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GOSHKA MACUGA

R. H. QUAYTMAN

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View of R. H. Quaytman, "Spine, Chapter 20," 2011.
Kunsthalle Basel. From left: *Spine, Chapter 20*
(lamb), 2010; *Spine, Chapter 20 (lamb)*, 2010; *Quire*,
Chapter 14, 2009; *Spine, Chapter 20*, 2011; *Spine*,
Chapter 20 (Distracting Distance/Hardy), 2010;
Spine, Chapter 20, 2011; *Spine, Chapter 20*
(Silberkuppe), 2010; *Silberkuppe, Chapter 17*, 2010;
Loft, Chapter 4, 2005; *Spine, Chapter 20 (Beard)*,
2010; *Spine, Chapter 20*, 2010; *Spine, Chapter 20*,
2010. Photo: Serge Hasenböhler.



Tabula Rasa

PAUL GALVEZ ON THE ART OF R. H. QUAYTMAN

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE that the person who makes R. H. Quaytman's panels was formerly a collaborator of Donald Judd's. The fastidious construction, the often dazzling optics, the play between transparency and opacity: Quaytman's painting and the Minimalist object share much. Most of all, perhaps, they share a systematic logic in which every detail, from individual paintings and installations to their publication and distribution, is subject to careful control. And it is this relentless drive that makes one wonder about the development of this system—its contours, whence it came, and how it continues to sustain itself.

Quaytman's recent climb has been quick. Since the artist's earliest solo shows at Miguel Abreu Gallery and Vilma Gold in 2008, there have been ten exhibitions in five countries in less than three years, a pace that would make even the most industrious among us drool with envy. A triumvirate of installations this past summer in Cologne, Basel, and Venice, along with the publication of a "catalogue raisonné," *Spine*, must surely make 2011 the year of Quaytman's coming-out party, if not crowning glory.

Yet this queen of panel painting is no debutante, as is well known. Journeyman years in the roaring 1980s and '90s, when many budding talents were

being plucked fresh out of school, were for Quaytman ones of gestation, not overexposure. More than a decade separates the artist's student days at the Skowhegan art program and Bard College from her first official "chapter" exhibition in 2001: "The Sun, Chapter 1." From this point, a relatively slow, fomenting period is followed by an explosive burst. In the seven years up to 2008, the shows number nine; in the subsequent three, nineteen.

The artist's labors have also produced two books, *Allegorical Decoys* (2008) and the aforementioned *Spine*, and numerous interviews and gallery texts, making Quaytman herself the works' most prolific

Quaytman's corpus as a whole is a game that anybody can play, one that can be repeated with no danger of ever becoming repetitive, since each enactment will play out differently from the last.

reader. However, the lucidity and intelligence of this written oeuvre has come at a price, one that has been most often paid, it must be said, in the outside reception of the painted one. So diverse are the iconographic references planted in each of Quaytman's installations, so articulate are her narratives of their origins, that most writers gleefully rehearse them, often with no further comment. And this is true whether they look outward toward the panels' context of display, with an obligatory nod to the history of institutional critique and its descendants, or inward, to the possibilities open to painting after the "death of painting," to name the two dominant topoi of the literature. Though I'm sympathetic to these readings, they often ignore one of the great strengths of Quaytman's work: the precision with which the contextual elements get incorporated into the pictorial system the artist has devised.

IN COMING TO GRIPS with this oeuvre, then, it is essential to understand the structure of its basic unit: the chapter. Quaytman uses this term not only to name separate installations of panel paintings, but also to give them a sense of open-endedness, of archiving without end, as if reading a novel without conclusion. The chapters all share certain features, some variable, some invariable. The latter include the support, the frame, the proportions, and the technique. The panels' ground is almost always gesso on wooden panel, a reminder of a time when painter-craftsmen treated their paintings as opaque things before ever thinking of them as transparent windows. The panel's edges are beveled, to reinforce its objecthood. Quaytman thus achieves by more subtle means what previous generations of painters achieved by thickening the depths of their frames—that is, a cleavage between surface and wall such that the painting begins to take on a three-dimensional life of its own, as if a relief.

Shorn of stretcher and frame, the panel is furthermore subjected to limits placed on its dimensions. A rectangle based on the golden section is one where the ratio of the longer side to the shorter side is exactly the same as that of the sum of these two to the longer side. If you cut the largest square you can from any golden rectangle, the leftover piece will be a miniature version of the original rectangle. Quaytman's panels all come in sizes based on the golden section (save for one exception, a 40-by-24.75-inch format kept in reserve), and they never exceed 32.36 by 52.36 inches.

