

ARTFORUM

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PAUL MOGENSEN: BYKERT GALLERY

by Emily Wasserman

Sprayed various shades of gold (in, for instance, a pale silver gilt or a coppery gold), Paul Mogenson's paintings at the Bykert Gallery have been passed off with little ado by some of this young artist's critics. They are admittedly problematical works and are even at times intriguing, for certain contradictions make these rectangles arranged in arithmetic progressions a bit richer—but it is a richness which just makes it through the back door. I was bothered by a kind of dry intellectualism about these paintings, which takes form in Mogenson's use of ordinary mechanical pictorial devices—devices which are nothing new, and which he is somehow trying to make look new. I say "pictorial" because the emphasis on separate, evenly coated relief-like units attempts to deny painting's traditional pictorialism-as-such, and doesn't.

Notions of change as expansion through unit repetition or proliferation give these works their greatest plausibility, but the problem of figure-ground relationship which is set up between the ordered rectangles and the wall space around and in between them in some way compromises that plausibility, at the same time that it adds vigor to Mogenson's propositions. (This is what is meant above by a richness achieved "through the back door.")

The largest sequence consists of four sections in which each of the four units gets smaller as they progress downward, and also move from left to right across the wall (they may be read in reverse directions too). As the gold rectangles are reduced in size so, too, are the spatial interstices between them. The heaviest masses are at the top of the arrangement, and the smallest are propelled forward or flushed right. In the left hand section, where the rectangular parts are wider than they are in height, a curious, involuted perspective is created. One has the sense that the whole plane on which the bars are mounted has begun to rotate inward or curve back into the wall, like the cogwheel of a steamboat as it pushes through the water. This is in contradiction to the object quality of the individual blocks by which the piece is composed, whose emphatically artificial gold surfaces reflect light away from themselves, and thus also attempt to deny or defeat this kind of pictorial illusionism. Where the sections are more vertical in proportion on the right, one is less apt to find this illusion of rotation, and instead the feeling is one of a side sweeping though choppy propulsion away from the left. What is arrived at then is an essentially and strangely disjointed piece, in which one half reads (inadvertently perhaps) as a bending plane, and the other—its extension in more numerous parts and spacings—bears out the flatness and object-relief quality aimed for in the whole.

Contradictions of this sort can often work to advantage, but here I don't think they do. A question that comes up is also that Mogenson (or the gallery announcement) calls his works "paintings": to the extent that they suggest a pictorial illusion of movement into a shallow 3-D space, they might purely be termed as such. (They also do not refer to the kind of literal flatness implied by a single canvas support.) It seems more apt to think of them as somewhere between painting and large, multi sectioned reliefs.

I like better the pieces where several graduated sequences were not combined. One yellowy-gold sprayed work contained only two blocks, a horizontal rectangle above, and a bar spaced slightly below—maintaining a relationship of hovering stasis quite effectively. A large fiberglass work (seen only in diagram) stressed the idea of vertical compression and velocity. The perplexing thing for me about this show, as with so many others this season, is that one is faced with only the most physical demonstration of a particular system (or its integers), which is neither imbued with an imaginative spark, nor redeemed by a dynamic intellectual character.