

ArtReview

Figurative Geometry

Collezione Maramotti, Reggio Emilia 16 October – 2 April

The smell of linseed oil hits at the threshold of *Figurative Geometry*. Like the aroma of baking bread pumped from the entrance of a supermarket, the message is clear: we got paint! And it's fresh, no mistake! Organised by Bob Nickas – curator, author of (among much else) the book *Painting Abstraction* (2009) – the exhibition's stated preoccupation is the teasing dance between abstraction and representation in recent work by nine (mostly American or US-based) painters. But as the olfactory component suggests, the stronger works in this elegant (if somewhat cool) show suggest an associated theme of engagement with the materiality of surface.

Three new tableaux by Sadie Benning are pieced together from gauged slabs of Medite, sanded to a curve at the edges and painted with milky casein, buttery smooth and matt as kid leather. Described in these painted puzzles are graphic black and red forms on a 'ground' of white that have superficial kinship to Jannis Kounellis's *Alfabeti* (1959–63). But Benning's errant glyphs – arrows, dots, a hooked cross like a malformed swastika – feel better moored, less transient. With their many components, the images, like the tableaux themselves, are fragmented parts of larger things, recalling the pixels that shattered the artist's early works shot on a kid's Pixelvision camera.

A different kind of shattering comes courtesy of Nicolas Roggy (the one artist not based in the US), whose untitled acrylics on wood and aluminium read like shards of wall, their pink 'plaster' apparently picked into to reveal underlying structure, or embedded with stubborn strands of images long since ripped off. Unlike those of Benning and Roggy, meanwhile, Robert Janitz's works pronounce themselves as paintings with a capital 'P', to the point where they're more or less portraits of the brushstrokes themselves. Janitz loads huge brushes with oil, wax and flour, leaving a rich spummy trace that feels at once liquid and solidly sculptural. In *The Merry Widow is an Operetta* (2016), vertiginous strokes in imperial purple dive from ceiling to floor on canvases the height of the gallery; in *The common ground of large hopes* (2016), ghostly cream writhes like entrails. Paintings with a capital 'P', maybe, but this suggestion of three-dimensionality in the strokes themselves allies Janitz to Benning and Roggy in producing materially alluring objectlike pictures.

Controlled, geometric works by both Richard Tinkler and Xylor Jane establish schemata based on repetition and echoing. Jane's grid- and graphlike forms – indebted to an earlier digital era – remain incomplete, their sequences of dots and lines petering out like unfinished texts. Where Jane's works seem

open to ongoing possibilities, Tinkler's are closed systems. Tightly canted penlines fill sheets of paper with netlike grids. In paint, his grids are worked up in wet layers with traces of coloured substrate picked up by the moving brush as it creates the layer above, producing gradated paint strokes that add a geometrical depth of field. Tinkler's works feel imbued with superstition: like Sudoku puzzles, their purpose is somehow fulfilled in their completion.

Alex Brown, who, like Jane, featured in Nickas's *Painting Abstraction*, revisits the idea of the pixel as an abstracting mechanism with figurative works teetering on the brink. In some instances – such as *Pilgrim* (2012), in which a messianic figure emerges from a grid of blue pyramidal forms – this can feel a little stuntlike. *Gang* (2015), in which the titular grouping is virtually invisible in a plane of Op-y green dots on a red ground, suggests a deeper engagement with ideas of visibility.

True to its name, *Figurative Geometry* is a beautifully balanced and structured show. Nickas has a weakness for the well-composed canvas, which at times leaves one wishing for ruckus. Despite the generous materiality of many of the standout series in the show, some works read as self-referential to the point of hermetic, but as an argument for borderland abstraction as a dynamic zone, this is compellingly made. *Hettie Judah*



Robert Janitz, *The Merry Widow is an Operetta*, 2016, oil, wax, flour on linen, 197 × 152 cm. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Meyer Riegger, Berlin & Karlsruhe