

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

PAUL PAGK

selected texts & press

PAUL PAGK

In Paul Pagk's paintings, the aim has never been to produce the sensation of a concept of a natural object. We must stand in front of his paintings, see what there is to see, and accept the invitation to explore the visual sensation in the substance of the painting. Nothing could be less abstract.

—Mérim Korichi

I feel as though what I have in front of me is mental architecture seeking its place in space.

— Olivier Kaepelin

Paul Pagk is an abstract painter whose painterly language is one of dualities and discovery. His work invites the viewer to slow down the act of perception, that is to 'look', 'feel', and perhaps 'see'. While his compositional style communicates a minimalist approach to form, Pagk plays with the flatness of the picture plane through his use of free hand linework and gestural abstraction, subtle though it may be in places. And yet, it is neither on spatial illusion, nor on process that Pagk insists in his practice. The object that is the painting itself is the form of expression, as are the finely-tuned oppositional forces and personal geometries he creates to relay flattened, deconstructed subjects, each one held in suspension amidst lush fields of singular color.

The pictorial rhythms inherent in Pagk's paintings and drawings are unmistakable. The artist's brushstrokes, both broad and finite, have a deliberateness that manifests a fluid mind and breathing hand at work. Like architectural blueprints that have shed their skin and rearranged themselves from within, Pagk's offbeat graphic compositions are structurally sound, but not in any rigid or mechanical sense. Whatever illusions and sensations his canvases might produce, Pagk's stated intent is for viewers to "inhabit" his paintings and the spatial constructs therein.

"The care and attention Pagk lavishes on his paintings, his satiny, almost licked surfaces, show an artisanal sense of self-effacing craft; not to the extent of effacing the premise of a maker – Pagk's surfaces are not the featureless, machine made skins of Minimalism – but only so far as to avoid loading every gesture with the burden of self-expression.

...

There is a stillness and grace to Pagk's work that seems to owe more to a memory of Greek civilization than to any modern painter.

...

What strikes one most in Pagk's paintings is the abundance of patience, both the patience of their making and the patience of how they present themselves to us. Like Brice Marden's monochromes, but in a way all their own, Pagk's paintings need a good deal of time to achieve their full effect. This willingness to wait, this lack of anxiety about the audience's attention span, is remarkable in so young a painter. (Possibly it is Pagk's mixed cultural background, his position as a 'French' painter actually English and Czech—transplanted from Paris to New York that helps him take such a long view.)

...

While it is true that [his works] are neither 'last' nor 'first' paintings, it is equally true that they have their own secrets and that these are well-guarded. Like inscriptions in an ancient language, they seem prepared to wait millennia if necessary before the world takes cognizance of their importance, their hidden wisdom, their arcane knowledge, their complex system of inner harmonies. One knows that, regardless, Paul Pagk will carry on constructing his human-scaled pantheons stroke by stroke, that no matter what, his paintings will continue to emit their quiet glow, like epistemological batteries."

Text excerpts from Meyer Raphael Rubinstein, "Paul Pagk: The Survival of Pagan Geometry," in *Paul Pagk, Paintings and Drawings* (New York: Thread Waxing Space, 1991).

Paul Pagk (b. 1962, Crawley, UK) lives and works in New York. Institutional surveys of his work were held at the Centre d'Arts Plastiques, Royan (2022), the Fondation Fernet-Branca, Saint-Louis (2021), and C.R.A.C. Montbéliard (1999), all in France. He had solo exhibitions at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2026, 2024, 2023), Thomas Park Gallery, Seoul (2022), Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris (2019, 2016 & 2014), Baukunst Galerie, Cologne (2008), Markus Winter, Berlin (2007), CRG Gallery, New York (1995, 1994), Thread Waxing Space, New York (1993, 1991), and Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris (1987), among others. Recently, his work was included in Drawing Past and Present: Paul Pagk with Master Works from Durer to Matisse, at Joe Project, Montréal, Singing in Unison: Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale That Society Has the Capacity to Destroy, Part 6, curated by Phong H. Bui at Miguel Abreu Gallery, La Poética del Espacio, Galería Marta Cervera, Madrid, Le Prisme du Féminin: Machines, Ovocytes, Fils, Potions, FRAC Picardie, Amiens, France, and Schema: World As Diagram, curated by Raphael Rubinstein and Heather Bause Rubinstein, Marlborough Gallery, New York.

Pagk's work is in the permanent collections of the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (FNAC), Paris; Les Abattoirs, Musée – Frac Occitanie Toulouse; FRAC Picardie; Springfield Museum of Art, OH; Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, NH; Pinault Collection; and Quenza Collection, among others. A monograph dedicated to the artist's paintings and drawings was published by Skira Paris in 2025.

BROOKLYN RAIL

FEBRUARY 2026 · CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE

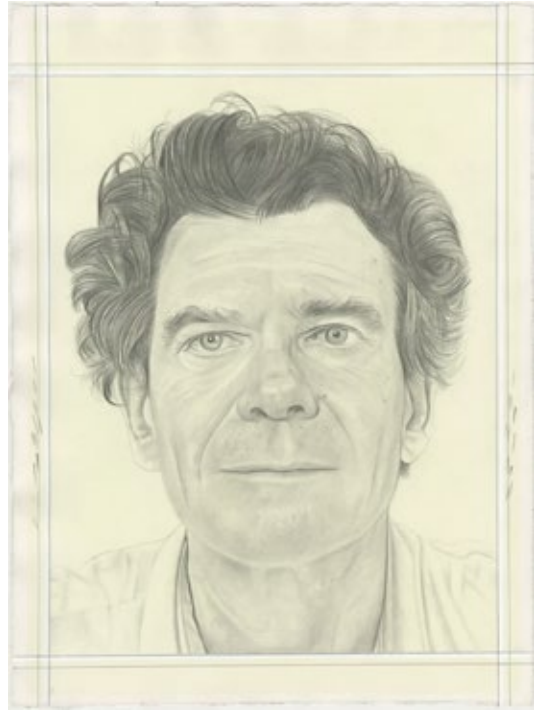


FEATURE INTERVIEWS WITH
AYOUNG KIM
PAUL PAGK
ROB PRUITT
MANDY EL-SAYEGH

GUEST CRITIC
PATRICIA L LEWY

ART | FEBRUARY 2026 | IN CONVERSATION

PAUL PAGK with Phong H. Bui



Portrait of Paul Pagk, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

I first met the painter Paul Pagk in the fall of 1990 through two mutual friends Bénédicte Burrus (then a painting student at the New York Studio School, now the director of Thaddaeus Ropac Gallery in Paris) and her then-partner Jonathan Nossiter, the filmmaker, and soon was introduced to his work in the following year at Thread Waxing Space in 1991. Ever since then, I've followed his work as frequently as I could in different contexts—from seeing Paul's paintings in various one-person or group exhibitions, to making occasional studio visits and even once having a conversation before a live audience at the site of his last exhibit at Miguel Abreu in 2023—I'd never had a lengthy conversation in the studio with Paul until recently, just the day before this new body of work was brought to the gallery to be installed for Paul's current exhibit *Inscriptions in a Shade of Color* (January 16–February 28, 2026), dedicated to the memory of Frank Dahlen (1938–2025). I've always thought of Paul's work in regards to his deep interest in abstraction as a pictorial synthesis of linear geometry, color and light, all of which can be revealed in varying

*Inscriptions in a
Shade of Color*
Miguel Abreu
Gallery
January 16–
February 28,
2026
New York

degrees of his personal sense of tactility. As I've been thinking more about Paul's greater emphasis on how his line within its seemingly simple, yet complex geometric structure relates to its painted surface, I was reminded by this Carl Jung remark, "Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain." The following is the edited version of our longer conversation for your reading pleasure.



Installation view: *Paul Pagk: Inscriptions in a Shade of Color*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2026.
Courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Phong H. Bui (Rail): I remember reading Donald Kuspit's review of your second show at Thread Waxing Space in *Artforum's* 1993 summer issue, and at some point he cited the psychologist/writer Thomas Ogden's phrase "autistic-contiguous mode," which instead of using the limited framework of the psychological condition of the "autistic", it describes the most rudimentary, primordial mediation of how we experience the world through our raw sensory data and sense of touch.

Paul Pagk: Yes, Kuspit appreciated my work as it resisted any gestalt reading. I had the feeling he may have seen my first show there two years earlier in 1991, which included a group of paintings that dealt with the idea of giving the same physical weight to painted surface and built form. The physical application was thickly painted in many layers. I was using lots of earth color palettes, including variations of Van Dyke brown, yellow ochre, earth green, but between 1991 and 1993 I began bringing in pure reds, yellows, and blues; the whole color palette was beginning to shift.

Rail: Was the network of lines during this period similar in their thickness, or at the least of the same character?

Pagk: No, the lines became much thinner and more varied in their characters. I was retracting paint with a small palette knife, and then I would put down the ground, redo the drawing, and repeat this process between line and ground, going back and forth.

Rail: I'd imagine the same is applied with the relationship between color and surface as you just mentioned.

Pagk: Definitely.

Rail: It's called hard-won unity. [*Laughs*] As Adrian Dannatt pointed out in his essay in your recent Skira monograph, you took ballet classes when you were thirteen after seeing Rudolf Nureyev perform at the Palais Garnier in Paris, and continued to do so until you were eighteen. That's five years seriously dedicated to ballet. Do you think the choreography of ballet, however simple or complex, slow or fast in its movement, which only takes place within the constraint of the stage proscenium, may or may not relate to the choreography of painting?

Pagk: Thinking back now, both are related in some ways. The painting is like a stage, contained in its given boundaries. After seeing Nureyev do a pirouette, I wanted to take up ballet lessons with a teacher named Sylvie Pigeon, who was once a star of Les Ballet de Monte-Carlo. Due to a car accident, she had to abandon her dancing career and teach dance. My family lived in Pontoise, and I would take ballet lessons in Saint-Ouen-l'Aumône where she taught. It wasn't that I intended to become a professional dancer, since my clear ambition was to be a painter as early as the age of seven.

Rail: I was also thinking about how ballet requires a certain degree of athleticism, precision, and fluidity. The same can be said of how the linear geometry in your painting generates its own formation in a variety of ways, as the lines change their speed, slow or fast, thick or thin, below or above the painted ground, and so on. Still, insofar as to how the use of material, paint application, surface/support relate to the painted image, I feel the treatment of line and geometry in each of your paintings is both fragile and declarative at the same time. As it has been described in having pictorial affinities with minimalist work, especially those by Dan Flavin, James Turrell, and Fred Sandback, all of whom undertake direct perception, industrial repetition, among other known restraints, I wonder how they again correlate with your attraction to classical Chinese painting, which embraces all things having equal worth as one unified worldview?

