

Léonie Guyer @ CCA Wattis Institute

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by Mark Van Proyen



Installation view: form in the realm of, 2018. Photo: Johnna Arnold

In a selection of about 30 mostly recent paintings and drawings, Léonie Guyer mines the evanescent threshold points between the almost visible and the plainly perceptible, creating intimately scaled works that seem slightly shy of becoming fully manifest. These oftentimes fragmentary works do not articulate the ineffable so much as they softly conjure it, making them seem at once too specific and not quite specific enough for the words we may be tempted to attach to them. They are, in the words of philosopher Roy Wagner, “symbols that stand for themselves,” and they do so in a beguiling and lyrical way. The task that they set for themselves is not so much a resistance to the tyranny of categorical understanding as it is a ninja-like infiltration of the world of presence with indeterminate ghosts of their own impetus toward partially realized (pre-constructive?) possibilities.

And yes, my invocation of the term presence is specifically intended to reference Michael Fried's famous 1967 essay titled *Art and Objecthood*, which drew a judgmental distinction between what he thought to be the banality of Minimalist "theatricality" rooted in presence, understood in distinctive relation to the more complete and satisfying "presentness" of Greenbergian post-painterly abstraction. Guyer's works add a third possibility to Fried's

reductivist dialectic, accomplished by simultaneously flying over while also tunneling under it. The tunneling-under part is indicated by what seems to be a kind of archeological romance, indicated by a vocabulary of shapes and materials that seem to have been excavated into visible being from some misty ancient past. It is not for nothing that 10 of the 30 works on view (all Untitled, and the majority from 2018) are executed on slabs of marble of varying size and shape, all displayed on shelf structures in a manner common to the presentational etiquettes of archeology museums.

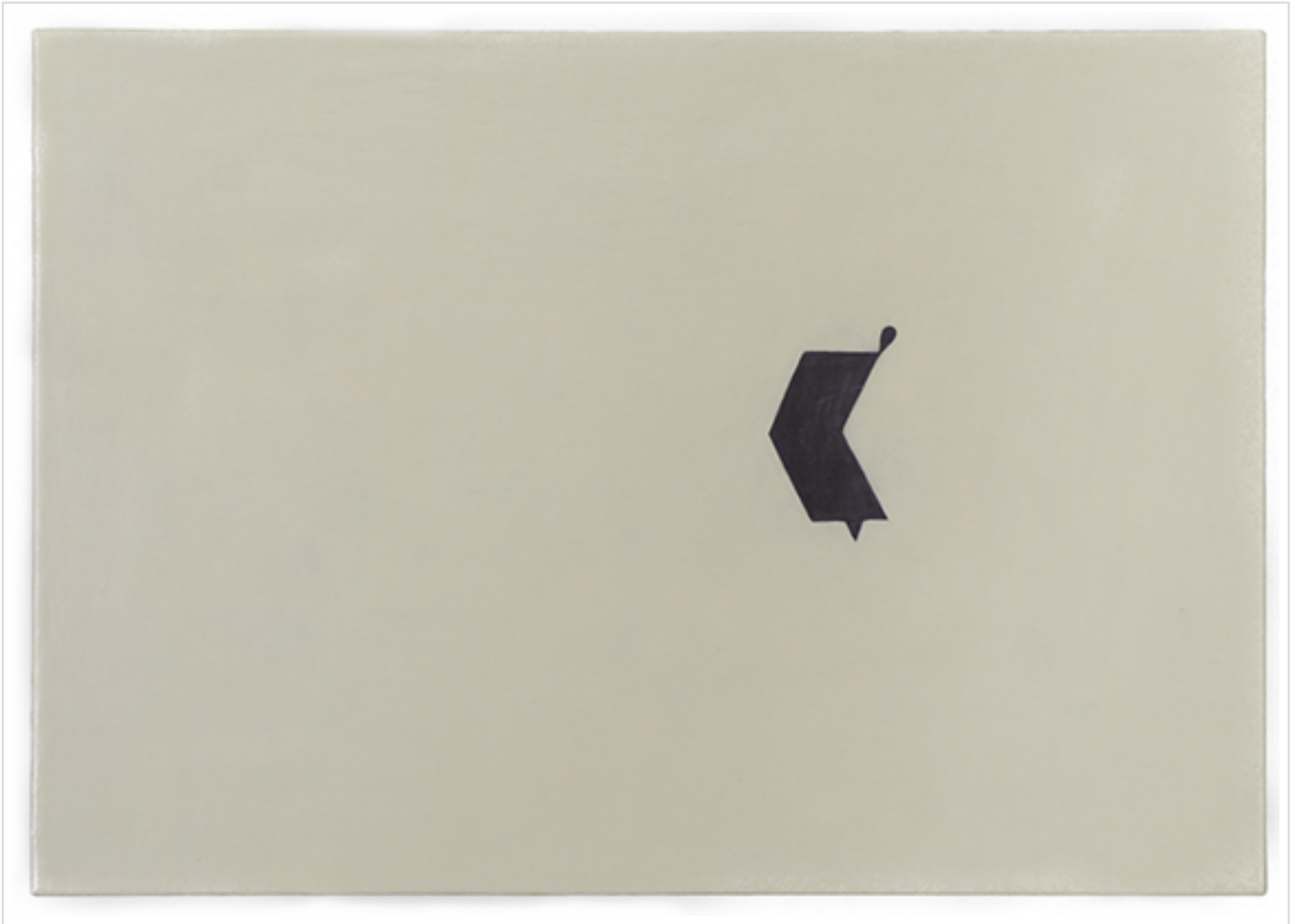
Upon these slabs are etched schematic or silhouetted shapes that seem to be derived from plant anatomy or astronomical diagrams, these usually being small in relation to the larger surfaces upon which they are inscribed. These shapes might be accurately called hieroglyphs if we take the word in its most literal sense — (Hiero = magic, and glyph = inscription), and in a very oblique way, we might want to connect them to tribal fetishes in that that they invite us to think that they have some special power over reality. In some instances, these shape-configurations are linear and schematic, while others are filled in with layers of richly saturated oil paint that seems to subtly hint at dimensional modeling.



