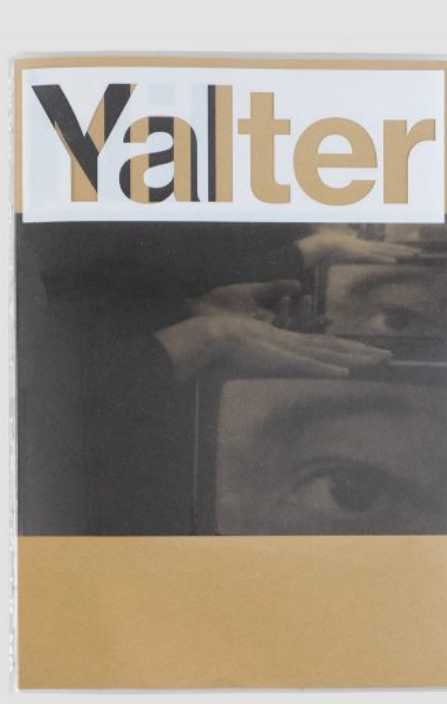
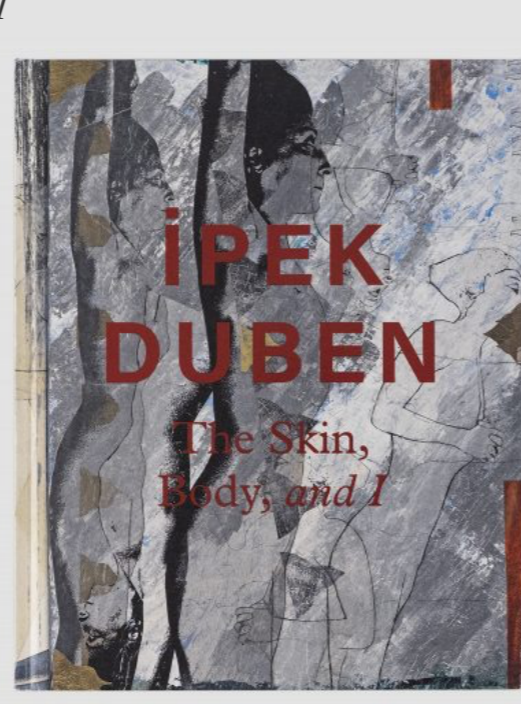
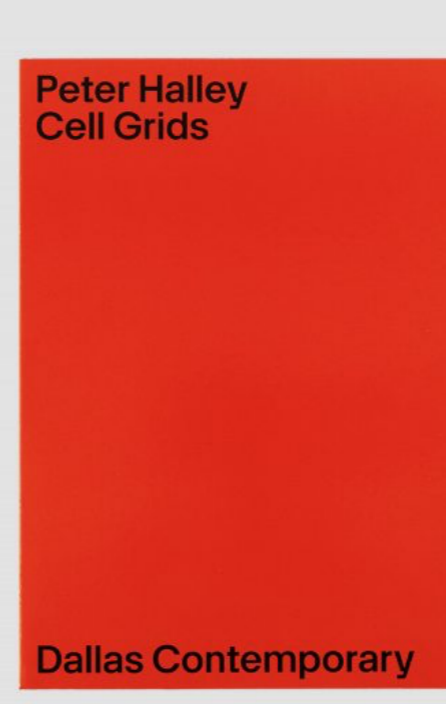

“Dumbbell” is an exercise in process, where Letain draws upon a shared vocabulary of elemental forms such as squares, stripes, bars, and circles, and reconfigures them into a unique visual poetry brimming with emotional nuances. Myriad pairings of shapes and colors burst forth, which she permutes and rearranges, shifting them around until they fall into place in a way that, just like the combination of a safe, unlocks new ways of seeing.

at Peres Projects, Berlin
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