

Arteviste.

A Review of Kyle Thurman: A Lonely Butcher at Off Vendome, New York

by Clayton Press
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“Work“ is the activity and “discipline” is the pervasive ethic in a diverse selection of seductive drawings, paintings, and sculpture that make up Kyle Thurman’s current exhibition at Off Vendome in New York. The works seem deliberately unrelated, reflecting a deeply conceptual – strongly Germanic – approach to art making, rare among the many one-medium, one-look artists. There is a unifying story here, nonetheless. Multiple studio activities stitch together concepts and convention. They mine and extract personal values and art history.

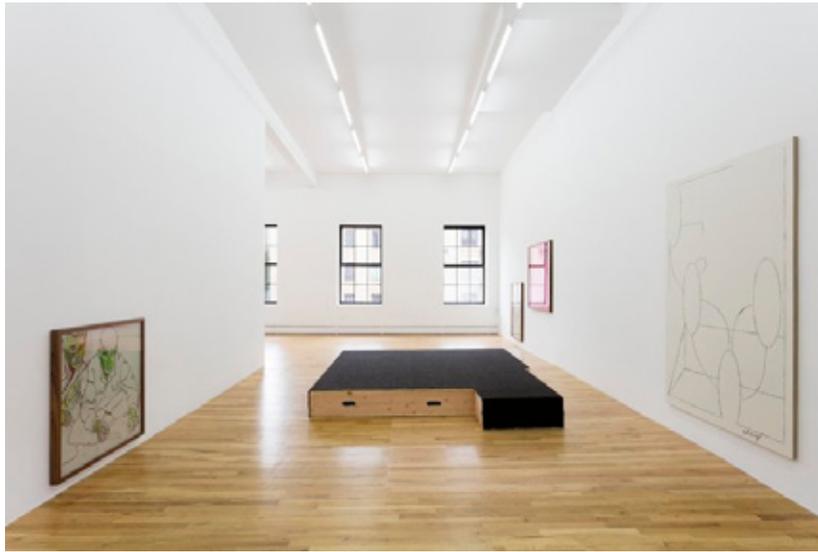


Conduct a “Kyle+Thurman” Internet search, particularly for images, and the results are disproportionately about his iconic white-on-red “flower” paintings. Thurman made his flower paintings in four standardized sizes. Like Jacob Kassay’s silver-plated canvases, the “flower” paintings were singled out and elevated in a collector-speculator dominated market. Thurman’s “flower” paintings had the requisite sexiness and a strong recall factor to become “big.”

Why is this important? All of these works are genuinely compelling in their own right. But Thurman has developed a highly individual, intellectually rigorous, and materially multi-faceted approach to art making. This exhibition, like Thurman’s most recent exhibitions in Brussels and London, continues to provide an antidote to any market bias or blindness about his work. He makes many things with many materials.

Thurman expresses a breadth of ideas that reflect his brainiac undergraduate studies in film studies and photography at Columbia, where he made little physical work. His visiting student status at Der Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and his MFA studies at Bard College further enhanced an unfaltering academic résumé. Thurman honed his gifts in rich intellectual environments under the guidance of some of the most respected artists of our time. Attending Düsseldorf between 2011-2012 was something akin to a pilgrimage to the Bodhi Tree, the acknowledged place of the Buddha's enlightenment. Most importantly for Thurman, the faculty included the American Conceptual photographer Christopher Williams, whose guiding principles were to investigate, experiment, make, and . . . repeat. Williams's seminars are notoriously free form, imposing no boundaries or limitations. Not everyone responds well to such freedom, even liberation. Thurman did. His intellectual inquisitiveness was revealed and his skill sets developed.

