

# ARTFORUM

## REVIEWS

### BERLIN

## Sergej Jensen GALERIE NEU

To many, the work shown in Sergej Jensen's exhibition "Master of Color" must seem like a radical act of refusal: painting that celebrates its own absence. The predominantly large and midsize pictures exhibited here consist chiefly of various fabrics, often of several different types, that have been sewed or appliques together and then stretched on wooden frames or slats. Painting in the strictest sense is used only sporadically, and is often a minimal, almost incidental element. For viewers familiar with Jensen's art, this will come as no surprise: He has been working for years on similarly material-oriented pieces that are both subtle and rough, pieces that minimize the directive role of the artist while focusing on inherent or slightly modified qualities of the fabric itself as image. Accordingly, he has typically employed processes such as cutting, ripping, stretching, crumpling, sewing, bleaching, dyeing, or washing. Taking these as starting points, he then selectively applies traditional painting materials such as oil, acrylic, or pastel in ways that are usually closely intertwined with the fabric's own materiality. Stains, rips, or frayed edges are also used as inspiration, and often what would otherwise be seen as defects become the focal point of a work. The choice of fabric for Jensen is itself a genuinely painterly act: He prefers to use muted shades, which he distinguishes from one another by varying the tonality, texture, and density of the material.

In this exhibition, the supports ranged from the finest silk to the coarsest burlap, although standard canvas was also part of the repertoire. Jensen hung his works (all Untitled, 2011) at irregular intervals, sometimes quite close together. Among the techniques used here was the application of color to the reverse side of the material. In one such piece, a pale brown with a blotchy greenish texture was created by painting burlap in monochrome, then turning it over before stretching it, so that the color is visible pressing through the weave of the fabric. The result is an informal, sober, rhythmic surface in which the act of painting and its material seem to have been interwoven in an unplanned artistic process. Such experiences are, for Jensen, ways of avoiding or pointedly outwitting intention. But for all of this seeming dependence on accident, Jensen's techniques are quite sophisticated: He might use several fabrics of varying translucence, or combine the pressed-through colors of his reverse-painting method with contrasting appliques or colored stitching. In one piece he even goes so far as to make an explicit painterly gesture: A curved mark shines forth from a reverse-painted surface. The effect suggests Polke-esque caprice or can perhaps be read ironically as the supremely vague suggestion of a figure. Other pieces in the exhibition are surprising for their unusually rich, impastoed colors. A large horizontal piece painted in oil was a muted, glinting monochrome of blues directly next to it, a small square featuring opaque



pink pastel provided a harsh contrast. Yet even when availing himself of such relatively "painterly" surfaces, Jensen does everything possible to avoid willful gestures of artistic expression. His characteristically sparse delicacy and refined roughness are not, however, in service to anti-painting or the rejection of the image. Quite the contrary: They stem from Jensen's artistic aim to draw a hitherto unseen beauty directly out of materiality in an intuitive, free, and ultimately radical way.

—Jens Asthoff

Translated from German by Anne Posten.