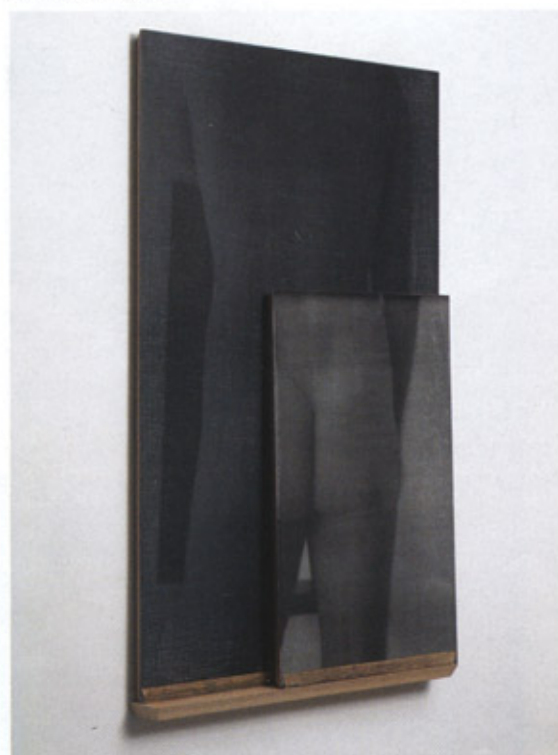
All these rules are of course classic strategies for eliminating whimsy and arbitrariness from the creative process, the holy grail pursued by generations of die-hard modernist painters, as well as by Minimalists rediscovering the strategies of Constructivism and the pleasures of the Fibonacci sequence. No surprise,

then, that in wanting to be more machine than man, an artist such as Quaytman should also have recourse to the photograph—the soulless medium par excellence. It is here, at the level of the halftone photo-silk-screen process, that the second set of features in the system—the variable ones—comes into play. Sometimes what is printed is a photograph, either taken by the artist or culled from an archive; sometimes it is an optical pattern printed directly onto the screen; and sometimes it is both at once. Two further elements are allowed to vary: color and texture. Quaytman often keys groups of panels and sometimes entire installations to a specific color or set of colors. There can also be an element of chance. The optical patterns at times are generated when a screen is printed twice (or thrice) in different colors, slightly offset, sometimes to the artist's great surprise.

To think of Quaytman's silk screens as a form of mechanization makes inevitable a comparison with the medium's foremost practitioner. If Warhol wanted to be a machine, willing to mime the worst of mass culture in order to become one, and if Sigmar Polke and other masters of the screen would follow suit, Quaytman cannot be comfortably inserted into this genealogy (or assembly line). The ads, celebrities, and logos for which Warhol is most famous are a subclass of images that never grace Quaytman's silk screens. I can only conclude that this is because the artist is still invested in a tradition of abstract painting that Warhol never ceased to mock and travesty, albeit in brilliant fashion. If Quaytman reintroduces reference into voids long ago depleted of it, it is because the artist sees no contradiction between the impersonality of abstraction and the impersonality of the photograph, a conclusion reached in different ways by such artists as Polke, Gerhard Richter, and Michael Krebber. Both abstraction and photography distance the work from the hand of the artist and therefore, by extension, from an a priori idea originating in a controlling, creative mind. The antithesis between figuration and abstraction that drove a century of painting is rendered moot. What matters now is less whether a painting is an example of one or the other, but by what and how many means something ends up painted at all.

This might also explain the cool air of detachment many say they feel in front of Quaytman's panels. We are so accustomed to the chance splashes and drips that Warhol let into his most dramatic silk-screen paintings that it is easy to forget that a more restrained application is also possible, nay, even desirable. Since the earliest Pop practitioners of the method had an ax to grind with the macho rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism, the messiness of those early silk-screened works was a kind of commentary on how the abstract gesture was merely one among many kinds

R. H. Quaytman, *Beard, Chapter 19*, 2010, oil, silk-screen ink, and gesso on wood, two parts, 32 3/4 x 20" and 20 x 12 3/4".



