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ARTSEEN

HELMUT FEDERLE: *The Ferner Paintings*

by Noah Dillon



Helmut Federle "Ferner J (Der Knochen)," 2013. Vegetable oil on canvas, 19 5/8 × 15 3/4".
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery.

Helmut Federle's fifth solo exhibition at Peter Blum, *The Ferner Paintings*, is promoted with an announcement card that excerpts an anecdote from Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists* (1550), wherein Italy's great painters were asked by the Pope to prove their skill. Vasari reports that Giotto was judged as the greatest of all the candidates by replying with a perfect freehand drawing of a circle on an otherwise-blank sheet of paper. Federle reproduces this feat with extremely spare means. The 17 works in the Ferner Series, each designated with a letter from A to Q, were made between 2012 and 2013. Seven are shown here, along with two other paintings that are not part of the series but are formally parallel.

Although some works in the series include acrylic paint, those at Peter Blum are circles rendered only in vegetable oil on raw linen and placed a little above center on the vertically oriented rectangular support. Each painting is a modest 19 5/8 by 15 3/4 inches. Federle stretches each canvas, wraps its edges with brown paper tape, and lays the surface face up on the floor of his studio. The markmaking is simple and is

commonly executed with one of only a few brushes. The works address the viewer as a kind of extension of monochrome painting, though an essay by Dr. Erich Franz in the exhibition catalogue raises that idea only to move quickly past or beyond it. (In fact, *ferner* translates from German as “further,” “moreover,” “also,” and “in addition.”)

Up close the images slowly oscillate between presence and intangibility. The linen’s warp and weft, undulating slightly from having been pulled and tacked to the stretcher bars, become prominent, as is the faintest wear from Federle’s brush roughing the fabric. Each ring has a gradually accumulated halo, and the slow, miniscule difference in texture and saturation may be taken to allude to *ferner*’s other denotation: in some dialects of Southern Germany and Austria, the term means “glacier” — a nod here to the glacial speed of the stain’s development and of the viewer’s full digestion of the painting. Texture has long been an important element in Federle’s work. That these new paintings are so subtle, nearly bare, seems both an abandonment of that study and its apotheosis.

The circles are smart and almost perfectly round. Their facture is fairly uniform though their diameters and thicknesses vary. Some, such as “Ferner G” (2012), are much darker than the others, without a discernable cause. Their mossy halos have spread outward, staining the fabric unpredictably to a greater or lesser degree. In “Ferner P” (2013) and “Ferner I” (2012, not shown here), the concentric brushstrokes and halos are so pronounced that they act as colorless Kenneth Noland.

Although Federle’s work has always included geometric elements, only one other painting in his oeuvre has used a solitary circle (“Siedlung Korea II,” (1988)). Previous works have largely been constructed around rectilinear planes in muted colors. But a small, earlier drawing included here, “Ohne Titel” (ca. 1980), precludes the circle motif in graphite on buff yellow paper, inscribed with a cross.

“Sektion des Zorns” (2013), the other work at Peter Blum not from the title series, is hung high at the center of the room. It shares some formal and material features with the Ferner paintings flanking it. Its dimensions are identical and its image is also a

circle, albeit one overlaid with a cross, the arms of which are a little shorter than it is tall. The work is painted with vegetable oil and acrylic paint—smoggy glazes of rusty brown glowing acid yellow at the bottom, the sigil overlaid in a strong, hard black. The ancient-looking cross is heavy and matte, and sits on top of the muted field, sinking backward in visual space and pulling the viewer with it. In its high, central placement, “Sektion” leans slightly off the wall so that it towers over viewers and expands outward into the space, dominating and reigning over the others as an icon, lord, or father. The title translates as the religiously, omnipotently imbued phrase “section of wrath.”

As Dr. Franz notes in his essay, some notion of spirituality has long been part of Federle’s work. If this collection represents the artist’s spirituality, it is of a hoary Protestant type, leaning as much on the inviting, meditative theology of Christ in the Ferner paintings as on the Old Testament’s threats of vengeful wrath in “Sektion.” Federle’s work is full of such dualities. The Ferner paintings move when seen in succession, their circles dilating or constricting, active. But their surfaces and images are so completely entwined—image and object indistinguishable—as to appear singularly still, monolithic, eternal.

The Ferner Series does inherit something of the legacy of monochromatic painting. 2013 marks the hundredth anniversary of the founding of Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematism. His unexampled movement culminated, essentially, in his best known, really hardcore monochromatic paintings. That development has been something of an ultimatum for a kind of formalist painting, a tradition that continued through Ad Reinhardt, Olivier Mosset, Steven Parrino, to Byron Kim, Jacob Kassay, and Henry Codax, among many others. Today it can seem surprising that an artist can find new territory in the creation of single-color canvases. But it happens.

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Peter Blum

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