Pagk: Must I go back to the beginning? [*Laughs*]

Rail: Tree has roots, sure!

Pagk: I was making figurative paintings, like most art students, at the Beaux-Arts, specially under the tutelage of a well-respected figurative painter named Pierre Carron, a good friend of Balthus. My interest in the figure at the time had a similar rebellious spirit to that of Eric Fischl's paintings; while referring to Édouard Manet's painterly language, they were charged with psychology revealed in their images. It was only after art school, when I took over an abandoned factory with a friend of mine in east of Paris and we were all so poor, that I came to realize I didn't want to make nineteenth-century French paintings, and I began painting on doors, car bonnets, bus seats, bathtubs, and cardboard that I had found in the street. It was a kind of liberation really. I should mention one of my earliest supporters was Jean Fournier, who included my work in group shows at his gallery, bought some works, then gave me my first show at his gallery in 1987 when I was barely twenty-five. It was during this time that I became less interested in telling stories; I was thinking about ways of making paintings that have sustainability, that I can continue making when I am ninety. I was aware of Fournier being a bridge between the French and American art scenes in the 1950s. He showed artists like Sam Francis, Shirley Jaffe, Joan Mitchell, and also Simon Hantaï, Claude Viallat, and Pierre Buraglio at the same time. This was when I began to abandon the figure and investigate line and surface.

Rail: So, the shift to abstraction took place when you were showing at the gallery.

Pagk: Yes, I knew even then that I didn't want to reinvent abstraction. Although I did and still love Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and others, I didn't want to paint like them. I spent lots of time talking to Hantaï about painting and art history in Fournier's gallery; I discovered James Bishop's paintings, his subtle ways of handling paint surfaces and his reductive approach behind his monochrome paintings. I also always loved Paul Klee for his poetry of intimacy and especially his distinct use of line.

Rail: Which he famously described as "a dot that went for a walk."

Pagk: Exactly. I'm trying to explore my line with similar dynamism but spontaneity where natural growth and cosmic energy can evoke feeling and a sense of rhythm.

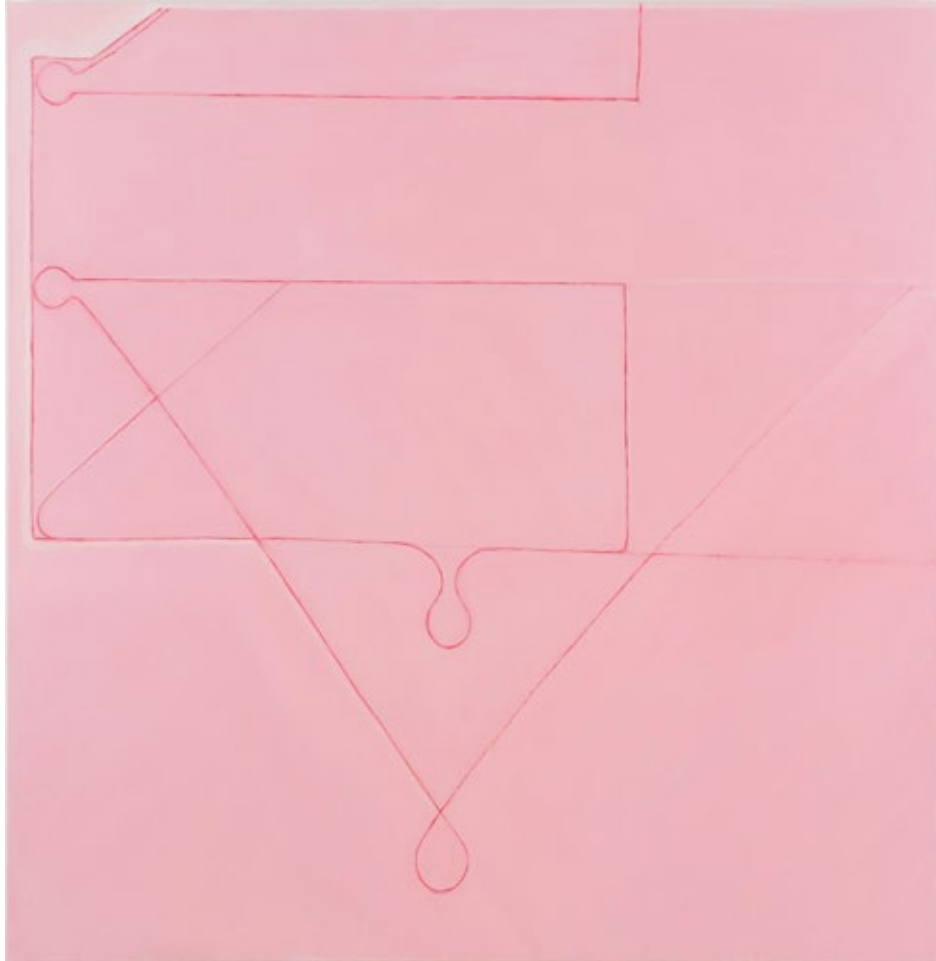
Rail: It's what Kuspit once again referred to as "the rhythm of sensation" that engenders the viewer's "sensory contiguity." He meant that your insistence of how the skin of the painted surfaces, that are succinctly and rhythmically infused with the network of abstract lines, form endless dissimilar variations of your highly idiosyncratic geometry. Paul, can we return to what you would add to your attraction to minimalism and Chinese classical paintings again?

Pagk: Well, in the mid-eighties, I started to look at Chinese painting and pottery, and read François Cheng's *Empty and Full*; I also became very close friends with the Korean painter Hyun-Soo Choi, who had started to work in our abandoned factory and had an immense influence on my understanding of Eastern philosophy and painting. Then, when I came to New York in March 1988, seeing the light and the energy of the city, I said to myself this is where I had to live and work. One of the first shows I saw was *Joseph Beuys, Imi Knoebel, and Blinky Palermo* which was Dia's inaugural show in Chelsea. I was blown away by their works. I loved Beuys's nervous and delicate lines of mysterious traces of things, animals, diagrams; Knoebel's layered construction of painting and sculpture as a hybrid. But it was Palermo's abstract painting that I was moved by the most, partly because he subverted the spiritual or utopian claims of Piet Mondrian or Kazimir Malevich by painting on banal and found objects, upholstery materials for example, also treating the color itself as the canvas, moving beyond applied pigment to color as structure, all of which somehow blurs what lies between painting, object, and the surrounding architecture.

Rail: And a sense of humor, poking fun as being a German painter, yet at the same time deadly serious about his subversive action.

Pagk: I agree. And it wasn't that I was committed to either the spiritual, utopian, or subversive aspects of painting, but I was inspired, and still am, to follow one idea at a time as an imposed search for something. For example, I spent most of my time on the painting 4 *Triangles* (2019) working the mixture of cobalt blue with an ultramarine until I got it to the luminosity and depth I needed without adding any white. It was just too obvious. I needed to put a color there that would turn a painting into color. So, intuitively, I would just mix two colors together and put it down. At some point I realized I shouldn't go back into it, because if I went back into it, I would kill the energy of the color. What I'd learned was that each painting kind of builds itself with me. In other words, the image and the structure are not the same in each painting. I began slowly trusting what each painting tells me what I needed to do. And sometimes the painting is right, sometimes it's amiss, but I must grapple with choices and roads I need to take with each painting.

Rail: Which brings me to the next question: in their insightful reading of your work, the essays by Raphael Rubinstein, Molly Warnock, and Mériam Korichi in your recent Skira monograph each explored the condition of your application of color. On one hand, Raphael expressed that each painting takes on its own mood, capable of creating its own climate or atmospheric *mise en scène*, and on the other hand, in Mériam's words, your sense of color is at once "voluptuous, carefree, and sensual." Molly posited that each color is unnamable as it becomes an archive of the time the painting takes. What are your thoughts?



Paul Pagk, *Tete-à-Tete*, 2023–25, Oil on linen, 76 x 74 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

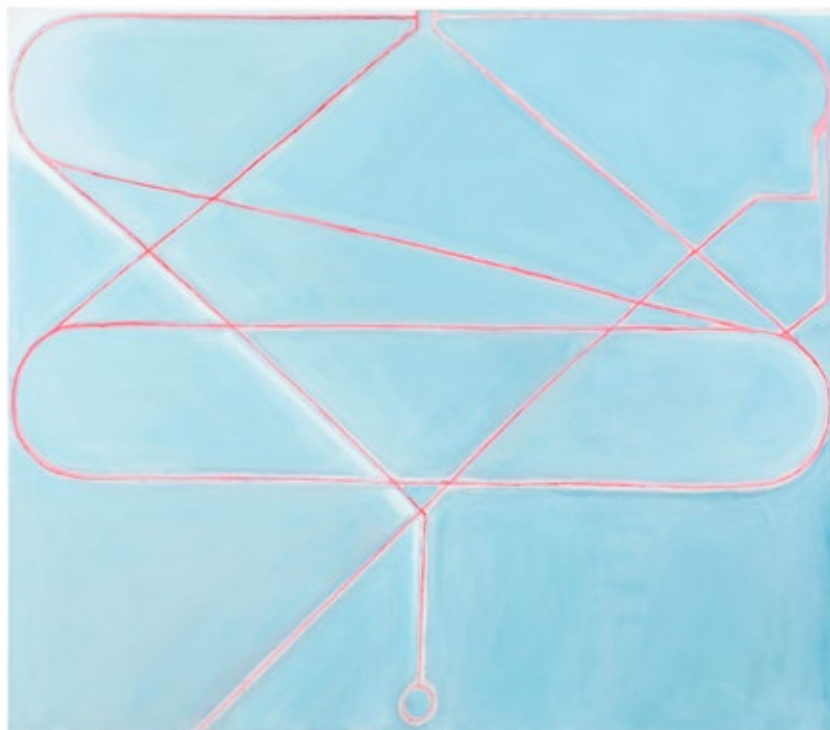
Pagk: I was never interested in monochrome painting that adheres to absolute flatness. I am interested in how the form appears in the painting, how the whole surface of color gets built up, depending on the degrees of opacity or transparency it generates. For example, in one of the new paintings in the show, the pink *Tete-à-Tete* (2023–25), which is a French expression of two people intimately talking one-to-one, I really wanted to imply a slight sense of air by bringing a bit of white paint butting the outer edges of the red lines in the upper part and the left of the image.

Rail: On a thickly painted surface otherwise.

Pagk: True. And not all the pink colors are the same in that painting, which in subtle ways gives an illusion of tonality that creates a friction against complete flatness.