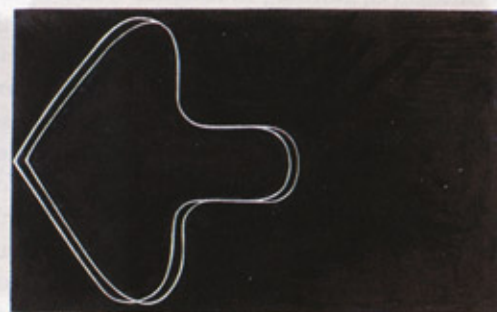


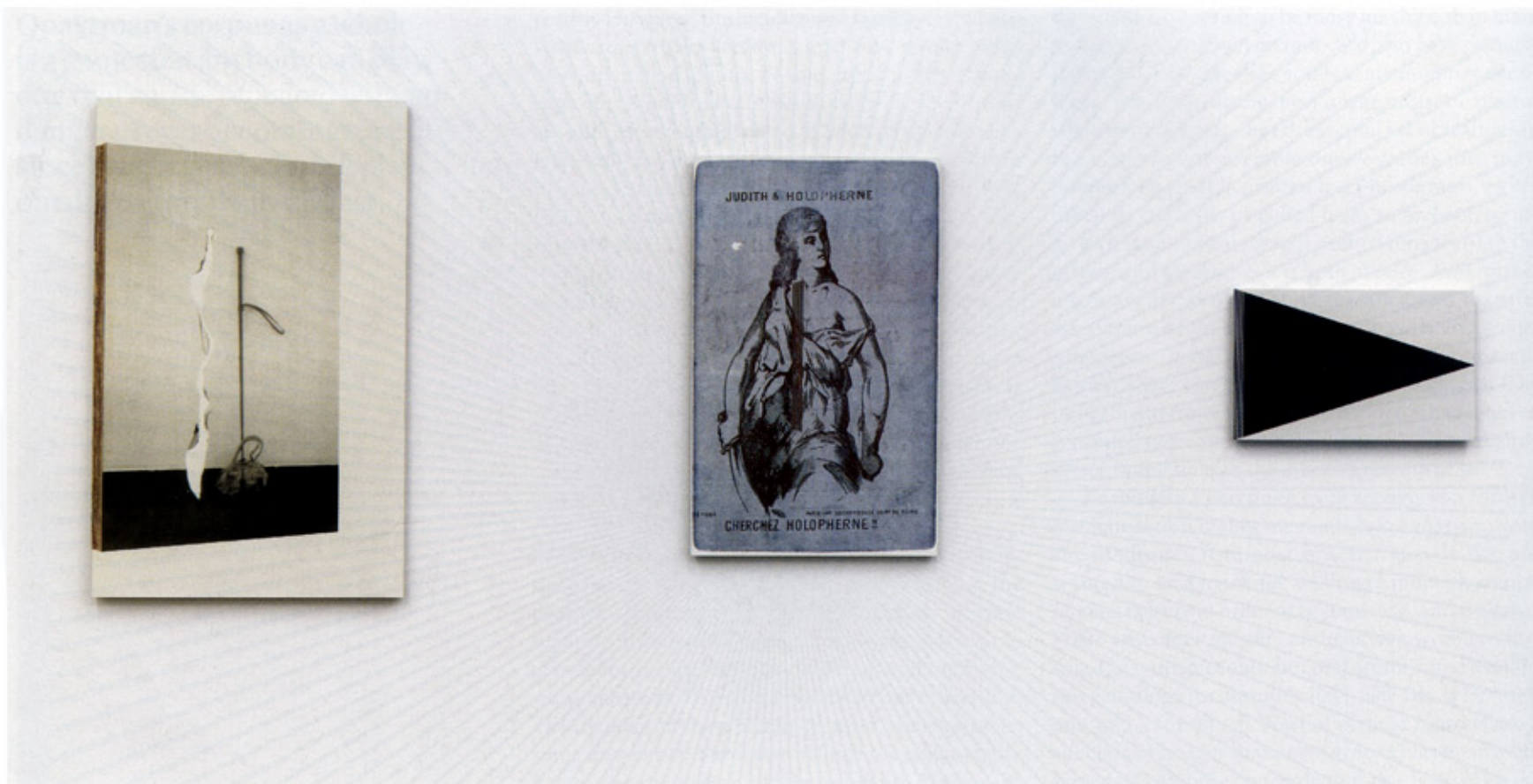
of imagemaking procedures. For similar reasons, the brushstroke itself was often subjected to the process (that is, a brushstroke was photographically transferred onto a screen and then painted, thus creating a mechanical ghost of the original) as a way of magnifying and thus further distancing the pictorial mark from the authorial hand. While Quaytman does occasionally leave traces of the brush on the panels, I would say that these cases are exceptions that prove the rule: “No gestures allowed.” The perfect examples are the small, talismanic handpainted panels known as “captions” that appear in every chapter and are not subject to the same set of rules as the other panels. It is as if in reading the history of post-war art, Quaytman had decided to skip the section on AbEx and its discontents, instead going directly from the self-effacing procedures of Minimalism and the reception of the historical avant-gardes to the rise of the photographic sign—and to the digital one, if the recent move in the work from a CMYK “print” color scale to an RGB “screen” one is any indication.

IF THE SPECTACULAR is off the table(au), then what *does* Quaytman silk-screen onto the panels? What I said in these pages on the occasion of “Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15,” the artist’s exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 2009, essentially holds true for the rest of the chapters: “As for subject matter, the range was also restricted. One category comprised abstract compositions of thin parallel [or patterned] lines; these were slightly offset or colored to create optical effects. The silk screens, many of which were abstractions, also came in two other types: photographs of other works or of the galleries they had occupied; and images related to the history of the museum [or exhibition space].” This last category of context-related imagery is the hinge on which swings most of the writing about Quaytman. And understandably so, for it connects the work to the legacy of institutional critique while at the same time seeming to provide a way out of the impasse of the “death of painting” *Trauerspiel*. But before examining these arguments more closely, let me

Above: R. H. Quaytman, *Silberkuppe, Chapter 17, 2010*, silk-screen ink and gesso on wood, 24 1/4 x 40”.

Below: R. H. Quaytman, *Distracting Distance, Chapter 16, 2010*, oil on wood, 12 1/4 x 20”.





