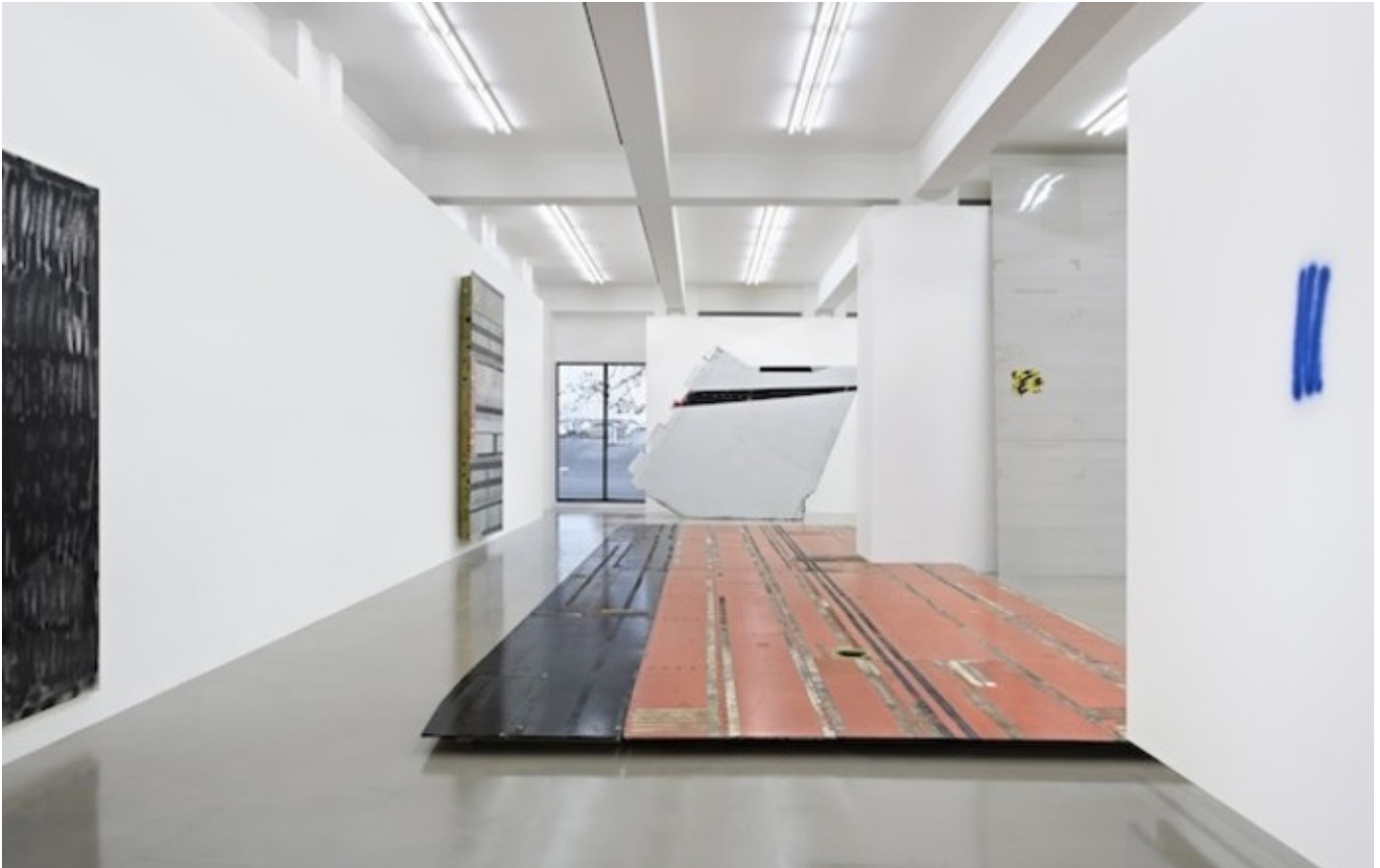


ArtReview

David Ostrowski and Michail Pirgelis: Nothing Happened

At Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, aircraft fragments and painted emptiness rub intention against accident

By **Jonathan T.D. Neil**



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The dialectic of intention and accident has been perhaps the most sustaining and nourishing paradigm for art of the modern period. Marcel Duchamp's readymades presented it in three dimensions; Jackson Pollock perfected it in two. Richard Tuttle has spent a lifetime burrowing into the poetic heart of it. And more contemporary artists, such as Tino Sehgal and Wade Guyton, have expanded its field, both institutionally and technologically. Martin Creed, for his part, has salted it with irony. The list doesn't end there.

David Ostrowski and Michail Pirgelis are firm adherents of the high modernist branch of this dialectic. No irony for them (OK, maybe a touch; their exhibition is titled *Nothing Happened*, after all), just abstraction taken to certain well-defined but nevertheless extreme limits. The two have worked and shown together for some time, yet one gets the sense that, of the two, Pirgelis has set himself the more difficult task. Working with pieces of decommissioned commercial aircraft sourced from the boneyards of the Mojave Desert (the aerospace industry's favoured cemetery), Pirgelis offers cuts of cargo-bay flooring, fuselage and tail wing that, apart from his excisions, are presented as is.

One would be mistaken to ascribe to Pirgelis's work that cliché of the readymade – that the work mines the poetics of the everyday – because few of these materials will be familiar to anyone outside of an airline's ground crew or manufacturing plant. Yet they are mundane: sheets of aluminium and fibreglass riveted together. Ninety-degree angles reign, as they do with works that serve equally well as horizontal expanses stretching along the floor (*Beer or wine*, 2014) and as pictorial gestures mounted on a wall (*Honey Depression*, 2016). The colours and stripes and marks of use belong to others (accidents), but the attempt to offer them just so (intent) is Pirgelis's alone. He's not always successful. The monumentality of a tail rudder (*Sam sitting*, 2016) installs awe as easily as the app store, of course accidentally. The intent was something closer to Ellsworth Kelly.

Ostrowski is less burdened. Yes, painting is fraught (too much history, too much money), but only if you let it be. The ease with which Ostrowski tackles composition is reminiscent of classical Chinese brush painting, or even certain styles of Japanese calligraphy, in which empty space is what the artist attempts to shape through some ratio of abandon and control. That Ostrowski often presents his large paintings hanging from the ceiling, like hovering shoji screens, can augment the sense of their environmental stakes, but it can also come off as defensive, as a need to be as present as Pirgelis's works ("Look, I'm material too!"). Ostrowski is weakest when this defensiveness takes over, such as in the painting *F (A thing is a thing in a whole which it's not)* (2015), a wink at Frank Stella's striped works whose title is another wink at Carl Andre's old dictum that 'a thing is a hole in a thing it is not'. Better to work with one's eyes wide open.

The question one can come away from *Nothing Happened* with is: how far can this go? Do intention and accident hold a secret to the present age? Is their dynamic tension an epiphenomenon of a deeper contradiction at work today, one which our contemporary artists – seers and feelers all – are trying to isolate like some signal in the aesthetic noise? I'm not convinced the answers can be found in *Nothing Happened*, but one should be willing to entertain the results.

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