Rail: Not to mention how in each painted area in-between, the lines throughout the whole painting are so visible in their different brushworks hence drawing us, the viewer, to look at them ever so slowly. Also, the two similar nipple-like forms kissing the left line near the left edge of the painting, along with the two dissimilar teardrop shapes drooping down off the center axis, are very alluring to our tactile sense. Is it tickling, sexy, or at the least with the predominant soft baby pink like color, about nurturing? In my immediate reading I can't decide. What about *An Ode to Canal Street* (2024)—a painting I saw you working on while you had a studio on Canal Street in the summer of 2024?

Pagk: This painting has a similar treatment as *Tete-à-Tete* in the use of the white, but the ground is more thickly painted, and they are very different in their moods. I was interested in the fragility of the line being declarative but at the same time being nothing else except itself. Even though the linear geometry is a bit more complex, as the two identical configurations are right on top of each other while facing up and down, I wanted the pink lines to be simultaneously as fluid as they are discontinuous. The same is true of the white lines.



Paul Pagk, *An Ode to Canal Street*, 2024. Oil on linen, 65 x 74 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

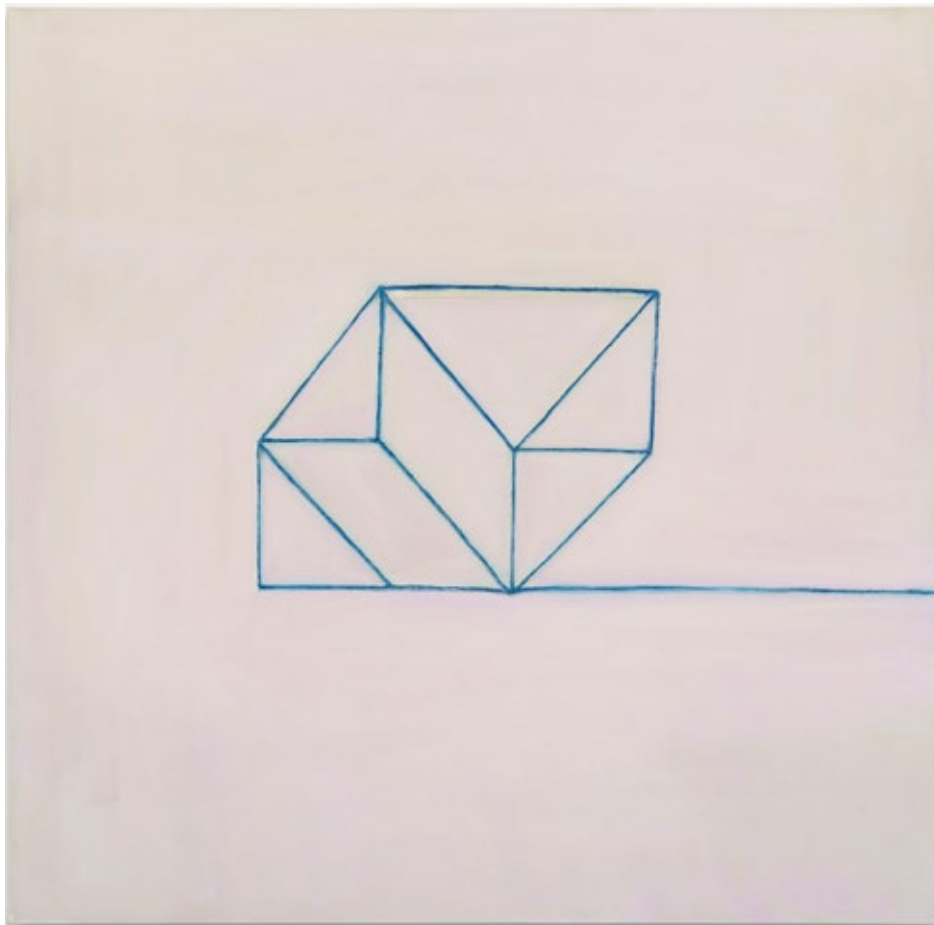
Rail: I really love the circle below that looks like a cord knob, which once pulled down, the whole network of lines or yarns will unravel. Otherwise, the lines are acrobatic yet at the same time I see them as occasional glimpses of anxiety, despite the fact that they're squeezed between the raised surfaces from either side.

Pagk: That's nice. As I said earlier, each painting demands its own linear geometry and mood. In *Scape* (2023–25), for example, we see the geometry is mirrored, similar to *An Ode to Canal Street* but frontally rather than overlapping. Its lines are more muscular, and varied in color, from cadmium orange/yellow to lead-tin yellow being painted in an unexpected way.

Rail: The temperature changes from one passage to the next.

Pagk: It's a landscape after all. This painting started off as an earth green, and at the beginning the main structure had a spinning effect so I had to stabilize it with the lead-tin yellow lines, the overall image is pretty contained within the boundaries of the painting.

Rail: Whereas *Ur* (2025) is one of your most reductive and minimal paintings I've ever seen.

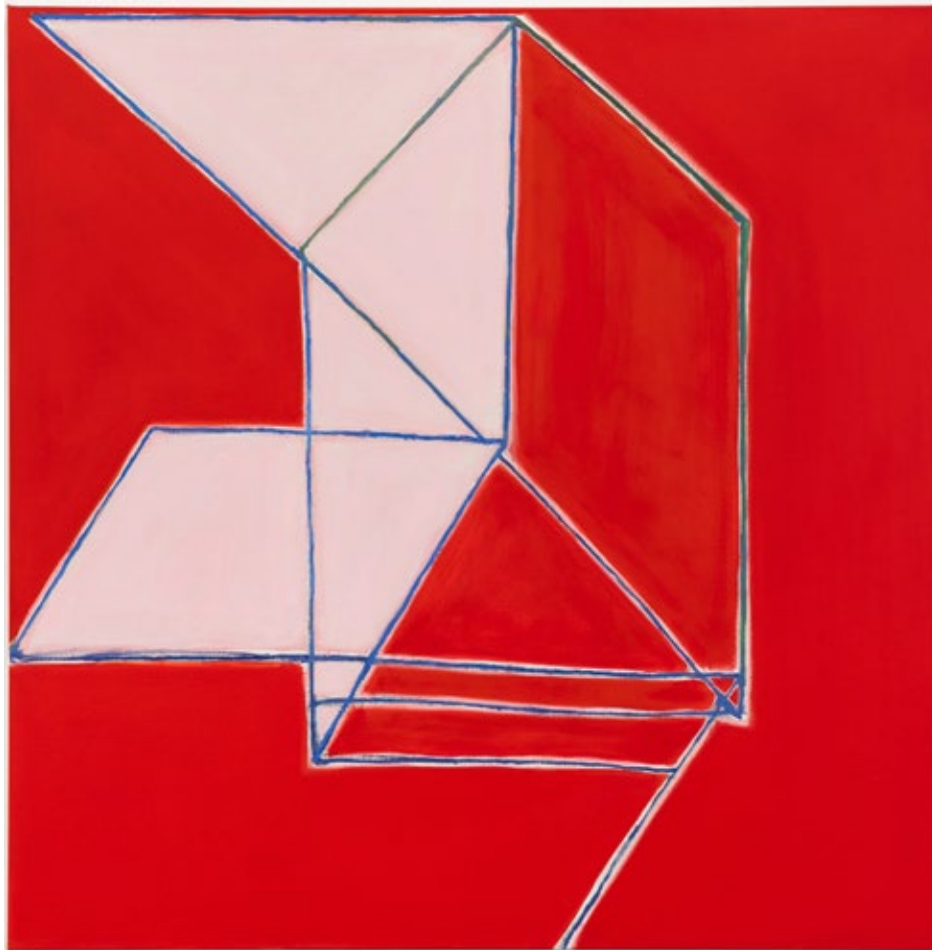


Paul Pagk, *Ur*, 2025. Oil on linen, 64 x 65 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

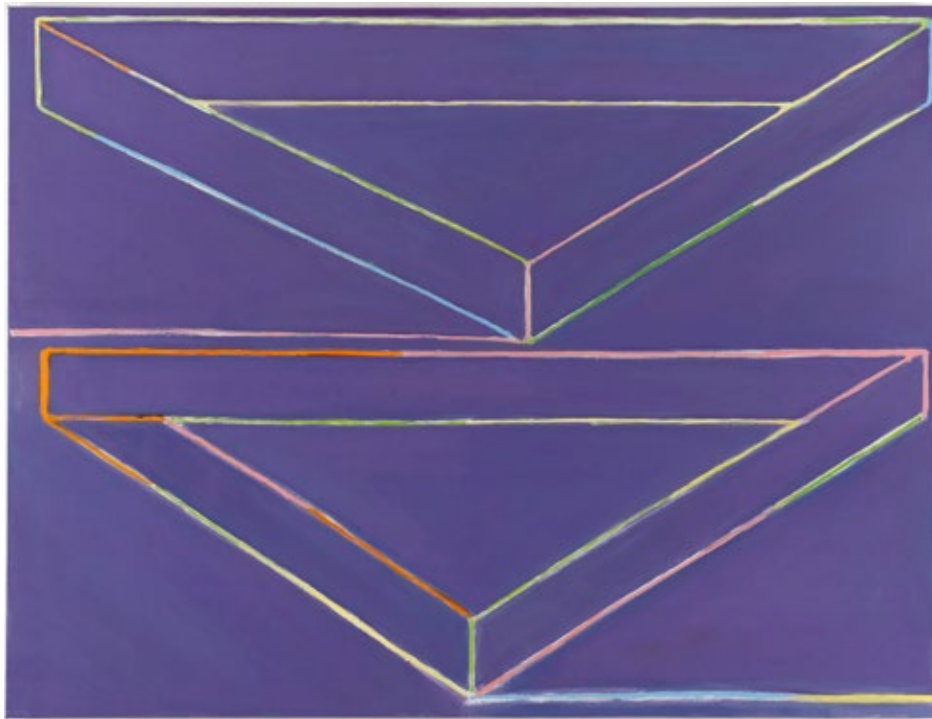
Pagk: *Ur* is short for Uruk, an ancient Mesopotamian city, which was the birthplace of writing and the home of Gilgamesh. I called it *Ur* because I thought it looked like a city from afar as you were coming toward it in the desert.

Rail: Even with the incomplete horizontal line, and how small the image recedes in the middle as well as the lines being even, the architectonic weight is felt even more, as opposed to this painting *Origami* (2025), which has many folding planes while the overall image holds the painting frontally.

Pagk: Exactly. That's why I call it *Origami*, because I felt it looked like a folded piece of paper, especially the upper half painted in a pinkish white. And then there are two reds: alizarin crimson and cadmium red. As you had referenced my work in the context of minimalist artists like Flavin, Turrell, and Sandback earlier, this painting *De-Doublement* (2025) is a good instance of a double image, slightly altered off the center axis, hovering over one another, and the lines are painted with different lengths of colors, from light cadmium green to light cobalt blue, moving to lead-tin yellow to orange, pink, yellow, and so on.