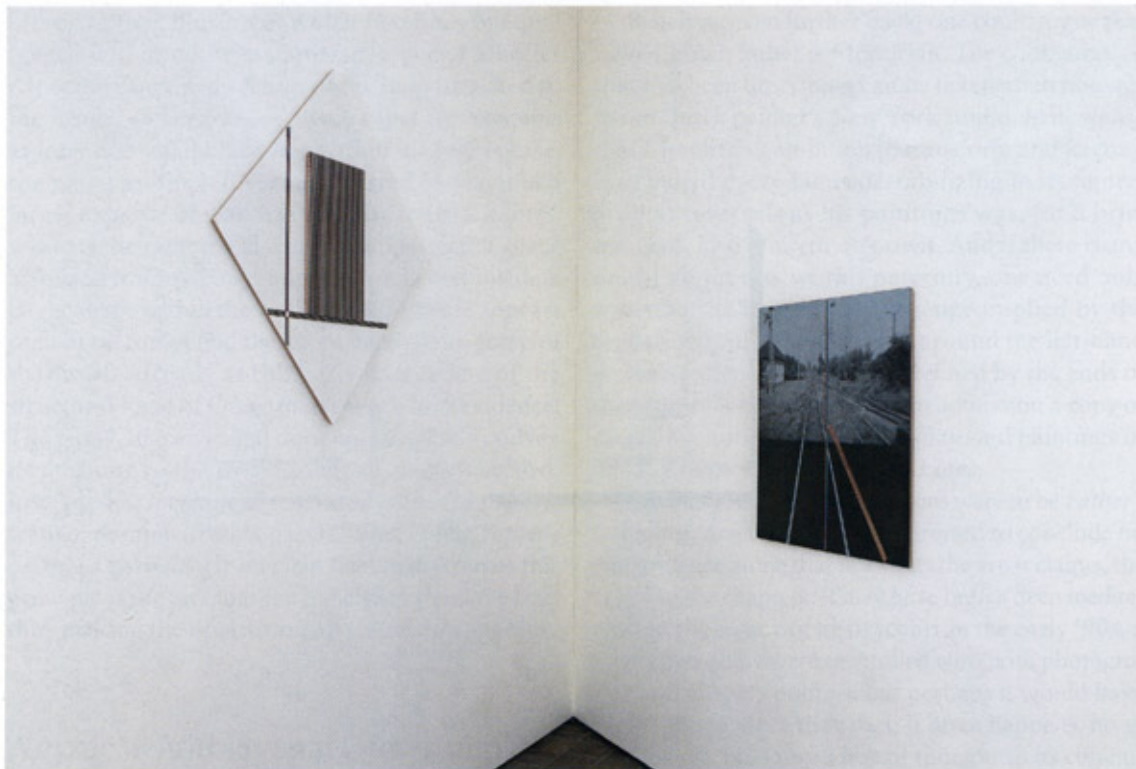
View of R. H. Quaytman, "Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21," 2011, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne. From left: *Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21 (Krebber's whip and Buchholz's purse)*, 2011; *Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21*, 2011; *Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21*, 2011.

Allover, screenprinted abstractions populate almost every show of Quaytman's, dropping like bombs into a tranquil sea of reference.

address one last feature of the chapters: their organization of perceptual space.

So concentrated is Quaytman's gaze on the slightest variables of painting that critics who do pay attention to these things often forget, or run out of room to talk about, how single panels interact spatially with their neighbors within the collective ensemble of each chapter. Once one does so, it becomes clear that Quaytman's skills as "installation artist" rival those as painter. Though the term has fallen into disrepute due to a fatal combination of overuse and understudy, I can find no other words, except maybe the more workmanlike "exhibition designer," to characterize someone whose exquisite sense of proportion and knack for juxtaposition have given her the ability to command a given space with such authority. Having worked on installing exhibitions for three years at the Institute for Contemporary Art/P. S. 1 Museum in New York in the late 1980s, where curator Chris Dercon's shows—such as "Theatergarten Bestiarium," a group show foregrounding artists working in collaboration—were formative in the artist's education, Quaytman would continue the role of artist-curator not only with exhibitions of Hilma af Klint, Marcia Hafif, and Stephen Prina but also in joint efforts with other artists and, of course, in the chapters.