Completing Bard's MFA, three-year summer program, required even more focus amidst a diverse faculty that



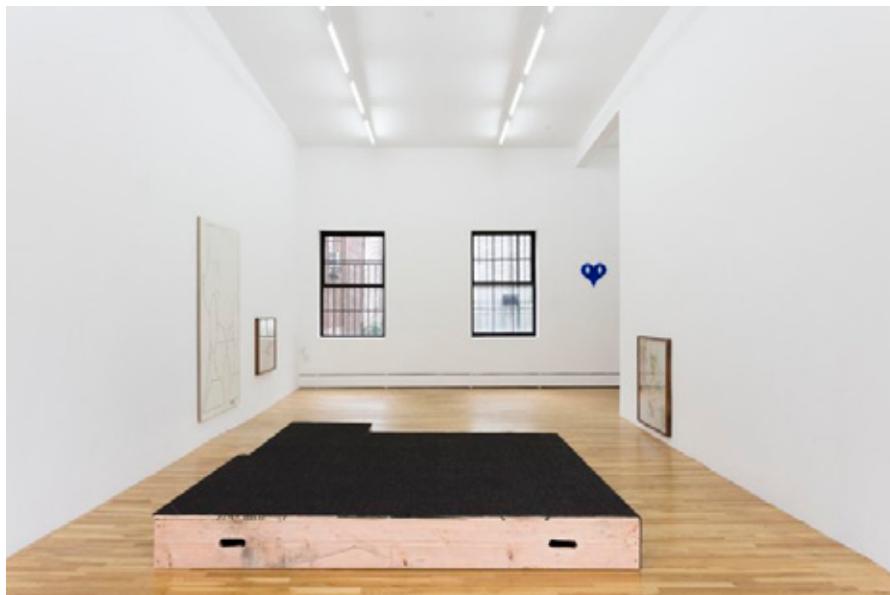
included Amy Sillman, Fia Backstrom, Thomas Eggerer, Dana Hoey, and Cheyney Thompson. Drawing has always been part of Thurman's art making. It takes discipline and real practice. Through encouragement from his mentors and peers, he has taken drawing out of the studio and into the world.





Drawing is center stage in his current exhibition at Off Vendome. The works are dreamy, vaguely homoerotic. They consist of simple lines and blushes of color, almost like an unfinished Egon Schiele. Drawn approximately life-size, the figures depict various (highly disciplined) professions that Thurman was encouraged by his family to consider as an adolescent: soldier, athlete, and priest. The drawings are positioned in the gallery as the figures might appear in life: standing, reclining, and just lounging around.

In contrast, Thurman's Minimalist paintings, made from burlap twine that looks like it was snapped on canvas, are schematics of psychological maps. They look like dance maneuvers, recalling – but only just – Andy Warhol's dance diagrams. Thurman's schematic paintings have a mid-Century Modern graphics look, but they are inherently menacing and intimidating, especially when you see the titles, "Fear," and "Envy."



A carpeted platform was added to the gallery and placed in a central position. As a work, it references a series of paintings, which depicted fictional stage architectures that Thurman exhibited in London. While the platform seems more of a psychological prop than a sculpture, it can be used for performances. It also invites comparison with Felix González-Torres's "Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)" 1991. Finally, there is a sensuous, cast, supersaturated blue, glass replica of a heart-shaped Tramp Art picture frame. (Tramp Art is humble homemade craft made by factory workers, farmers, and laborers from just about every conceivable occupation or made by itinerant workers – hobos – to make extra cash.) It recalls the shape of classic Pennsylvania Dutch graphics that appear in *Frakturs*. This is a fitting association and consistent with Thurman's origins in Chester County, PA. The glass heart also symbolically frames absent portraits.

All these works fit together in a single space, like large pieces of a puzzle of an intense intellect and uncertain, but cool, emotions. Having moved beyond a speculative period in the art market, it is refreshing to see so many talents and techniques in one person's output.

Once I had a love and it was a gas. Soon turned out had a heart of glass Seemed like the real thing, only to find. Mucho mistrust, love's gone behind - "Heart of Glass," Blondie (© Deborah Harry + Chris Stein, 1978)