Paul Pagk, *Origami*, 2025. Oil on linen, 65 x 64 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.



Paul Pagk, *Dé-Doublement*, 2025. Oil on linen, 61 x 80 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Rail: You're right, they're your neon lights flickering very gently. In any case, looking back now, your admiration of Alhambra's intricate geometric tiles, ornamental vaultings, and carved stuccoes, with elements of arabesque and calligraphy, is in a way at odds with your appeal to simplicity of form—well, they're not that simple—and minimal use of color, how would those juxtaposed interests reveal issues of time, space, and emotionality in your painting?

Pagk: I went down to southern Spain and saw the Alhambra in the early nineties, right after my father had died. As he was of Jewish descent, I started getting interested in cosmology in different religions, particularly in Judaism and Islam. The figure wasn't the center of things, and I became more aware of the concept of infinite space. And gradually I came to see that there exists this infinite space in Mondrian's work as well.

Rail: Especially with his "Pier and Ocean" series starting in 1914.

Pagk: Exactly and also in his later work. That's when I got rid of the letter-like forms in my paintings. I felt that they were totemic structures, like figures held within, because that's where I was coming from: figure within painting, figure floating in painting, standing in paint, contained. So, I decided to remove the painting's boundaries, and I made a painting called *Egyptian Blue* (1993), in homage to my father.

The title hinted to the Israelites leaving Egypt. And this painting treated space as being infinite, going beyond the painting's boundaries, opening it to the outside world.

Rail: Yes, and the more Mondrian tried to contain, the greater the form of the painting expanded. His network of verticals and horizontals are ready to extend themselves beyond the edges of the painting and onto the surrounding environment.

Pagk: And Barnett Newman brought it even further with his zips, scale, and color field. Anyway, between 1993 and 1999, I was really trying to deal with those issues. Then by the end of 1999 to 2000, I decided to reintroduce the ideas of perspective and image within the painting. That's when I started moving away from the non-illusionistic picture plane that I was holding on to, because I found the modernist approach had failures in it, and though they were interesting failures, I didn't have to abide by them necessarily. I also started to reintroduce the arabesque.

Rail: Well, Matisse explored the arabesque in the mid-1920s onward to welcome intricate, flowing patterns from Islamic art, Byzantine mosaics, and textiles into his compositions to emphasize rhythm, decorative beauty, harmony rather than strict naturalism.

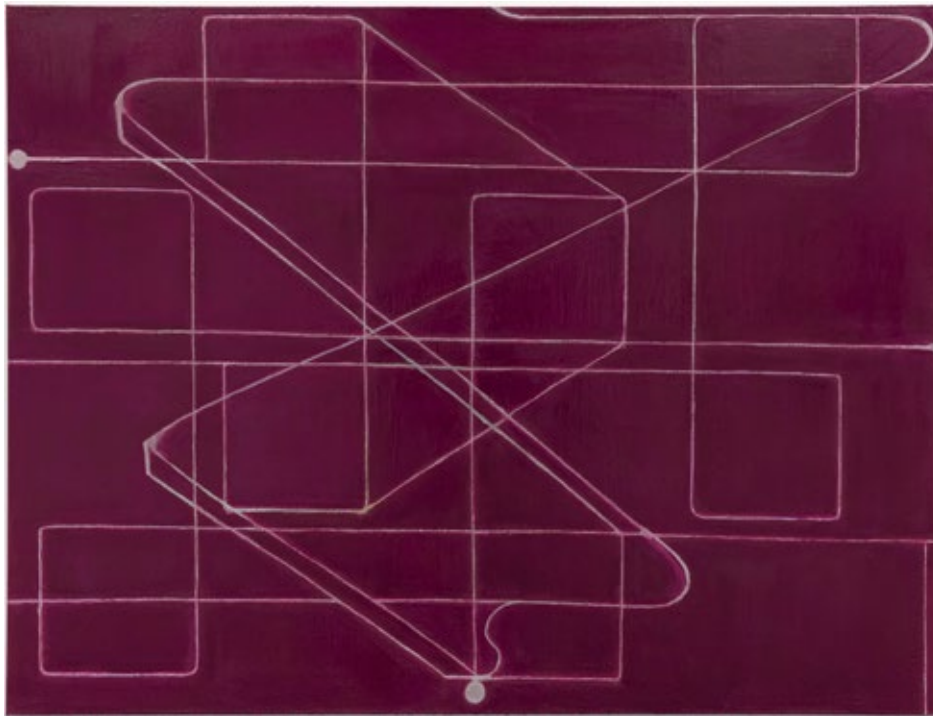
Pagk: Matisse has been a big influence on my painting just as much as Klee. And I also love Rembrandt for both his exuberance and painterly eloquence. Yet at the same time, there's a weight of emotionality. I was also interested in painters like Robert Ryman, and in how Maurice Merleau-Ponty explored the issues of memory and the perception through the body and eye. All is in the eye of the beholder: you come with your own memory of art before seeing a painting or work of art, and this memory is the start of what you see in it.

Rail: I wonder whether the structure and geometry of Richard Diebenkorn's landmark "Ocean Park" series—which is abstractly visible as landscape divisions, windows, architectural elements, and above all the light of Santa Monica when he moved there in 1967—ever came across your thinking with similar concerns?

Pagk: As much as I love Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" series, especially as we share an interest in Matisse, my line and structure come more out of Matisse's than his. Partly I think Diebenkorn is abstracting reality, whereas I play with the illusion of reality to break through the surface and ultimately come back to the surface to create pictorial depth and an ambiguous space where the viewer may imagine seeing something but always comes back to the painting as an object.

Rail: That's true. In any case, when did you begin grinding your own color pigment? What prompted you to undertake such a laborious process? And how would you describe its sustaining effects on your painting surface as well as your specific color composition as you often describe it as such?

Pagk: When I left art school in 1982 and had no money, it was cheaper to buy pigments than expensive paints. That was when I started to use pigments. I first used them in a vinyl medium for two years after which I decided to go back to oils and started to grind them with oil. At that time, it was for financial reasons. From there I began to understand that each color also had a pigment quality, not only a color quality—but some were also smooth, some had tooth with pigment particles, some absorbed more oil and so on...and a color became a decision as it was a commitment to grind it. I began to invest in searching for colors in different pigment stores. For example, there would be a bigger choice of cadmium yellows, or ultramarine blues, cobalt, the choice of different colors became vast. I learnt how a color changed in the oil and I learnt about its innate consistency. Each pigment has its own surface when applied. I found colors that one could not necessarily find in commercial oil paint brands. When grinding pigments, I limit myself to grind one or two batches at a time, one for the large areas and one for the lines (sometimes I will use more than one color in the lines). Both of those colors change during the painting process by grinding different colors into them. Thus, infinite hues can be found.



Paul Pagk, *8 Squares*, 2023, Oil on linen, 61 x 80 inches, Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Rail: That makes perfect sense for how the surface appears the way it does, I mean each has its own surface condition. For example, in *8 Squares* (2023) how the uneven patches of dried (matte) and wet (glossy) interact with each other on a thickly painted surface otherwise. Can you share with us how such surface appearance came about?

Pagk: The painting started with the eight squares interlinked with lines. I realized I needed to introduce a second structure in the painting like two bodies coming together, like tango dancers, to subvert the viewer from the first eight form structure, giving ambiguity and complexity. At the same time, I worked on the cobalt violet light surface. Cobalt violet light doesn't have much covering power, because it is extremely translucent and the color changes significantly each time a new layer is added. The surface developed a physical presence; it became more than a color. I spent a couple of months building up the surface, reapplying the same color. At one point, I even added a little red to subvert the blue in the violet. The uneven patches of matte and glossy surface is an ongoing process: it will become more matte over time, and it is apparent only under certain light. I like its living surface and imperfection against the refined lines.

Rail: At any rate, can floating forms, or say suspended geometry, be capable of evoking both movement and stillness at the same time?

Pagk: For me, everything in the canvas has the same importance. Nothing should be left unthought of, even the memory of the past of the painting must be addressed. And that's where the whole is an absolute. I don't want to use the word absolute, because that's not the word, but it's a unity of things I aspire to see. There are two types of painters: one who already knows how the painting is going to look when it's finished, and one who doesn't. I'm one who doesn't. *[Laughs]* Every time I bring in a new color, I always feel it can be a total failure, a pictorial failure. The biggest challenge is to create a desirable color composition on which the eye may travel with ease and engagement. To answer your question: like most painters, I aspire to create a dynamic pictorial equilibrium in my painting, where every issue regarding form, matter, color, and composition is equally considered to generate both movement and stillness. This is the most difficult because ultimately it is about trusting oneself on the decisions one makes, but then each painting has its own life, which you have to accept.

Rail: Which again relates to the most essential issue of speed of execution, how fast or slow the artist's hand gesture can be in coordination or harmony with their natural body movement. This is the

very reason why we can detect any form of forgery, be it a painting or a signature once it's closely examined by those who have sensitive yet discriminating eyes. I suppose such an idea of what was called connoisseurship (explored by Dr. Giovanni Morelli in the late nineteenth century, who introduced systematic visual analysis, and popularized by Bernard Berenson at the turn of the twentieth century) no longer has its similar relevance today. Since we're talking about speed of execution, I may as well ask you to share with us the relationship between your drawing and your painting?

Pagk: For me, drawing is about the directness and spontaneity of how an image is given birth to, although sometimes I revisit my drawings. My drawings are not studies for my paintings but a parallel expression with my painting. My painting may reverberate into my drawing, and my drawing may echo into my painting. One drawing breeds the other, and over time they may slip an element into a painting. For me, paper is a transparent infinite space, and it only becomes a drawing when the paper is drawn on, while a painting, due to its object nature, is a painting even before it is painted on.



Paul Pagk, *March 25, 2024*, 2024. Pencil, gouache and dry pastel on paper, 15 x 11 inches. Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery.

Rail: Drawing is like taking notes of a thought, which requires no specific coherence, whereas painting is like the writing that needs some form of legibility.

Pagk: I agree. But I also want the feeling in the drawing to be monumental and painting to be intimate.

Rail: I thought another interesting thing that Adrian pointed out in his essay was how you took the initials of your birth name, Paul Alexander Godfrey Klein, to invent your last name: Pagk. I thought it was very perceptive of Adrian to suggest that in creating a new identity, a new birth, the four letters P, A, G, K correspond to the four corners or the four edges of the painting. Again, it recalls the four corners of the stage's proscenium when you were dancing in your youth. Am I over psychoanalyzing this reference to your spatial sense of scale?