The recent "Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21" at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Cologne is a telling example. On the right wall of the main room hung three panels. From left to right were a large vertical panel with a skewed, seemingly torn photograph of a Krebber piece and a purse owned by gallerist Buchholz; a medium-size vertical panel almost completely given over to an image from a card found in the antiquarian bookshop in front of the gallery, depicting the biblical general killer Judith with the words *CHERCHEZ HOLOPHERNE* ("find Holofernes"), which give this chapter its title; and a small panel containing a black triangle against a white ground. At first glance, this descending configuration had all the charm of a police lineup, moving not only from biggest to smallest but also, in terms of subject matter, from contemporary art to collector's item to abstraction. This disjunctive syntax deserves fuller comment than can be given here. But since we are talking about installation design, let's focus on the rhythm that sweeps the eye from the leftmost edge of the Krebber panel, drawing it along the upper and lower diagonals of the trapezoidally shaped, "receding" photograph in that work, until it eventually sandwiches the figure of Judith in the next panel, before terminating at the apex of the black triangle. If you were to follow this pincer movement, as I did,



View of R. H. Quaytman, "Spine, Chapter 20," 2010, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University of New York, NY. From left: *Spine, Chapter 20 (P. M.)*, 2010; *Spine, Chapter 20 (The Sun)*, 2010.

from the left, you would find yourself helped along by the black triangle, which suddenly has taken the form of a three-dimensional arrow accessed by a wooden handle or hinge, an illusion created by the virtual joining of the panel's beveled left edge with its painted double, which rests on the left-hand border of the piece. And where does this arrow lead? Toward the wall heading back to the adjoining entrance, where one finds a panel, rotated and of a different color, that replicates the one first passed on entry to the gallery.

Quaytman's chapters are filled with such moments. The use of the golden ratio ensures that even with no ostensible thematic or formal connection between panels, there will always be a latent order underlying them all. This is true even of the allover, screenprinted abstractions that populate almost every chapter, dropping like bombs into a tranquil sea of reference. Because these abstract designs are nonhierarchical (that is, because they extend all the way to the framing edge and thus revoke traditional modes of composition that involve a figure isolated against a ground), each one seems to fuse with the gessoed surface to which it has been applied, in effect becoming a factual declaration of that surface. At the same time, as optical illusions, they work in the complete opposite direction—distorting

and destabilizing the perception of planarity altogether, be it through moiré effects, afterimages, or a digital keystone printing process that allows the pattern to change according to one's angle of approach. This schizophrenic conjunction of empirical and physiological vision can be spellbinding, but never so bewitching as to make one oblivious to the rest of the chapter and its overall system of proportion.

Thus, a paradox: A system of the utmost structural order is nonetheless infinitely open to permutation. The corpus as a whole is a game that anybody can play, one that can be repeated with no danger of ever becoming repetitive, since each enactment will play out differently from the last. What makes it difficult to write about the work, then, is that the microscopic analysis of a single chapter, itself already a tangled web to unweave, loses sight of the connection to the larger "book." The broad overviews of Quaytman's oeuvre undertaken in recent criticism often suffer from the reverse condition. In following the invitations to look elsewhere, suggested by iconographic clues sown throughout the chapters, be it into the institutional or informatic context or into the aesthetic positions shared by collaborators and friends, what gets lost is the specificity of this highly developed and intricate system.



View of R. H. Quaytman, "iamb: Through the Limbo of Vanity," 2008, Vilma Gold, London. On table: Chapter 12: *iamb/Captions*, 2008. Foreground, front of stack: Chapter 12: *iamb/Captions*, 2008.

THIS IS WHY, up until this point, I have refrained from mentioning the artist's three-year directorship of Orchard Gallery, the vibrant alternative space on the Lower East Side in New York that closed its doors in 2008. Clearly, not only was that period formative as a model of organization and a source of energy that was then translated into the solo work, but it was also, by all accounts, a moment shared with kindred spirits looking for alternatives to the dominant modes of exhibition then (and one could say still now) on offer. But to say that the work of Krebber, Andrea Fraser, Blake Rayne, Josef Strau, Nikolas Gambaroff, and Thomas Eggerer, to give just a sampling of the artists with whom Quaytman has exhibited either at Orchard or other venues, is part of a new zeitgeist of painting as institutional critique, transitive or networked painting, etc., while perhaps doing the admirable service of rooting these artists in a garden of shared sensibility, ultimately does little to distinguish one from the other except in the vaguest of terms. (To take one small example, most discussions of the 2008 Orchard exhibition "From One O to the Other" gloss over the fact that Quaytman's panels were the *only paintings* in the show and, more important, that they were created with specific tropes of *modernist* painting in mind.)

In reading such arguments, one sometimes gets

classic optical illusion in which two lines of equal length will nonetheless appear larger or smaller depending on the direction of the lines attached to their ends, \Leftarrow versus \Rightarrow . (Each panel also contains at least one small black line within it.) In this case, the panel on the left seems dwarfed by the much larger expanse of wall traversed by the black lines, whereas the right panel consumes the smaller space afforded it. One panel appears anchored inside a larger shape within the wall, while the other appears to float on top of and therefore beyond the grasp of that wall. Already at this early date, some of the structural logic of Quaytman's work is in evidence. The panel, like any sign, does not magically convey its meaning to the world solely of its own accord. Instead, that meaning is generated when the panel is set in opposition to other panels. What makes *Father's* pairing a particularly efficient demonstration of this principle is the fact that the panels are the same size, thus making the opposition all the more apparent.

A cynic would say that Quaytman's painting reaestheticizes what used to be antiaesthetic—that what was once on the outside is now firmly ensconced on the inside. But what artistic practice has not suffered this fate?

