

## REVIEWS

### REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY

#### **"Figurative Geometry"**

*Collezione Maramotti // October 2, 2016–April 2, 2017*

OUTSIDE OF ITALY when you hear of Reggio Emilia, it's often in reference to the alternative education model—associated with the Montessori and Waldorf schools—which originated shortly after the Second World War in the city of this name. Mention the location to a fashionista or devotee of contemporary Italian art, then Max Mara and the Maramotti Collection might respectively come to mind. Achille Maramotti founded Max Mara in 1951 and soon after began collecting works of contemporary Italian artists, expanding to American artists in the 1970s. It was his wish that upon his death his collection would be placed on display for the citizens of his hometown to enjoy.

Today, more than 200 works from the collection are on permanent display on the top two floors of the original Max Mara factory, where viewers find a comprehensive post-1945 history of Italian painting, followed by stellar examples of Italian, German, and American Neo-Expressionism, and American new geometry. This is the setting for "Figurative Geometry," a fine-drawn exploration into paintings that exist at the juncture of subject and abstraction—most often manifested in an interplay of geometry and figuration. The exhibition is organized by Bob Nickas, who, over the course of his 30-year career as a critic and curator, has developed an obvious passion for abstraction, which has translated into a talent for assembling articulate shows of this work. The nine artists in "Figurative Geometry" range in age from their early 30s to mid 50s. The works are not drawn from the Maramotti Collection, though were selected in response to it. There are 42 pieces on display, the majority from 2016, in mediums of paint, ink, and enamel.

Navigating its galleries, one becomes aware of a deliberate pace within the exhibition. Works are installed sparsely to begin, later densely packed onto the wall, as if approaching some kind of narrative climax. The exhibition begins with the early Riot Grrrl Sadie Benning, who is best known for her lo-fi videos and for co-founding the electroclash band Le Tigre. Presented here are three of her most stripped-down puzzle-like paintings composed of interlocking shapes delineated by color. Benning's works are arranged with a generous amount of wall space, as though inviting the



**Ulrike Müller**  
*Béla*, 2015. Oil  
on canvas,  
36 x 27 in.



viewer to take a breath and examine the connections formed between them. Soon after, one finds the 15 modestly-sized pieces offered by Richard Tinkler—a far larger number than any other artist included—which are presented in two lines: seven 11-by-14-inch colorfully intricate pen drawings leaning on a window sill, and across the room eight 40-by-30-inch canvases in oil. All of the works share an architecture created by confidently repeated brush strokes or pen lines, building basic shapes of diamonds and squares. The paintings are each

made in a single day, wet into wet, providing a visceral liquid sensation as one peers through the painting's carefully spaced brushstrokes to the works' many layers. By their very method of coming into being, these paintings are about painting. The drawings, while working with similar forms, are allowed to break down at times, spinning out of control in a satisfying yet puzzling and uncomfortable way, as the viewer attempts to tease out the inherent logic of the piece. Robert Janitz's big-brushstroke, lavishly translucent gestures, created with a concoction

of oil, wax, and flour, and Xylor Jane's hypnotic paintings of psychedelic grids made up of thousands of dots and right triangles, are intermixed throughout the exhibition, hung alongside these small groupings of series by their peers.

In the final gallery, the works open up and are again given ample space. This finale consists of five canvases all done in tones of gray, black, and white, four by Mamie Holst and one final contribution from Janitz. Holst's come from her "Landscape Before Dying" series, which she

began eight years after her diagnosis of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. The works vary in format and scale. The smallest, *Omen*, 2004, at 20 inches square, is placed high

**Richard Tinkler**  
*Book Four Volume*  
*Three Page Thirty*  
*One*, 2016.  
 Pen on paper,  
 11 x 14 in.

on the wall, beckoning one into the last room. A series of wavy black-and-white concentric circles that give way to a gray pinwheel terminating in a bright white circle, this work is emblematic of others in the series, such as the larger, square canvas *Toward Exiting*, 2008. Both evoke a cellular structure, which, through the use of concentric circles, makes them seem to recede from the viewer, their titles asking, "where to?"

The works in "Figurative Geometry" play out a few of Nickas's various definitions for abstraction found in his essay "The Persistence of Abstraction," published in a 2009 book from Phaidon. By his definition, "the painter of abstract life slows down perception" and posits that, "if a representational picture offers an image of how the world looks, then doesn't it fall to abstractions to provide us with an image of how the world feels?" These thoughts, played out in the work of "Figurative Geometry," all seem to harken back to László Moholy-Nagy's post war platform, explicated in his book *Vision in Motion*, where he wrote of art's new role in the post-nuclear age. "It is the artist's duty today to penetrate yet-unseen ranges of the biological functions, to search the new dimensions of the industrial society and to translate the new feelings into emotional orientation," Maholy-Nagy put forth. The nine artists in "Figurative Geometry" take up the task of unpacking our internal sentiments through meditative, measured mark-making based on repetitive points, lines, and surfaces. The contemplative state of reflection these visuals unlock is not one where answers are meant to be found, but rather where paths of questioning are begun.

—Mack McFarland