Pagk: Yes, for me, the four letters in my surname and in my name are like the four edges and four corners of a painting. I've always felt that creating a scaffolding on the painting through the process of drawing is like a skeleton from which the flesh and skin can be built onto. It can take a long time or a short time, depending how the overall image sits in the picture plane. I think scale is not about size. It can't be measured by mathematical equations; rather it's an inner or lived condition, as Merleau-Ponty explored — our perception, emotion, memory, and bodies are what lead to each of our personal, sensory experiences. Similarly, color is essential to eliciting this lived experience. I have read Ludwig Wittgenstein's primary work on color *Remarks on Colour*—which had a big impact on my way of thinking about color—often think of Goethe's *Theory of Colors*, and I was really interested in Isaac Newton's color experimentations. And of course, Albers's *Interaction of Color* confirmed that when you put one color next to another one, say an orange to a red, it will be affected by one another; it's as if a new unnamable color would emerge. I came to understand color through the color pigments I use to make my oil paint.. Color, for me, is an essential element that can only be expressed through material experimentation; a hands-on experience. I do not use tape, my lines are hand drawn, my paint is hand made. Painting is the ultimate analog art form to be experienced in person, body and mind. I've always embraced the idea of imperfection in art: the concept of imperfection as the step after perfection, in a line or a gesture, a surface, revealing my sensibility, my vulnerability, ultimately humanity.

BORDERCROSSINGS

PAINTING

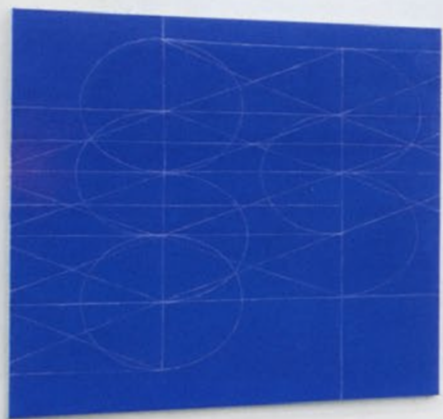


Tala Madani Paul P Ambera Wellmann Margaux Williamson Nick Cave Christina Quarles
Alfred Leslie Jarrett Earnest Chris Cran Mika Rottenberg Remedios Varo
Paul Pagk Ekene Emeka-Maduka Azadeh Elmizadeh Laura Lewis

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Untangling Straight Lines The Paintings of Paul Pagk

by Craig Love

A repeated action is upon its own feet.
We who have spoken there speak here.
The world turns and walks away.
The timing of independent objects
Permits them to live and move and admit their space
And entity and various attitudes of life.
All things are cool in themselves and complete.
— Joan Murray



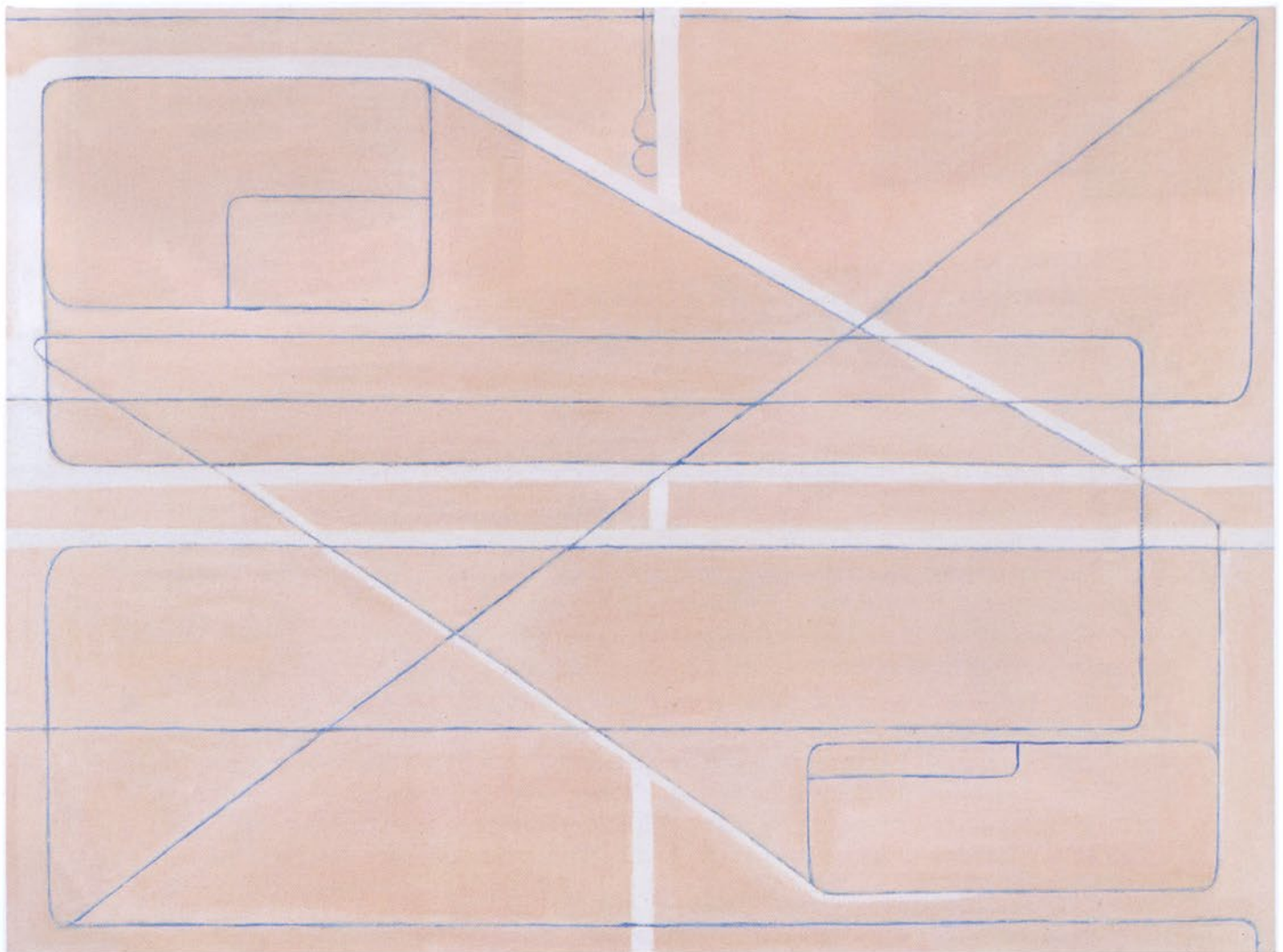
What follows is an account of my thinking through Paul Pagk's paintings, writing about this work in the way I experience it. That is, variously interrupted, discontinuous, full of truncation and recommencement. These works avoid language, unless you speak only in nouns. They resist simple description, or any simple description would prove misleading. Perhaps it is important to state that Pagk espouses the modernist idea that Paint(ing) is a language, to which I agree.

It was my first morning in NY, I was on the D train heading into Pagk's 2022 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York when a voice came over the subway loudspeaker: we will be evacuating this train. The train already has a certain energy going on: individual and small groups of people, many tethered to their devices; the myriad mechanics of the MTA, not to mention the teeming conflict of energies swirling around outside of the cars. Passengers were already on edge as the train was over 30 minutes late; we had been delayed at every stop since my getting aboard in Sunset Park. We had just made it over the plein-air section of the Manhattan Bridge when the announcement more than doubled our annoyance. This added a surge of various emotional energies to the mix, confusion and fear putting a new edge on the situation.

Once we started trudging single file, car to car to car, things took on a certain organized rhythm, only to be halted by another announcement. To make a long story short, the train oozed its way into the station. Without warning the doors opened as if nothing had happened, new passengers flooded in through the open doors, I exited through the throng, making my way to the bustle of Grand Street. All the energies trapped in this series of networked tubes and tunnels got me thinking about line as it appears in Pagk's work. How the circumstances outside one line affect the energies inside the line, and then as the eye zooms out it acknowledges all the energies working upon/throughout the space of the whole network. The interconnection of energy within the space of the image.

There is often a line entering from an edge into a Pagk painting, so I'll begin there. He provides us a way into these seemingly simple labyrinths. Whether a childhood diversion or mythological labour, these structures invite us to solve their riddles. When we enter these paintings, we must do it as a less reckless Theseus, keeping calm and not tangling our own escape thread.

What do I see when I confront a Pagk painting? Stretched linen, oil primed, the linen may be either smooth or rough. The scale of the chassis is calibrated so that you notice the paint applied to the surface, not the format. Close to square, the larger ones still relate to human scale—Vitruvian man style, i.e., as tall as Paul with his arms outstretched. Paul is tall so let's say 76 by 74 inches. The drawing of interrelated geometric structures upon the canvas in charcoal or graphite might be the starting point/initial catalyst. Then comes the colour. Dry pigments hand-ground with a mixture of linseed and walnut oil (although he admits to using the odd tube: "I'm not a purist"). I think that the slowness and patience involved in making the paint allow Pagk more time to ponder his decisions, increasing the feeling of deliberateness and self-assurance that the paintings have. The paint is applied primarily with brushes. You don't see much evidence of trowelling or knife work in the finished paintings; if you do, it is a gesture of removal. There are usually three to five colours in a painting; one of these will most likely be the predominant ground colour. It could also be said that Pagk may turn three colours into five, depending on how he applies



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Paul Pagk, installation view, "Paul Pagk," 2023, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York. All images courtesy Miguel Abreu Gallery. Photo: Stephen Faught. © Paul Pagk.