Below: R. H. Quaytman, *Łódź Poem* (1928, *Spatial Composition 23.3 Parsecs Away*), Chapter 2, 2004, oil, silk-screen ink, and gesso on wood, 24 3/4 x 40".

Right: R. H. Quaytman, *Łódź Poem* (*Spatial Composition 23.3 Parsecs Away*), Chapter 2, 2004, oil, silk-screen ink, and gesso on wood, 24 3/4 x 40".

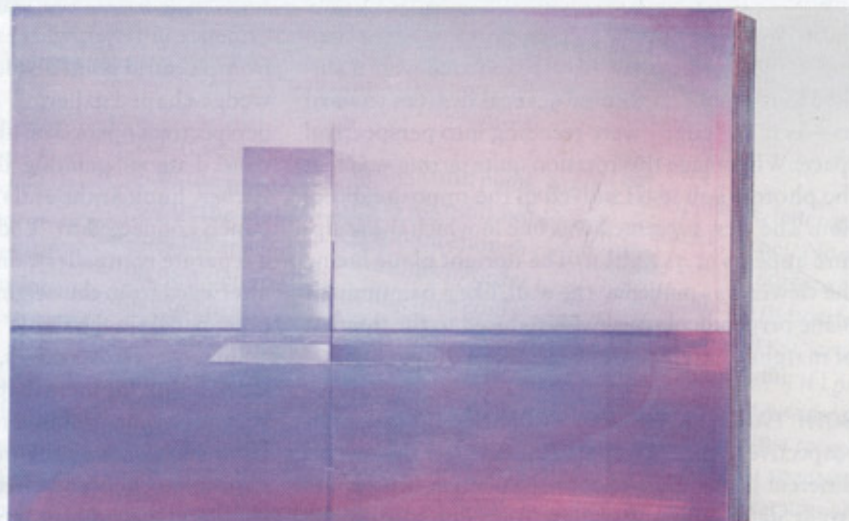
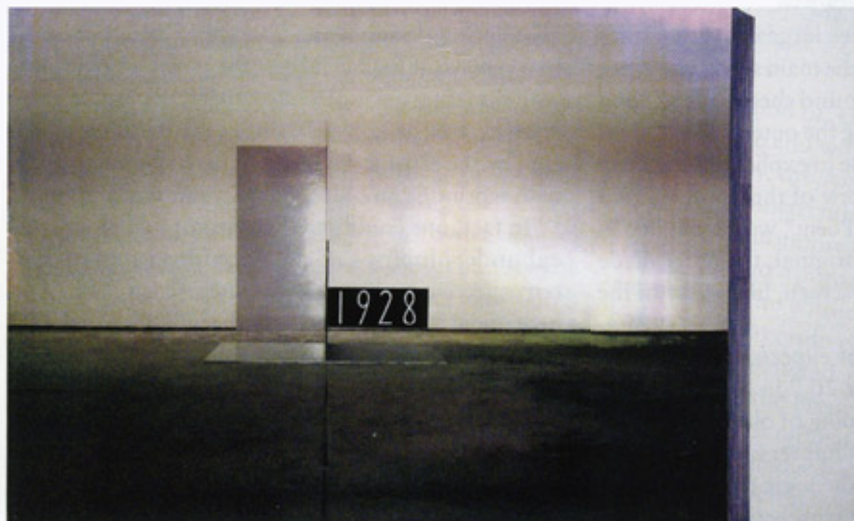
Reaching even further back, one could argue that *Father's* own father is Mondrian. The configuration that I've been describing can be taken as an homage to the Dutch painter's New York studio. In it, we see that Mondrian's ambition to transform architecture into a field every bit as destabilizing in its figure-ground reversals as his paintings was, for a brief moment, also Quaytman's own. And if there is any doubt about this work's paternity, one need only consider the fact that the lozenge implied by the angled ends of the black lines around the left-hand painting (picture a diamond defined by the ends of those lines) is by the artist's own admission a copy of one of Mondrian's celebrated diamond paintings of 1931, *Composition with Two Lines*.

