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Gray Would Be the Color, If I Had a Heart at Marc Straus Gallery
June 21 to July 31, 2015
299 Grand Street (between Eldridge and Allen streets)
New York, 212 510 7646



Installation view, “Gray Would Be the Color, If I Had a Heart,” 2015, at Marc Straus Gallery. Courtesy of the gallery.

Monochromatic Polyphony: Gray at Marc Straus by Noah Dillon

Marc Straus’s recently closed summer group show, “Gray Would Be the Color, If I Had a Heart,” showcased nearly 30 artists, spread through three galleries on two floors. Each artwork was rendered primarily in grayscale and the show went far beyond grisaille studies, including gelatin silver photographs, drawings, prints, and sculptures. That kind of excess is, although not ideal, pretty much to be expected with a lot of summer group shows. “Gray...” exceeded many similar exhibitions in its more-or-less consistent tone; and it basically achieved its aim of selecting works intended to be, as

the press release puts it, “Not completely hopeless. Not utterly bleak. Not fully shrouded in darkness.” The maudlin grimness, which is supposed to be tinged with optimism, is excessive, too. But there were some really great artworks, silver lining or no.

Kind of surprisingly, few of them were monochromes. Although the show celebrates gray, it doesn’t remain there alone, and it recognizes that the color itself is broad: cool grays, warm ones, dark, light, tinted with pink, or blue, brown, orange, nothing at all, reflective, matte, symbolic or concrete, and so on.

There are contrasts from the start: near the gallery’s entrance is a photocollage diptych by VALIE EXPORT, showing a woman’s face towering over and observing a hypnagogic modernist cityscape, set next to two small assemblages by Kristjan Gudmundsson, made by adhering mechanical pencil leads in ordered rows on sheets of aluminum. In a nearby corner of the gallery, Rona Pondick’s man-headed dog sculpture, *Fox* (1998 – 99), recalls sci-fi horror from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Mars Attacks!* It uses an image variously intended as horrific or absurd. One realizes that chimeras — aesthetic, biological, conceptual, whatever — are usually both.

Here also hangs a totemic punching bag by Jeffrey Gibson, a tight drawing by Joyce Pensato and Matt Ducklo’s *South Parkway East Church* (2011), a black-and-white photo of a small bus, used by a Memphis church, locked behind a chain-link pen in the middle of an empty parking lot at night. Like a lot of the work here, these simple, spare images are iconic and direct.

Upstairs, the show doesn’t hang quite so neatly together, or at least some of the works in it fall flat. Diana Shpungin’s *A Failure of Memory* (2015) suffers from a bland execution, as does Grayson Cox’s *Vent* (2015). The artists’ material choices are unclear: why is Shpungin’s wastebasket cut so loosely in half? Why are the shorn edges lined with plaster-cast material? Why is Cox’s painting framed in a large plywood casing?

Why does the frame look so unfinished compared to the naturalism of the painting embedded within it at an angle?

Although Zlatan Vehabovic's image of a large, dead whale, called *Rock Bottom Riser* (2014), is painted fussily, the image has deep roots in Dutch printmaking, and it's a powerful one: a morbid leviathan. One reason that the icon is so common, besides its allegorical value, is because it's one that recurs under human guidance. Whales have been threatened for centuries, first by large-scale hunting, and now by climactic catastrophe. Two works by Sam Trioli, hung side-by-side — *Harry S. Truman* (2014) and *Untitled (Vibrations)* from 2013 — show in photorealistic detail the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb, and the man who ordered such weapons dropped on Japan 70 years ago. These, at least, are utterly bleak.

Also upstairs is a small and reserved etching by Jasper Johns: an image of one of his pewter-colored flashlight sculptures, titled *Flashlight* (1967 – 69). Johns was a gray eminence who sort of inspired the much-remarked-on work of another of the color's most famous painters, Brice Marden, whose early monochromes likely subsequently influence some of the other artists on view, such as Jessica Dickinson, Geoff Hippenstiel and Jim Lee. These artists are still exploring the marriage of surface, color and image. And for whatever reason (there are probably several that the artists would cite) gray is a good way to do that.

Finally, Dove Bradshaw's 2013 painting, *Contingency (Snow Tracks)*, shows a really concrete, absolute way to think about color's use in art. Bradshaw made the painting by applying liver of sulfur to a silver-coated canvas (the former substance reacts to patinate the latter). Her technique here and in other works uses chance-based methods — developed by Johns's friends Robert Rauschenberg, Merce Cunningham and John Cage — in order to create images rooted in the precise relationship of one chemical to another. There's nothing more factual than that. It's not morose or bright, just true. Another fact is that this show had a lot of interesting work, a mélange. I don't know about anyone else's heart, but mine is there: it's a gray fact.