

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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MARK GROTJAHN: SKULLS 2016–2023

by David Rhodes



Installation View: Mark Grotjahn: Skulls 2016–2023, Karma, New York, 2023. Courtesy Karma, New York.

At 188 East 2nd Street a multitude of small-scale oil on cardboard paintings from 2016 to this year iterate inventively on the theme of the exhibition's title: *Skulls*. Each one, as with a vanitas, is possibly a reflection on, or mirror of mortality and its ever-present facticity, something that itself is always bound to evade our own actual personal experience. It is not easy to comfortably contrast our inevitable on rushing finitude with the superior durability of our skeletal base. Each painting's vitality comes through a virtuosic engagement with corporeal, fleshy paint and roiling color. Here, there is to be no going quietly into that good night; this is exactly as Dylan Thomas famously preferred it. Morbidity, it should be emphasized, is not Mark Grotjahn's tone; rather, it is a bleakly comic and always aesthetically sensuous visuality inseparable from physical rapture.

Though this is a series the artist began in 2016, health issues in 2019 provided Grotjahn the circumstances to develop them further. An early painting from the series, *Untitled (Skull)* (2016), is an oil on cardboard, and at 10 by 8 inches, a typically intimate scale for the series, or even miniature scale, especially in contrast to some of Grotjahn's monumental paintings. The range of color; red purple, green, yellow and white is applied in wet, short angled gestures and oval smearing shapes until a skull/face portrait emerges. It brings to mind northern European Expressionist painting from the first part of the last century such as the paintings of German-Danish artist Emil Nolde, for example his *Mask Still Life III* (1911), or several of the very late self-portraits by Pablo Picasso in which the presence of the skull beneath musculature and skin appears equal to the living physiognomy.

The evocative tone of the "Skull" paintings includes terror, playfulness,

burlesque, and comedy, sometimes in the same painting. *Untitled (Skull XI 48.37)* (2016) takes the notions of abstraction and figuration well away from their relative binary positions to an entirely ambiguous place of both entropy and becoming. The fragmentary architecture of gesture, pattern, and shape merge into both formlessness and image; human and animistic associative features flit back and forth allowing only partial recognition; its red, black and yellow color is somber and the gestures are disjointed, eschewing elegance. In contrast *Untitled (Skull)* (2016) is a direct and frontal image of a skull, unambiguously facing us, the eye sockets staring back like eyes behind aviator sunglasses, the remaining teeth awkward in a stilled grimace.

Untitled (Backcountry 55.46) (2023), at 74 by 94 by 2 1/2 inches is a far larger work than any of the “Skulls”—a painting from Grotjahn’s “Backcountry” series it is also an oil on cardboard though mounted on linen. It is on view at 172 East Second Street. A visceral vortex of pallet-knifed paint, it is as aggressively corporeal as the “Skulls” but without figurative armature or iconographic gestalt. The curvilinear field of the composition features a number of vertical, horizontally smeared sections; the painting recalls the energy and dynamics of Jackson Pollock’s *Blue poles* (1952). After Grotjahn’s last exhibition in New York City of his nearly mural scale “Capri” paintings, this exhibition changes the emphasis to an intensity of another order—just as physical, but now intimate and with a vulnerable stridency that never abandons Grotjahn’s insistence on visual and haptic pleasure.