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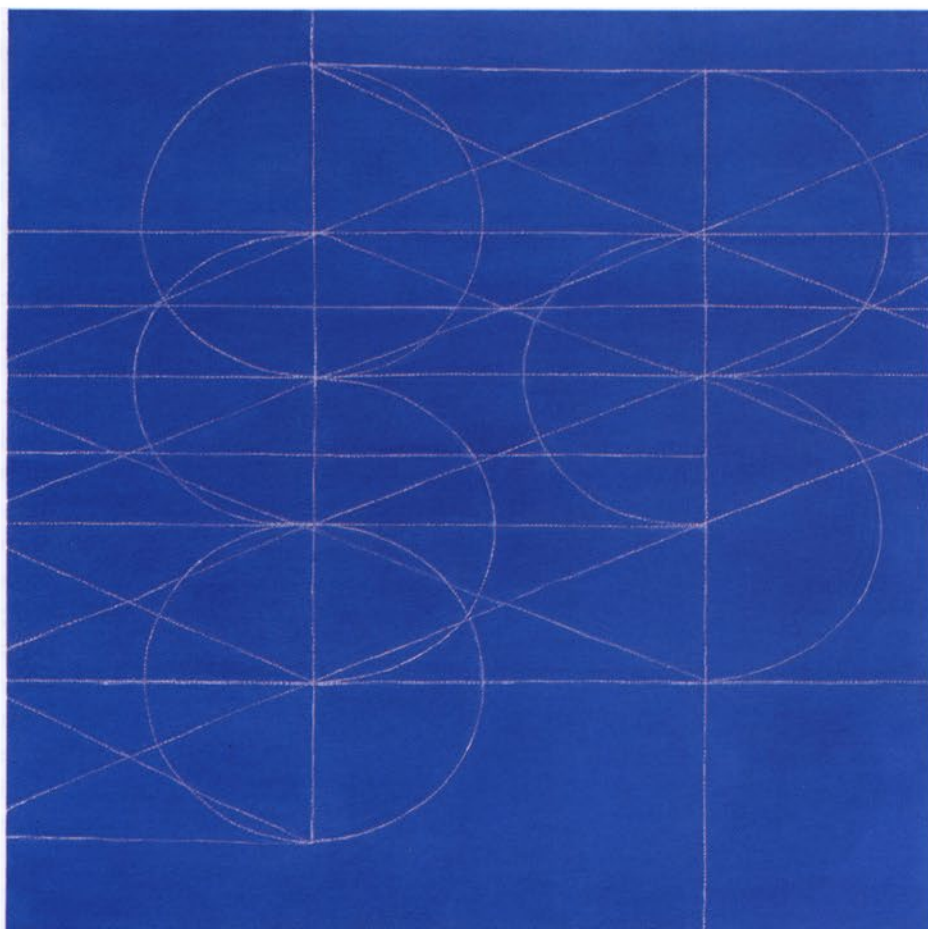
1. *Andromeda*, 2020, oil on linen, 152.4 × 203.2 centimetres.

2. *Pasiphae*, 2020, oil on linen, 165.1 × 162.6 centimetres.

3. *MidNoon 2*, 2021, oil on linen, 177.8 × 177.8 centimetres.



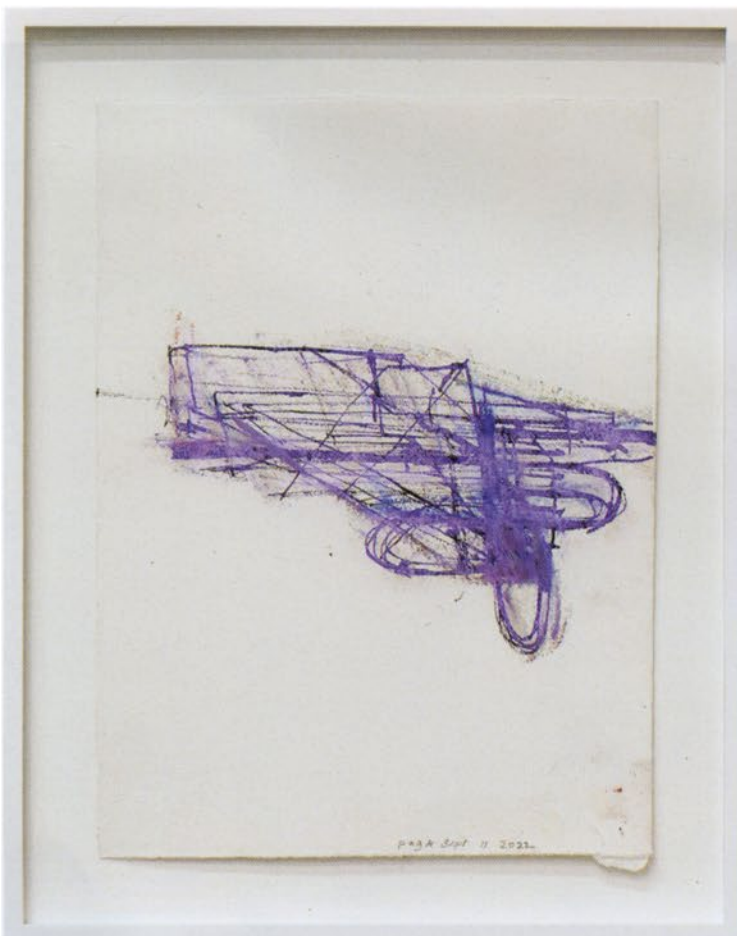
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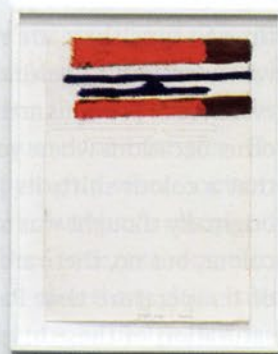
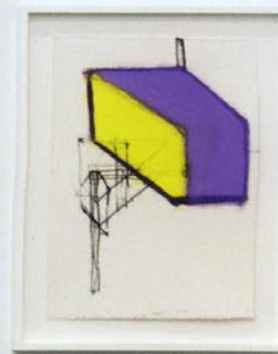


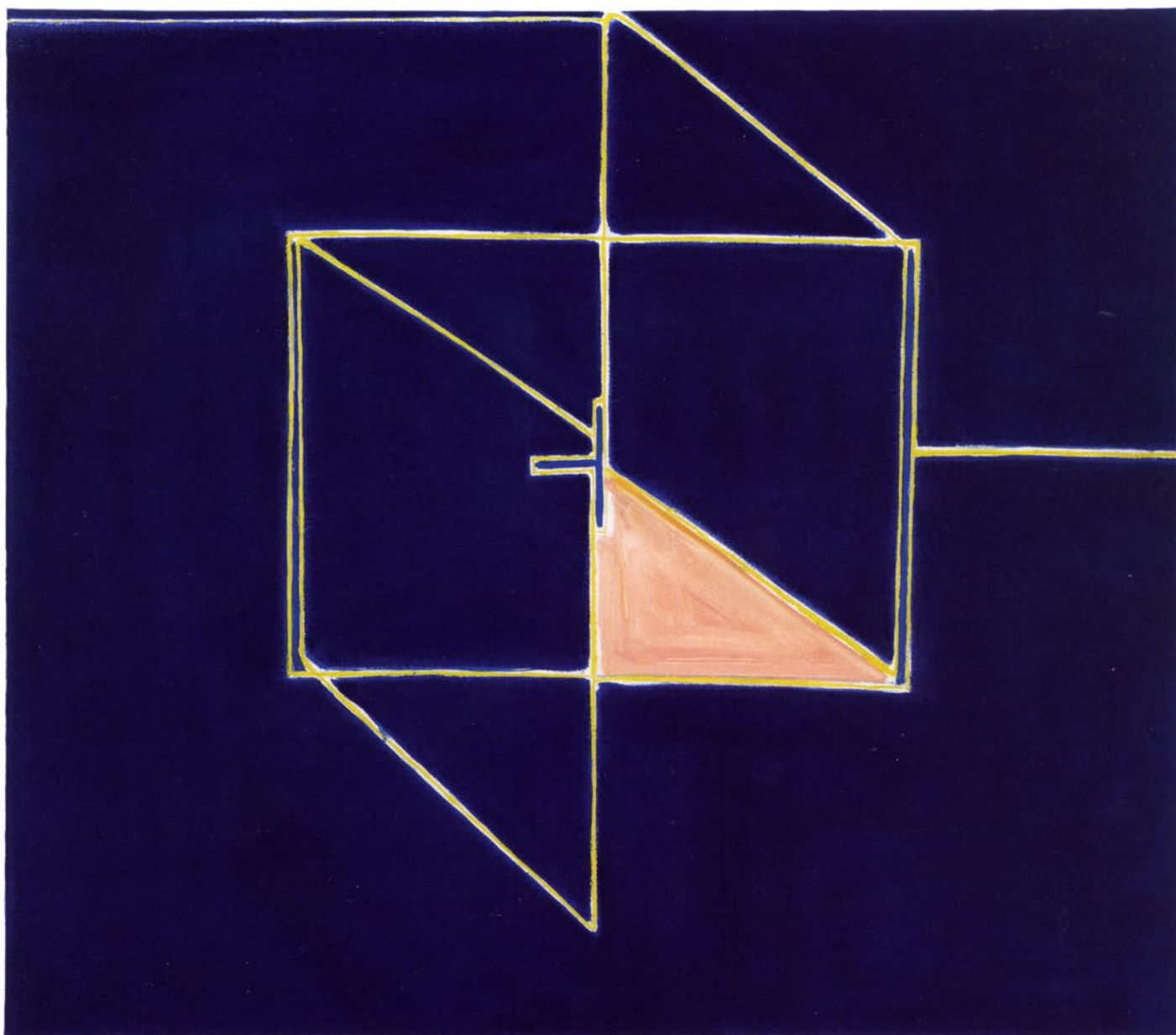
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the colour. The surface is built up with hundreds (thousands?) of free-hand strokes but rarely to the point of impasto or chunkiness. The paint film can be either matte (but not thirsty-looking) and dry, or have a silky sheen or low lustre, very rarely glossy to the point of reflection—an example, *4 Triangles*, 2019.

At the end of the '90s Pagk allowed perspectival lines to deepen the painting space. In some images negative and positive space shift and the viewer is called upon to dispel the previous illusion, however momentarily. Once a certain aspect of the picture becomes clear, you have two choices—step backwards and engage with the whole image or continue along a line while still close up, most probably moving your body sideways or twisting your torso and craning your neck. Step up, step back, step aside to the right then left again, look up. Acknowledge which part of the painting sits by your lips and which by your belly. What is the quality of surface—does the colour modulate softly above your head or darken slightly below an imagined intuitively felt horizon? What is eye level, what do I need to stoop down to see? What do I pick up in my peripheral vision? You become in the space and of the space of both the painting and the architecture in which it is located. Nothing is hidden in Pagk's paintings. If we are willing, we can witness the limitless complexity of the seemingly obvious. "The obvious is not of necessity the normal; fashion rules and deforms; the majority fall tamely into the contemporary shape, and thus attain, in the eyes of the true observer, only a higher power of insignificance; and the danger is lest, in seeking to draw the normal, a man should draw the null, and write the novel of society instead of the romance of man," Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Humble Remonstrance*, 1884.