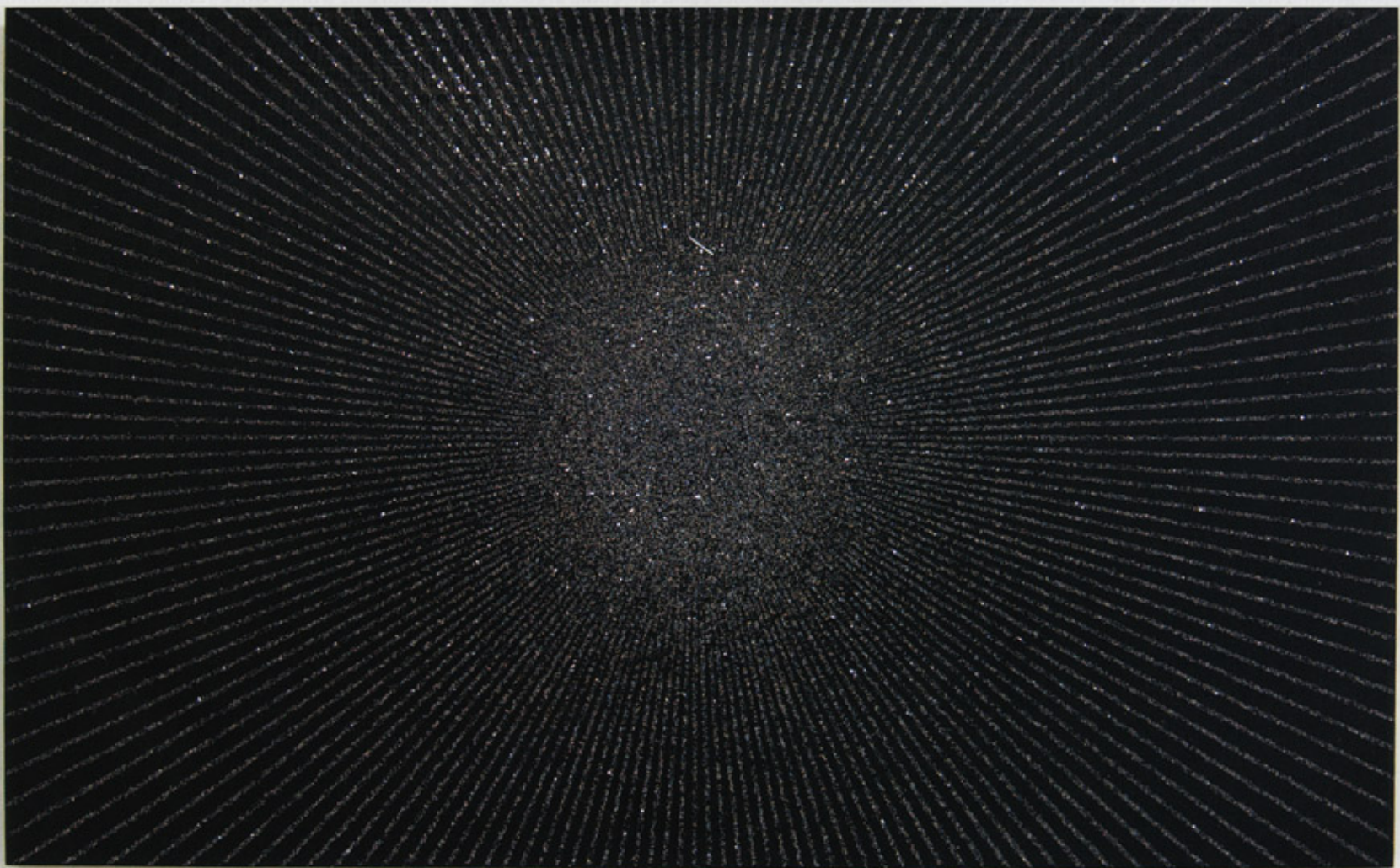
If the leap into three dimensions were to be *Father's* last word, one would be hard-pressed to conclude on this evidence alone that it was, as the artist claims, the origin of the chapters. It may have been a deep meditation on the legacy of abstract art in the early '90s, a time when many were enthralled with both photography and identity politics, but perhaps it would have been nothing more than that. It often happens, however, that in pursuing a line of thought to its conclusion, one stumbles across a tangent that then itself becomes a new line of thought. This is what happened to Quaytman in the case of *Father*—literally. For when the two pieces were hung side by side, an unforeseen connection emerged. The shadows that the right-hand panel cast onto its support had the form of thick lines with angled ends, due to the beveling of the panel's edges (which created diagonal ends) and its protrusion from the wall (which gave the shadows width). These turned out to be the exact same shape as the large black lines in *Father*, since its diamond-shaped "frame" cut them at that angle. The total effect was an invasion of the left-hand panel's picture plane by its partner's framing edge in a way that an artist like

Mondrian, whose work requires strict frontality, would have never imagined. Reading *between the lines* in this way, Quaytman discovered that the painted panel still had more to offer—if one could learn to look at it from other points of view, *obliquely*.

And what of the mother? Quaytman's writings are full of references to strong female characters: Hilma af Klint, the architect Anne Tyng, her colleagues at Orchard. But one stands out above all. "Łódź Poem, Chapter 2," 2004, is a dedication in paint to another artist of Polish ancestry, the sculptor Katarzyna Kobro, who produced some of the most extraordinary sculptures of the twentieth century. One of these, *Spatial Composition 2*, 1928—which, depending on one's point of view, looks either like an unfolded metal shoebox or an architectural model of a corner—made such an impression on Quaytman that she had an almost identical copy fabricated in 1999 and later photographed it for one of the silk screens used in "Łódź Poem." I say "almost identical" because the replica was a mirror image of the original work. And of course one way to look at something obliquely, from a different perspective, is to look at it in a mirror—the way painters have done in their self-portraits since time immemorial, an act for which their reversed hands are the telling trace.

