

**CONTEMPORARY FINE ARTS**

# **GÜNTHER FÖRG JULIAN LETHBRIDGE**

## **BALLAD OF A THIN MAN**

**23 MARCH – 20 APRIL 2019**

**OPENING: FRIDAY, 22 MARCH, 6 – 8 PM**

**Günther Förg** (1952-2013) and **Julian Lethbridge** (\*1947) come from two worlds – Förg working and teaching at the University in Karlsruhe and later at the Academy in Munich, Lethbridge painting in New York's Meatpacking District since the heydays of Max's Kansas City. Their paths never crossed, the connection between the two is not obvious. Upon closer look, however, a story about painting arises, where gesture, tactility, repetition and seriality are paramount. In the meeting of these painters, we are struck with the insistence that constraint and repetition enable expression. As Förg and Lethbridge meet in *Ballad of a Thin Man*, the second presentation of works by the artists at CFA, the pair appear as the cool and collected conjurers of the poltergeists of the 20th century. The exhibition borrows its title from Bob Dylan, whom Förg and Lethbridge appreciated and valued as a fellow artist, and who, like the painters, carved out a path with humble understanding and quick wit.

Where Lethbridge carves out grids with a palette knife, works within them in gestures and shapes that may initially appear programmatic, it becomes evident that these variations are, as critic Robert Storr wrote "the crux of the enterprise...those nuances are warnings against the pitfalls of inattention. There to make us look harder, savor more fully." He could have been describing Günther Förg, whose Color Fields mimic the method, make the same demand of attention. On view here, a *Farbfeld* on plywood, the material he said intrigued him most in this series of endless variations, for its everyday connotation, its smooth stage for color. Günther Förg worked in series, often arranging his workflow so that one picture continued almost seamlessly to the next. Though he worked on multiple pieces at once, he finished the pictures sequentially so that a new image could emerge from the conclusion of the previous. The artist pitted seclusion and self-reliance against a reference-oriented interpretation of his paintings, sculptures and murals, which were often viewed as a critical interrogation of modernity. A perfectionist who left next to nothing to chance, Förg's aesthetic incorporated imperfection into the play of creation.

Sometimes the work was weighty, like Förg's bronze reliefs from the mid-eighties, for instance, where his material bore a heavy human touch. Förg pointed out that these reliefs "physically, have elevations and depressions, not unlike those of a face." This thinking evolved with the mask series, which he worked on from 1990 onwards. Shadowy faces cast in bronze, sometimes mounted on reinforced steel with its recognizable ribbing, the masks exude a sense of something raw and archaic. They are reminiscent of Jean Fautrier's *Tragic Heads* from the early forties or the bronze masks of French fauvist André Derain. The four bronze heads from 1994 on view look like the hazy memory of relatives whose features have been forgotten. Like all the Förg works in *Ballad of a Thin Man*, the masks were gifted to the late F.C. Gundlach by Förg himself and are held in the collection in Hamburg.

As Förg's bronzes face Lethbridge's scintillating fabrics of brushstrokes, the rhythm of the human touch emanates from both. Lethbridge's canvases beg for the language of ricochets and currents, succulent tones, as reds and purples pirouette across canvas. The series of new paintings on view continues to experiment with a technique Lethbridge developed a few years ago: he applies a layer of paint with a palette knife, scoring structure into the surface of the painting. This structure allows him to begin from a place of disturbance, which liberates the brush stroke to make marks unencumbered by the need to structure the canvas. By consciously breaking down the painting process, Lethbridge manages to work in layers, but keep his canvases open. The paintings are at once reserved and disciplined, unapologetic and hedonistic. Perhaps this is the secret to Lethbridge's dance: he taps his foot to the groove of New York's Abstract Expressionism but steers clear of its hubris, constructing his own constraints to show us that another chapter in the story of abstraction is still being told.

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