The paintings are what we may call conundrums of touches. The physicality of touching seems important even when these touches are merely visual. All manner of surfaces, the weave of linen, the brushing layer upon layer of pigment, the scratching away of etched lines, diaphanous wipe-outs of paint, dragged drawn line. A slow evolution of shapes seems to appear as we remake his lines with our own eyes. These structures beg you to toy with them in your mind, to tease them out in real time. This deconstruct and reconstruct of the picture is the way you play. A square, a circle, rectangles or triangles, perhaps a drip or teardrop form or maybe a mirrored pair of soft ellipses, cruciform shapes, hybrid letter forms, an elongated dog track lozenge: these are some of the innumerable shapes utilized by Pagk to build his pictures. In combination they are capable of setting up complex visual structures. There are often correspondences between shapes—pairs or triads of motifs seem to be a common occurrence. Groupings that allow a viewer to jump across the





picture plane, visually linking same with same or allowing themselves a place to rest and regroup. They also contribute to the overall orchestration of visual rhythms playing out over the work's surface. Pagk wants his cake, gets his cake and eats his cake, too. These works showcase all the things a painting can do with what many would call an economy of means.

His exploration of colour is various. It takes on the same function as weather, setting the psychological stage for the actions that follow. Never seeming arbitrary, Pagk's colour enhances both space and gravity in the work and is where the emotional charge lies. Not afraid of bright, highly keyed colour, sometimes positively fauvist gem tones—cadmium lemons, cobalt violets, vermillion, azure blues, etc. But also, softer, more muted tones of rose pink, pale lilac, Sakura whites or fuzzy baby blue greys. These colours are applied cleanly, which is to say they have a feeling of being unadulterated and trustworthy, their integrity intact. From

time to time there are moments in the paintings where something behind the paint shows through, evidence of previous artistic decisions. There are yet other occasions where you have the nagging feeling that a colour shifts its intensity within what you originally thought was an undifferentiated field of colour, but no, these are the infinitesimal changes of temperature that Pagk often plays with. The saturation of these bright colours is never harsh; they can seem gentle, almost like the petals of flowers, where the scale and texture paired with their temporal fragility seem to adequately saddle the weight of their chroma. Also, the gradations in colour that exist in natural things seem to have a special relationship to these paintings. They do not carry any of the slickness of the digital realm or the absolute flatness of a Barnett Newman, even when observed from a significant distance. Perhaps it is Pagk's handmade paints that make them seem more natural. It's the visible patina of their facture;

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1. *Untitled*, 2022, ink and oil pastel on paper, 38.1 × 27.9 centimetres.
2. *Untitled*, 2022, ink and oil pastel on paper, 38.7 × 28.6 centimetres.
3. Installation view, "Paul Pagk," 2023, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.
4. Installation view, "Paul Pagk," 2023, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

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- 4 *Triangles*, 2019, oil on linen, 165.1 × 188 centimetres.

the surfaces are often painted, layer upon layer, with the same colour, slowly built up over time.

Pagk's lines are busy blazing detours around conventional geometry. The linear mark-making seems amplified by the simplified field. Which is not to say that there is nothing more to see or that they are overpowering. In fact, you are drawn toward these gestures, seeking further information. This up-close investigation begins the body's dance with the object. The geometry is hard to pin down. Perspectival lines allow the space to flip momentarily into three dimensions, but it refuses to reside there. There are also moments of near invisibility or vanishing that occur to some lines, the opposite problem; a multiplicity of lines appearing, keeps you guessing, almost forcing you to revisit previous glances. Moments like these spatial flip-flops are ephemeral, like an act of breathing that the work allows; you can inhale the spatial illusion, but then you have to exhale back into the flat field surrounding the figure. You can't inhale forever—at some point you have to let it all out. Drawn lines are laid down with an openness that is more like trembling than breath. But this trembling is not due to fear: more like the slight hesitancy of concentrated effort; ideas like these set off emotional ripples. This hesitation makes the artist's presence felt in the work; this is not the facile deployment of a predetermined program. The sometimes fuzzy frenetic line quality opens up the space, like reaching branches, knots and all. Branches also imply a kind of imperceptible slow movement or growth. As dynamic as some compositions may be, these paintings are embodiments of restraint, willing to wait for you to come to them. Only by waiting will we catch the "old pond, frog leaping ... SPLASH!" haiku quietude. A similarity to haiku poetry (another reductive form that gives beyond its means) seems an apt comparison in that the structural elements are compressed, and the subject is simple, so simple it may rest on the edge of banality, like the banality of describing coloured squares or triangles. The word "simple" keeps cropping up when someone is thinking about this work, but that's completely incorrect and superficial. Used to denote something easily understood or done, or something plain, basic, uncomplicated in form, nature or design, without much decoration or ornamentation. Perhaps there is no such thing as simple; we are simply defaulting to the way we presume to know the world.

A painting such as *And thus spoke*, from 2020, can reveal a lot. This painting has a structure whose line quality could best be described as "adamant." Physical paint handling makes these rectilinear structures concretely the figure upon the no-nonsense red ground. First of all, the title immediately takes you to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, by Nietzsche—the book that contains another historical

White guy's misapprehension of Eastern thought, possibly due to translation but also due to his own philosophical bent; Nietzsche confused emptiness with nothingness. This in turn flipped in my mind, which was already dealing with Pagk's full/empty conundrum, to a punning rhyme *and thus spoke heart sutra*, the most well-known and oft-recited Buddhist sutra, which contains the Two Truths Doctrine, i.e., Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. *Sūnyatā* (bear with me), the fundamental emptiness of all phenomena, is known through the five aggregates of human existence: form, feeling, volitions, perceptions and consciousness. These aggregates could do well as descriptors or guideposts for Pagk's practice.

At a public talk subsequent to his show at Miguel Abreu Gallery, the artist revealed that he had indeed thought of bicycle spokes when he had finished the picture, thereby complicating the titular pun. Perhaps another pun to decipher is the one of frames. A different kind of line that literally contains energy, in our case pictorial energy. And, if we revert back again, this geometrical tubular structure's surface is shared with another set of lines, the ones that control the brakes. These empty frames or tireless spokes definitely need human bodies to operate them: person-powered machines, just like paintings. Even if this bicycle has no tires for the spokes in question, they still may have you going in circles, and the loops you may spin are all in the mind. Although, Duchamp famously made a frameless bike that blinks and flickers when made to rotate by hand. A shape endlessly tumbles through space, turning and flip-flopping all the while like some kind of doomed Icarus tumbling through the blue, never to hit the protean geometry of the Aegean.

On March 20, 2023 (while I was preparing to write this), an amateur mathematician/shape enthusiast named David Smith discovered the answer to a 60-year-old math problem. He found a 13-sided shape (an asymmetrical mono-tile, if you must know) that is able to tile an infinite plane without overlapping, leaving gaps of any kind, or ever repeating. Not only does the pattern never repeat, it can never be made to repeat. This last sentence seems to sum up everything I think about my observation of these paintings: namely, that I can't repeat my experience of them; they can only be revisited. These are unique objects; not made to be construed as a group or series, each painting has its own story to tell, regardless of current cultural trends. ■

Craig Love is a painter. He lives and works in Winnipeg.

TWO COATS OF PAINT

NYC Selected Gallery Guide: February, 2023



Miguel Abreu: Paul Pagk, Mellow Yellow, 2021, oil on linen, 76 x 74 inches

We lose a few days in February, so there isn't any time for procrastinating. Among the early-closing must-sees are David Deutsch's solo at Eva Pressenhuber, Claudia Keep at March (recently reviewed), and the exhibition of sculptors' drawings that Carl D'Alvia organized at Helena Anrather. New shows include Erika Ranee's first solo at Klaus von Nichtssagend (opens Feb 18) and Brenda Goodman at Sikkema Jenkins (opens today). And, finally, Paul Pagk's outstanding show at Miguel Abreu is required viewing.

BROOKLYN RAIL

Paul Pagk: *Queen of Spades*

JUL-AUG 2022

By Emireth Herrera Valdés



Installation view, *Paul Pagk: Queen of Hearts*, New York. Images Courtesy Hionas Gallery.

Hionas Gallery

May 19 – July 9, 2022

New York

Upon entering Hionas Gallery's exhibition of paintings, viewers encounter the largest painting in the gallery space, *Queen of Spades* (2019), the piece that gives the show its title. It resembles the card that depicts the queen of spades flipped and mirrored along the center axis, producing an inverted portrait. The focal point is the rectangle that convenes with a triangle washed in white and blue. Paul Pagk manages to slow the viewer's gaze through vignettes on opposite corners that produce a diagonal axis, and the empty spaces that give an undertone of silence to the work. The genesis of this painting is indicated through the white line, left pure and untouched on most of the works to represent the birth of artwork. This painting orchestrates the rhythm of the show, inviting us to observe the artist's stylistic evolution from the exploration of patterns to the juxtaposition of the lines and forms.

As a remembrance of the Brighton Pier on the British Coast, the following painting is titled *The Pier* (2021–22). As one moves through this painting, our vision shifts according to the ambiance. When the natural light hits the canvas, the color absorbs the reflection of the light, changing its tonality. The continuous yellow line, despite being more subtle, shapes the structure. Subsequently, the colorful resonance emerges when the violet establishes a controlled relationship with the bold color. Although our attention is instinctively focused on the green volume that expands horizontally, the saturated violet hue appears intermittently, accentuating the green field as complementary colors. Thus, we discover the profile of a body suspended on a field but supported on a vertical axis. The object of the painting occupies a dichotomous state, static and stolid but also with overflowing potential to engage the infinite horizon.



Installation view, Paul Pagk: *Queen of Hearts*, New York. Images Courtesy Hionas Gallery.

Sometimes Pagk brings these relational energies into direct conversation with architectural structures. An early untitled series of fifteen smaller paintings portrays the artist's exploration of patterns. Vibrant colors, subtle traces, and unfinished lines cause the audience to gravitate to the figures on the canvas as they float with an unpredictable rhythm. We can distinguish that one of the qualities of Pagk's oeuvre is the game of illusion. He puts forth this exhibition to encourage viewers to immerse themselves in the exhibition, to discover each painting in a way that is not possible to fully appreciate on a screen.

While walking toward Hionas Gallery, my attention was swayed by the sun's reflection framing *Hathor* (2021). This positionality brought out the combination of the pink color of the surface with the yellow and white geometric forms, framing it in delicate light. At that precise moment, the shadow played over the work as if it were inviting me to explore the asymmetrical balance of its composition. This painting shows a continuous line drawing an ascending ladder that, despite its flatness, holds perspective. Its rhythm is accentuated by triads: three short lines and three small circles. While the white contour of the trace provides a sense of depth, the small circles seem to pull down the energy of the painting, injecting equilibrium. The nature of the painting centers the viewer in a meditative moment. Pagk uses geometrical forms as the vehicle to reflect on one's passage in the world and the impossibility of holding onto a single moment.



Installation view, *Paul Pagk: Queen of Hearts*, New York. Images Courtesy Hionas Gallery.