Since circumnavigation is absolutely crucial to Kobro's sculpture, this choice of inspiration created an implicit conundrum. How to incorporate this sense of rotation in a medium such as painting, which is resolutely flat and one-sided? One solution was to multiply it; a second was to accentuate even further the panels' ability to create spatial ambiguities. Accordingly, the artist installed two panels, each depicting the same photograph of the mirrored version of *Spatial Composition 2*, each in a different set of colors, and each containing a painted version of a beveled panel edge that vertically divided a left-hand





R. H. Quaytman, *Silberkuppe*, Chapter 17, 2010, silk-screen ink, diamond dust, and gesso on wood, 20 x 32 1/2".

silk-screened area from an uncovered space to the right. Because this dividing line was angled at each end, it read as if the entire screened area were a surface that had been rotated several degrees toward us—as if its “edge” were receding into perspectival space. What made this rotation quite jarring was that the photograph itself moved in the opposite direction. The view presented was one in which the sculpture appears at its flattest: The upright plane facing the viewer was pinned to the wall, like a painting; the plane perpendicular to it was reduced to the thinnest of margins, barely perceptible, like a drawn line.

BOTH “PARENTS” FIGURED PROMINENTLY in the retrospective “Spine, Chapter 20,” on view this year in different configurations at the Neuberger Museum of Art at State University of New York, Purchase, and at

Kunsthalle Basel. This genealogy was particularly in evidence in Basel, where three large walls radiating from a central point divided the main space into three wedge-shaped galleries. Around these spaces, long perspectives opened up along the outer walls. A two-panel diamond painting, done in explicit reference to *Father*, hung at the end of one of these vistas. Two panels connected to “Łódź Poem” were exhibited in a separate rear gallery, one original, the other made afterward from the original screen, like many of the other panels in the show.

In most retrospectives, one expects to see original works. But “Spine, Chapter 20,” in both versions, was not a reunion but a redoing of old panels taken from each of the previous chapters, hung in non-chronological order. Given the logic of Quaytman’s chapters, this odd form of retrospection makes per-

fect sense: Since each chapter is context-specific, the installation design was accordingly different in the two venues (at the Neuberger there was a single large wall bisecting an enormous gallery, instead of three smaller ones, as in Basel); since each panel is considered by the artist to be unique, there was no problem with reprinting an old screen to create a new panel.

In fact, one could say that the implicit biographical underpinnings of the very idea of an artist’s retrospective—a summary of one’s artistic “life”—is here undermined and subverted, since the panels neither date to their original moment in the time line nor adhere to a fixed chronological presentation. Thus, another of Quaytman’s paradoxes: Each panel is unique and related to a specific chapter, but like a deck of cards, the panels can be shuffled around or even remade and added to. On the one hand, this may pose

Quaytman discovered that the painted panel still had more to offer—if one could learn to look at it from other points of view, *obliquely*.

R. H. Quaytman, *Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15 (DvS 4)*, 2009, silk-screen ink and gesso on wood, 20 x 20".



problems to the collector who covets “originals” and to the historian who craves linear teleologies. On the other, the situation mimics the logic of the market, which puts a premium on the labor-saving production of multiple “originals” from a limited set of prototypes. And it is perhaps a boon to future curators, who will be able to do shows without having to replicate entire chapters, following Quaytman’s own example. At the very least, these dilemmas show that, for the moment, the artist’s practice has kept pace with—both affirming and upsetting—the necessarily changed institutional context surrounding its recent success.

As the child of an artist and a writer, Quaytman has on numerous occasions declared a love for poetry, both as inspiration (“Chapter 18” drew heavily from the work of Jack Spicer) and activity (the artist’s poem “The Call of the Wind” was published as the

second section of *Allegorical Decoys*). It seems fitting, then, to end with one final word. In the history of art theory, *tableau* was a term used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to define the special unity and autonomy of easel painting as a defense against its incorporation into broader decorative ensembles. The whole history of modern painting has worked to undo this autonomy—a trajectory that could be denoted at the level of language by the truncation of the French diminutive *tableau* to the more quotidian *table*. Quaytman would no doubt approve of this move from autonomy to utility, from disinterest to interest, from picture plane to tabletop, from artwork to object.

But I imagine the artist performing a different sort of cut. For with slight alteration, a tableau can also become a *tabula*, which in Latin denotes, among other

things, board, plank, writing tablet, plaque, letter, game board, account book, and, of course, panel. Now, it is common enough to invoke the tabular surface and its variants in order to describe the status of postwar painting *tout court*—as a flatbed depository, a screen of projection, a mirror of consumer desires. But if I put special emphasis on the seemingly gratuitous wordplay *tableau-tabula* here, it is because, rather than a receptive surface, Quaytman’s picture plane is a space of activity. It is the place where one writes, in all senses of the word. It performs what one could call the activity of writing, the work on the signifier in its most infinitesimal forms, the slightest shift whether of a letter or of a point of view. A tableau in Quaytman’s hands is, in other words, the site of many possible *tabulae*. □

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