

# Michael Krebber

## *Cartouche paintings*

May 20 - July 8, 2017

Ten years after his first solo show at the gallery, Michael Krebber unveils himself through a series of 15 new abstract paintings which assert the irreducible intractability of the artist's identity.

Krebber moved to New York a year ago and *Cartouche Paintings* is the very first series of paintings produced in his Soho studio. Facing all the cultural differences that a foreigner can experience abroad, Krebber had to ship all his stretchers and canvases from his old studio in Frankfurt as he could not find the equivalent painting material in the United States of America.

As Carter Ratcliff's text suggest, the painting – even when it looks blank or with three, two, or sometimes only one color – expresses nothing other than pure feeling. And the cartouche, here, may contain more than a date or a name but the self-portrait of the artist.

Michael Krebber lives and works in New York. His recent solo exhibitions include “The Living Wedge”, Kunsthalle Bern (2017) and Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto (2016); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2015); and CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux (2012).

His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; CAPC Musée d'art Contemporain, Bordeaux, France; and the Museum Brandhorst, Munich, Germany, among others.

Michael Krebber taught at the Städelschule in Frankfurt in 2002 to 2016.

He was awarded the Wolfgang Hahn Prize by the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, in 2015.

... So he affects stillness, the image of one who neither acts nor is acted upon, and who therefore is not caught in the machinery of modern life.

Most who object to modernity are utopians rather than ironists of the excruciating, dandified kind. It is a choice between wild hope and no hope at all—alternatives not as clear as they might seem, for there are moments when certain utopians display something like the dandy's pose of defiant blankness. Blake, I think, immersed himself too deeply in sensual particulars to assume the pose of an inanimate object. Dandified episodes are more likely in the careers of utopians inclined less to particulars than to abstraction. I'm thinking of Piet Mondrian, for one, though I don't deny the usual understanding that he was driven to his utopian visions by a Calvinist sense of good and evil.

Mondrian hoped that a universal style would release painting from the snares of individual ego. Purified of self, canvases would become sculpture, sculpture would attain the scale of architecture, and architecture would generate urban planning so transcendently rational that society would evolve into a state of harmony. Nothing like World War I would occur again. Art was to be the cause and the effect of a heavenly city on earth. Yet one sees equivalents to the dandy's self-centered inertia in Mondrian's nonobjective paintings: lines doubled without advancing the clarity of a composition; rectangles counterpoised with a tense precision that neither brings a painting to harmonious closure nor opens it up; chalky, torpid passages of white. I take none of these nuances to be faults. Moreover, I intend no adverse criticism when I point out that the shape of Mondrian's career sent much of his energy in a circle around an immobile center: from the early 1920s until he began to work on *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, in 1942–43, Mondrian repeated himself with a doggedness that baffles those who believe

that his only impulses were progressively utopian. Little energy remained for pushing his art forward.

Mondrian could envision his grandiose and radical program of change only because, like a dandy, he resisted the imperatives of existing institutions such as ordinary standards of taste, and the morality that prescribes for artists and everyone else the purposes they ought to pursue. In resisting these intangible institutions, Mondrian of course put himself at odds with institutions of another sort—the art market, museums, and so on. Granted, his purpose was to create new institutions, first De Stijl, then the forms of the utopian society that he expected De Stijl to engender. Yet a certain arrogance that proclaims itself in his and his colleagues' dismissal of the conservative demand for propriety, on the one hand, and the avant-garde demand for progress, on the other, strongly recalls the inert gestures of the dandy.

Beau Brummell designed himself as a "visual object" to assert the irreducible and inalienable intractability of selfhood. The visual object called an abstract painting does the same on behalf of its maker's self, opening a blank space in the texture of institutionally recognized meaning. Few artists leave that void empty for long. Even when the object looks entirely blank, even when it is a monochrome painting that seems to represent blankness, the artist is usually the first to assign it meanings. But before the artist can feel the confidence necessary for the deployment of this rhetorical machinery, there needs to have been at least a moment when the work was empty and inert, totally resistant to our culture's demand that images be interpretable. Having blanked out that demand, the self can make demands of its own, and blankness is blanked out in its turn.

Kasimir Malevich, for example, claimed that the Suprematist canvas of three, two, and sometimes only one color is a "desert," where nothing is real except feeling.<sup>25</sup> Because Suprematism argues that "pure feeling" constitutes authentic reality, Malevich's abstractions were, in his own eyes, far from void: they contained everything. Or they emanated everything in pure form, a purposeful characteristic, for Suprematist emanations were to purify ordinary life.<sup>26</sup> Malevich delivered his theories pantingly, at the top of his lungs. His public self couldn't have shown less of the icy refinement that Barbey admired in the dandy.<sup>27</sup> Yet Malevich's abstractions suggest that he too was capable of the dandy's inert arrogance. To carry out the imperious maneuver of redefining the clichés of idealist esthetics to produce Suprematism, he needed to assert himself, at least fleetingly, as an absolute not to be moved by the flow of institutionally approved meaning—not to be reduced to an effect by an external cause. In the blankest of his canvases, one can sense his stubbornness. And if Malevich obscured the quality of that blankness by layering rhetorical content over it, it was at some point still a reflection of his stance.

George Moore's introduction to *An Anthology*

of *Pure Poetry*, which he edited in 1924, speaks of Tennyson "and many other poets...that have been devoured one by one by the needs of empire"—the need to moralize and to sustain morale, to justify the great institutions of empire by shaping attitudes to their requirements. Moore asks, "Which shall it be, art or empire?"<sup>28</sup> He believed that artists could choose one or the other; the artist who rejected empire—perhaps, one speculates, by developing an abstract art—would be pure. Similarly, Barbey thought the dandy could achieve pure self-absorption. Yet the situation of modern life admits of no purity in the sense that a fin-de-siècle esthete like Moore used the word. Dandyism and abstraction are easily incorporated and taken over by the institution. The most recalcitrant are sometimes given blue-chip status as compensation.

Through his reproachful, repetitious writings, Ad Reinhardt defined himself as a nag—like the obstreperous Malevich, he was no Brummell. With argumentative insistence he urged that art should display "no object, no subject, no matter. No symbols, images or signs. Neither pleasure nor pain. No mindless working or mindless no-working. No chess playing."<sup>29</sup> Reinhardt's monochromes sometimes look to me like logos accompanying his moral strictures, but they are not that for a sympathetic critic, Lucy Lippard, who argues that his black canvases in particular gain their significance by acknowledging what the theologian Paul Tillich calls "the unconditional and infinite character of the Ultimate."<sup>30</sup> Reinhardt appears to have believed that there are realms where concepts like "the Ultimate" make sense; undeniably, he intended his art to have purposes, both transcendent and earthly. Yet I don't think his sense of mission would have been so strong, his grappling with institutions so vigorous, if he had never formed a dandified image of himself as a presence utterly disengaged and self-sufficient—the imaginary

Robert Ryman, *Annex*, 1988, oil on gator board with metal, 22 x 22".  
Courtesy of the artist.



Marcia Hafl, *Roman Painting XX*, 1988, oil on canvas, 84 x 78".



ARTFORUM | DECEMBER 1988 87