Untitled, no. 103, 2018, oil on marble. Photo: Phillip Maisel

In addition to the 10 works on marble slabs, there are also five untitled wall drawings that recapitulate the familiar configurations on the gallery walls, all executed in a faint pencil line that

comes into perception only when you get close, creating a delightful surprise. Sometimes we see these works hovering above normal sightlines, which activates the entire gallery space as an echo chamber that responds to and reflects the other works in the exhibition.



Untitled no. 85, 2015-2016, oil and chalk gesso on wood panel. Photo: Phillip Maisel

My personal favorites are the quartet of small oil paintings on panel, which reveal the shape-symbols as figures set against richly saturated grounds. In works such as Untitled No. 85 (2015-2016), it is clear that the paint was applied in a succession of thin layers that were subsequently sanded down prior to subsequent applications of slightly different colors, and this obviously time consuming process yields magical results that convey a remarkable effect of deep space. A similar effect is also evidenced in pair of larger works on fine paper, only these works show the natural fibers of the paper enlivened with thin saturations of ink and water-color, with the silhouette shapes resulting from the application of opaque gouache, floating in their amorphous spaces as if they were extraterrestrial weather balloons.

Art history gives us a number of presiding spirits to point to in relation to Guyer's work. One obvious one would be the elegantly subdued still lives of Giorgio Morandi, he being the 20th century's uncontested master of evanescent subtlety. Another more obscure one might be the ideographic remnants of the 7,000 year-old Neolithic Goddess cultures from southeastern



Untitled, no. 78, 2014, oil and chalk gesso on wood panel. Photo:
Phillip Maisel

Europe that were investigated by archeologist Marija Gimbutas (*The Civilization of the Goddess*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1991) during the 1970s. Guyer seemed to want to hint at these and other sources by including a small collection of ephemera as part of the exhibition. This small offering includes a pair of miniature late Roman glass containers originally used for what was probably scented oil, a small Shaker prayer box and a handmade book of poems by Susan Howe. Also included was a video monitor showing Terry Fox's *Children's Tapes* (1974). The latter is a classic early work that makes simple and elegant sport of everyday activities such as funneling a candle flame through a fork, executed in a way that invokes the austere aesthetics of minimalism on an intimate scale, absorbing the viewer in a pocket theater of purposeless, libidinous play.

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Léonie Guyer: "form in the realm of" @ [CCA Wattis Institute](#) through December 15, 2018.

About the Author:

Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries focus on satirizing the tragic consequences of blind faith placed in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for *Art in America*. His recent publications include: *Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein* (2011) and *Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction* (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read Alex Mak's December 9, 2014 interview, published on *Broke Ass Stuart's Goddamn Website*.