

Fredrik Værsløv

Fredrik Værsløv's New Curtain Bangs

394 Broadway
September 6 - October 19
Opening Reception:
Friday, September 6

SUBTERFUGE

Fredrik Vaerslev's latest body of work consists of large strips of painted cotton (i.e., *canvas*) arranged and displayed as sets of bunched-up *curtains*.

Firstly: on the basic level of biography, these works reference one of the artist's oldest aesthetic experiences: a primal, prelingual sense that his mother's choice of bright colors and brash patterns for covering up his childhood home's windows had something deliberately "artful" about it. Art, in young Vaerslev's mind, began with the look and feel of certain curtains – and that's as close as one would get to the *idea* of art in smalltown Norway in the 1980s. Over the years, such biographical details have grown in importance in making sense of the artist's caustic, workaday experiments in high-end painterly abstraction. And no such detail is of greater consequence, in this regard, than the *social* charge of these formative experiences – which are, inevitably, a matter of *class*.

Secondly: on the slightly more elevated level of the artist's continuing interrogation of the codes and conventions that constitute the expanded field of painting, Vaerslev's curtain paintings seem to question the age-old metaphor of painting as a window onto the world – *any* window, *any* world. Perhaps these paintings are the very curtains designed to sabotage this epochal dream of total transparency instead? What if painting *isn't* a window on the world – but a *screen* (aha!) draped across this very window? These questions recall some of the best-known curtains in twentieth-century painting, namely the dull brown pair framing the canvas inside René Magritte's iconic *La condition humaine* (1933), which depicts a painted landscape obscuring the actual landscape, hinted at through the window frame seen in the background, after which it is painted. The curtain is the *mise-en-abîme* of the seeing mind – of spirit bedeviled by scopophilia ("what's *behind* this?"), so to speak.

Thirdly, and finally: on the Olympian level of founding myths and memes, the legend of the fifth-century Greek painter Zeuxis as recounted in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* comes to mind: "The contemporaries and rivals of Zeuxis were Timanthes, Androcydes, Eupompus, and Parrhasius. This last, it is said, entered into a pictorial contest with Zeuxis,

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who represented some grapes, painted so naturally that the birds flew towards the spot where the picture was exhibited. Parrhasius, on the other hand, exhibited a curtain, drawn with such singular truthfulness, that Zeuxis, elated with the judgment which had been passed upon his work by the birds, haughtily demanded that the curtain should be drawn aside to let the picture be seen. Upon finding his mistake, with a great degree of ingenuous candor he admitted that he had been surpassed, for that whereas he himself had only deceived the birds, Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.” This story lies at the basis of many themes and tropes that have helped shape the history of painting, not the least of which pertains to the “scandal” of realism – but the one that concerns us most here is the ancient notion that *drapery* allowed artists to show off their skill and mastery of the material at hand, which has led some commentators to suggest a “secret history of painting” in which the figuring of drapery (curtains and the like) helped pave the way for the advent of abstraction in art. (*Sure.*)

Let’s think of it as art’s ultimate curtain call: there may be “nothing to see here.” Or *not*.

Dieter Roelstraete