



Marcel Frey - Petitessence
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Razzle Dazzle Dazzle
On Marcel Frey's New Works at Galerie Thomas Fischer

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In his exhibition “Petitessence,” Marcel Frey presents new works in an installation that takes over the entire gallery and transforms it. The exhibition makes manifold references to earlier works, almost like a retrospective. A special focus is placed on two subjects that have already appeared in various ways in Frey’s past work: the grid and the fold. These two elements are so subtle (*petite*) and yet so central, so essential (*essence*) that we would like to examine them more closely in the following.

Let us begin by examining the individual fragments that Marcel Frey has assembled in the space and which ultimately can hardly be viewed separately from one another. Key here, and dominant if only because of its size, is the sculpture *Opus Moderandi I* (2024), which at first glance seems like a shelf that has been robbed of its original use, a display or ordering system without content. Here, vertical supporting columns are combined with five horizontal, tilted shelves to form a quadratic structure that was sprayed with paint in a disassembled state with quick painterly gestures (the works on canvas are created in a similar way). Here, the load-bearing beams were placed flat next to one another on a surface, the later crossbeams were arranged like a stencil on top that was then “captured” by the paint. In an additional step, the artist sanded the painted surface, making the paint seem as if burned in and completely fused with the support material. In this way, Frey breaks the fragility of the painted surface and moves the sculpture closer to an object that can be used and arranged. The sculpture is literally folded out, painted, and reassembled to form a grid.

This sequence of design, deconstruction, processing, and renewed construction is also inherent to many works by Marcel Frey where he goes through a similar process of folding, compressing, twisting, and turning, then once again smoothing and then mounting the canvas. While the two paintings *Untitled* (2023) show this clearly (at issue here are the creases and folds that are emphasized by the fine layer of spray paint) the chronology of traces disappears completely in the three-dimensionality of the shelf sculpture. Although the object is a properly ordered and geometric structure, a grid, our eyes virtually lose it when examining the work. They are overtaxed by the layering, the lines and surfaces, and above all by the strong black and white contrasts, and are hardly able to capture the perspective or even classify the object; a principle of the psychology of perception that is called “razzle dazzle.” This form of intentional disorientation was used during the First World War in the form of *dazzle camouflage*¹ and is applied in *Opus Moderandi I* so that the three-dimensional object naturally does not disappear, but in its optical confusion is pushed as it were into the surface and thus regains two-dimensional qualities: sculpture as image.

The work *Thisplay* (2024) also combines grids and folds, although it is not an object made by the artist, but a ventilation grill that Frey found in the very condition in which it is exhibited. It is thus diametrically opposed to the sculpture in terms of its process of emergence. No careful and precise construction took place here, but shifting and bending with mechanical force. In its compressed form it recalls vertical blinds (and thus earlier series by the artists, in which he depicted curtains with their folds using spray paint and canvas). Although it is clearly a readymade from the outside world, in the exhibition space and especially in the opposition to the shelf-like sculpture and its adjacency to the paintings, it becomes a relief and an element of the interior, with a domestic aspect to it.

All of these elements are linked by a grid of concrete slabs on the floor that once again brings a material from public space inside. This raises questions of interior and exterior, inside and outside that already came to bear in earlier installations by Marcel Frey. The combination of typical materials of public space (concrete, slabs of pavement, or, as is the case here, grass paving blocks and the zincked ventilation grill) with design objects that are usually associated with (private) internal space (furniture and other design objects, here in the broadest sense a shelf) is particularly worthy of mention, although the artist is less interested in the socio-economic context and more in the formal qualities of the materials and structures.

The new works and especially the overall impression of the installation "Petitessence" direct the gaze toward a situation constructed by Frey, in which an image fans out into the space over and over, briefly thereafter disappearing into the surface. This process of alternating two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, rest and disorientation, structure and chaos, black and white, surrounds the viewers like a gentle whirr that allows them to balance the individual works in their perception in repeatedly new ways.

¹ *Dazzle camouflage* was a technique developed by the British naval painter Norman Wilkinson: in the early twentieth century (especially in the First World War, but also in the Second World War) warships were painted with black and white geometric patterns to make it more difficult for the enemy to ascertain the size, direction, and speed of a ship or other object.

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