

Magnus von Plessen

Barbara Gladstone Gallery

19 MARCH – 23 APRIL

It is without doubt that Magnus von Plessen has found a signature style. Equally doubtless is that the fairly conventional subject matter of his painting – single and group portraits, horse and rider duos, still lifes and interior scenes; all in evidence recently at the artist's first show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery – are mere motivations for the application of that style's distinct painterly device: a regularized, repeatable and thus highly recognizable brushstroke. The term 'brushstroke' may be a bit misleading, however. Less wholly additive, Von Plessen's marks are more like subtractive scrapes made with palette knives of varying widths, something like an uneasy marriage between Frank Stella's stripes and Lucio Fontana's cuts. Those two artists engaged, with certain rigour, the question of how and what it means to make a mark under the guise of 'painting', and it appears that Von Plessen has similar interests.

Recent commentary on Von Plessen's work has pointed to its radical difference from what one critic has described as the 'decorative, even sugary, quality of much current painting'. That difference derives from Von Plessen's sustained dialogue with photography. Though he paints from photographs, since around 1999 his manipulations have led away from any photorealist approximations and towards painting as a means of resistance to the photographic impulse.

Yet when painting is charged with such a resistance, the temptation to return to an idea of it as that practice which mines the inner precincts of the psyche is often too hard to resist. And so it is with little surprise that

Magnus von Plessen
Gruppe (Group), 2004,
oil on canvas, 281 x 173 cm
COURTESY BARBARA GLADSTONE
GALLERY, NEW YORK
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From left
James Welling #015, 2004,
c-print mounted to plexi,
109 x 91 x 4 cm
COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK
AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

James Welling #018, 2004,
c-print mounted to plexi,
109 x 91 x 4 cm
COURTESY DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK
AND REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES

James Welling

David Zwirner

7 APRIL – 7 MAY

one now also reads that Von Plessen's work is deeply 'psychological', that it is productive of its 'own reality', or that it is the 'imagination made physical'. These are old arguments, in vogue in the heyday of painting's triumphant moment in the 50s.

Though painting surely did not die in the decades that followed, or at any time thereafter, the romanticism that sustained the arguments for painting as a privileged space of private and transcendent experience certainly did.

That appeals to this ever-present but mythic world of meaning are now getting recycled in pronouncements on Von Plessen's work is unfortunate, but the phenomenon points to two rather pressing questions. Firstly, has Von Plessen's too-easy adoption of a signature style left admirers scrambling for a way to deflect his device's possible superficiality and thus, in turn, its looming deflation? Or, rather, do Von Plessen's canvases present themselves as highly meditative and apparently self-reflexive investigations into his medium's remaining potentials? If the answer to this second question is to be 'yes', then those canvases demand an equivalent level of criticality and a language of analysis that admirers and detractors alike have yet to apply to his work.

JTDN

James Welling, whose *oeuvre* has included ravishing photos of aluminium foil and phyllo dough, has long worked between photography and conceptual art, creating pictures that are as much about vision, illusion, light, negative and solid as they are about image and content. The more recent works on show at David Zwirner extend these long-standing concerns, subtly playing with the affects of light and dark on visual perception, riffing on modernist photographic precedents and punning on the meanings of negative and positive in photography, language and space.

Works from the series *Light Sources* (begun in the early 90s and the earliest on show here), reference classic modernist photographs of industrial lighting and architecture often shot from oblique angles. In *Ravenstein 6* (2001), a circular ceiling of glass bricks set into a gridded matrix seems to pulsate as the eye attempts to focus. When it does, if only briefly, the bright areas register as present, while the structural interstices read as dark, absent, negative space. In *Paris* (1996), the reflections of a window in the glass orb of a lamp hint at its surface; but, ultimately the luminous white globe reads as an empty, white space in the centre of the composition. *Cave* (2000), depicts a rock face bleached of colour and detail because of the intense sunlight striking it. It loses form to the eye precisely because it is solid and able to reflect light. Conversely, the dark entrance in its centre appears as a solid because it is a light-absorbing absence, translated as dark on the photographic paper and perceived by the mind as present.

The series *Flowers* (2004) plays off a similar reversal of solid and void. For these works, Welling laid sprigs of plumbago – a common plant in his native Los Angeles – directly on film which he then exposed to light, creating photographic negatives. From these he printed colour images. His process adds a step to the traditional photogram of Man Ray who placed objects directly on photosensitive paper so that the areas covered when exposed to light remained light, while the rest of the paper darkened. In Welling's images, the background is a sharp, bright white on which the outline and shadow of the plumbago, printed in saturated tones of purple, green, orange and yellow, seem to float. Colour becomes form; but, in contrast to the white of the paper, it reads as negative, recessive space although the mind knows that what is pictured is a solid. The impact is subtly disorienting and unnerving; the photos, lusciously beautiful.

JM