For Pagk, "every painting is a discovery," and *Queen of Spades* provides an activating experience beyond the surface of the canvas. It leads us to discover the origin of architectural scapes in different planes, where the bustle of the city and the noise of our thoughts vanish. Oscillating between a state of peace and interrupted moments, each structure that appears is catalyzed by the remnants of our memories. Perhaps the origin of Pagk's paintings is not only continuity but a suspended turning point for social and cultural regeneration. After being inundated with the digital world and its manipulated content consumption, we find ourselves eager to establish a direct dialogue. This exhibition offers the opportunity to reignite our experiences in the material world.

Contributor

Emireth Herrera Valdés

Emireth Herrera Valdés is a curator and writer based in New York City. She holds an MA in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU. Her curatorial practice reflects her commitment to socially engaged projects.

Paul Pagk: Rythmes & Structures

"Vibrato"

Olivier Kaepelin

My first observation is to identify the geometric form, its simplicity and its complexity. Its simplicity of surface and its complexity of composition, of movement when we observe it. The figure of the anaphora, if I embrace a transposition from rhetoric to visual art – i.e. a process whereby a figure' segment (anaphoric) refers to another segment (antecedent) on the same canvas - furnishes me with an interpretation of the picture. The painting itself, its skin, calls into question what we can take to be its principle of construction. Interconnected squares, rectangles, cubes and parallelepipeds evoke an architecture, straight-line drawing, which, however, find themselves altered and led in a different direction by the nature of the line and the treatment of the surface. I feel as though what I have in front of me is mental architecture, seeking its place in space. It could be a hut, a house, a building. This feeling reassures me because in a monochrome land with no edges, it delineates, it defines. The impression is short-lived. The ambiguous desire for solidity, the anxious rejection of "a movement that shifts the line" is undermined by the character of the lines themselves. Many of them are drawn freehand, trembling, set in motion by an infinitesimal sinuosity, barely perceptible but ever present. This insistent fragility is not expressed by the drawing alone, but by the painting itself, made up as it is of coloured pulsations, of the vibrations secret yet dazzling - of pigments. Paul Pagk's art has the gift of taking us into the painting's unstable architecture so that we transcend it, transform it, in a fascinating expansion of space where the painting draws us into its movement, from the line to the quivering of the astonishing magnetic fields it creates. Our body is captivated, not in one spectacular stroke but step by step, as underlined by one of his titles, *Station to Station*, which, despite the figures of crosses, I see as a reference not to the crosses of the History of Art but to David Bowie's song when he wrote:

"Once there were sun birds
To soar with
And once I could
Never be down
I got to keep searching and searching
Oh, what will I be believing?
And who will connect me with love?"

Paul Pagk's work contains this repeated searching, whether we call it love, desire or energy, as evoked in one of his paintings, *Straight No Chaser*, which draws on both African-American spirituals and, more patently, a cocktail of hard liquor and a Thelonious Monk jazz standard.

Bowie's sun birds "to soar with" are like this painting, which goes beyond the mere construction of the figure to become a springboard, thanks to colour and its overflowing, subtle, vibrant nature, launching into a silent intoxication of oscillations that lead into the light substance of air.

In Paul Pagk's art, these two elements contrast and complete each other. The outlined, bounded forms generate driving forces and open surfaces.

They spark a vivid impression of light. I don't know what sun birds are, but I see them as birds of paradise, which are other names given to light. The light that shines through Paul Pagk's paintings.

The bird of paradise mentioned by psychiatrist and writer Ronald Laing' in *The Politics of Experience* and *The Bird of Paradise* is breath, the life force itself. It is the expression of the fascinating beauty of colour, of the capacity to convey all possible colors with a powerful, undulating flight. Legend tells us that the bird is an incarnation which spends its entire life in the air, carried by light alone. It destabilises masses and bodies with the interplay of volumes untethered in space, naves free of foundations, their existence random and transitory.

It offers us the experience of an architecture defined by the constant rocking produced by particles and waves underpinning the manifestations of matter. Paul Pagk's paintings are birds of paradise. Which also makes me think of the flap of a butterfly's wings; in other words, of quantum physics and what it teaches us about the intensely animated existence of colour.

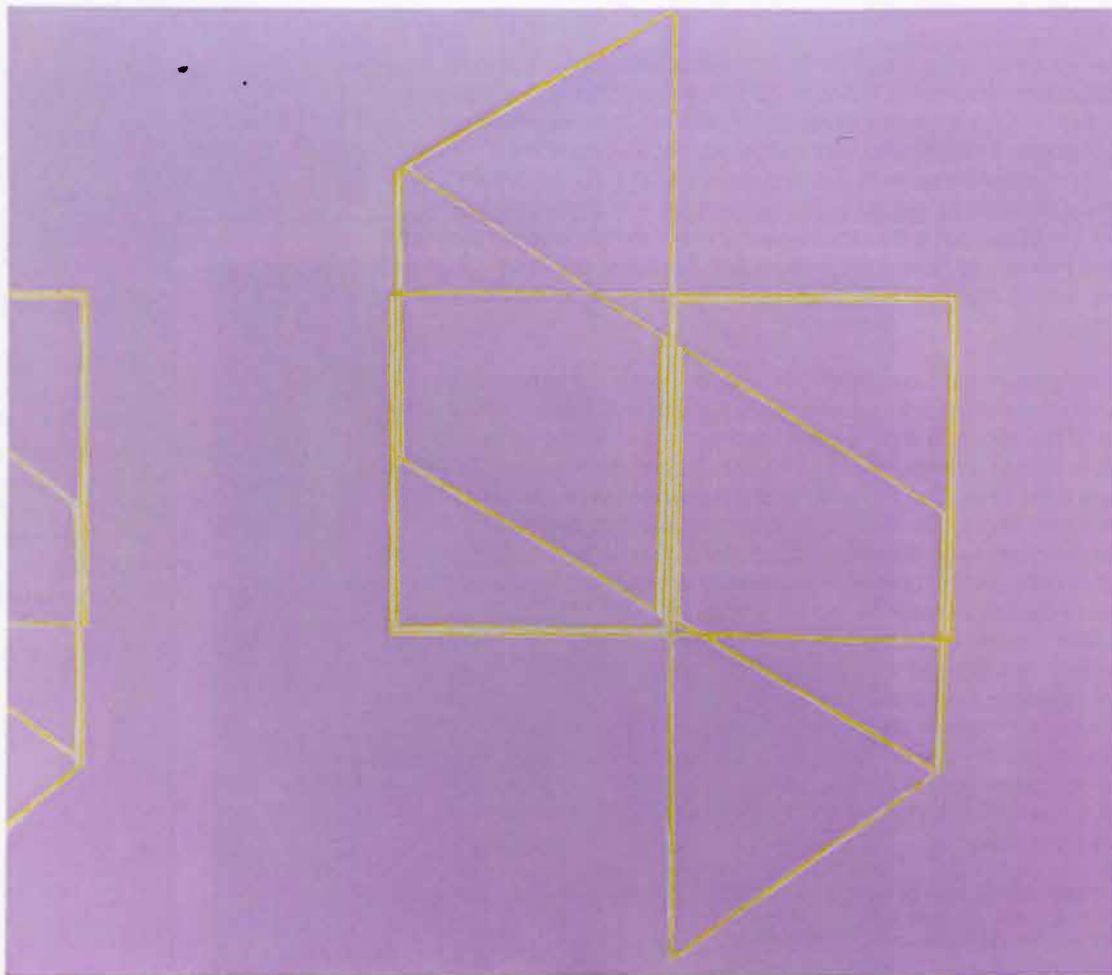
Tim James? sheds light on the subject when he writes: "When you perceive an object's colour, what you are actually detecting are the vibrations in the electromagnetic field. Atoms and molecules harmonise their electrons with a specific quantity of energy that corresponds to the energy of the photons emitted or reflected (...).

Electrons moving through water give off a blue glow (....) but appear slightly more purple in air (the colour of lightning) and slightly pink or green in the snow. The nucleus of an atom, and the quarks, protons and neutrons inside, are, however, utterly undetectable to the human eye.

Thanks to this dance of perception and non-perception, we have the marvellous surprise of discovering that Paul Pagk's paintings, using alternative methods to science, open the door for us to experience mobility, diversity and the vastness of the real.

Originally published in Paul Pagk: Rythmes & Structures (Saint-Louis: Foundation Fernet-Branca, 2021).

PAUL PAGK



Aurore, 2021. Huile sur toile, 165 x 188 cm. Courtesy et photo artiste

Le lieu où Paul Pagk se sent réellement chez lui, nous dit-il, est « devant des tableaux. » Né en Angleterre de parents européens d'origines différentes, ayant vécu en Autriche et en France, Paul Pagk n'a jamais éprouvé le sentiment d'appartenir plus spécifiquement à un pays plutôt qu'à un autre. Représenté très tôt dans son parcours d'artiste par la Galerie Jean Fournier à Paris, où il a côtoyé les œuvres d'artistes internationaux tels que Shirley Jaffe, Joan Mitchell, James Bishop mais aussi Simon Hantai, Claude Viallat et Pierre Buraglio dans les années 1980, il est parti peindre à New York ayant pu trouver là-bas un atelier qui lui faisait soudainement défaut à Paris.

Traverser l'Atlantique pour s'installer aux États-Unis a été pour lui le moyen de s'exprimer librement et d'appartenir à la communauté sans être désigné toujours comme « autre », mais aussi de rejoindre la terre où se pensait la peinture avec une approche plus contemporaine. En installant son atelier à New York, il répond aux réflexions que nécessite sa propre pratique. Il la questionne en la plaçant au cœur de la fabrique d'un art

pictural repensé par les artistes du Minimalisme. Une destinée qui a toujours été en germe dans ses peintures et qui l'a mené tout naturellement vers cette contrée où la peinture a trouvé de nouvelles voies d'expression ouvertes par Barnett Newman, héroïque, sauvage et sublime, Willem de Kooning, dissonante, charnelle et émotionnelle ou encore Marc Rothko, méditative et sensorielle. Il a eu le sentiment de percevoir les enjeux du travail de Dan Flavin ou Donald Judd, de saisir « une autre radicalité qu'on ne pouvait pas comprendre même quand on voyait un Barnett Newman à Paris. »

Cette transition entre Europe et Amérique n'est pas à considérer comme un refus de l'art du passé, car pour Paul Pagk cet art vit continuellement dans le présent. Il nous rappelle que des peintres américains ont fait le chemin inverse en venant s'installer en France pour aller à la rencontre de l'Histoire et avancer dans la Modernité. Il a eu pour sa part le besoin contraire de venir en Amérique pour perdre un peu cette histoire même si la peinture européenne le nourrit toujours.

PORTRAIT D'ARTISTE - PAUL PAGK

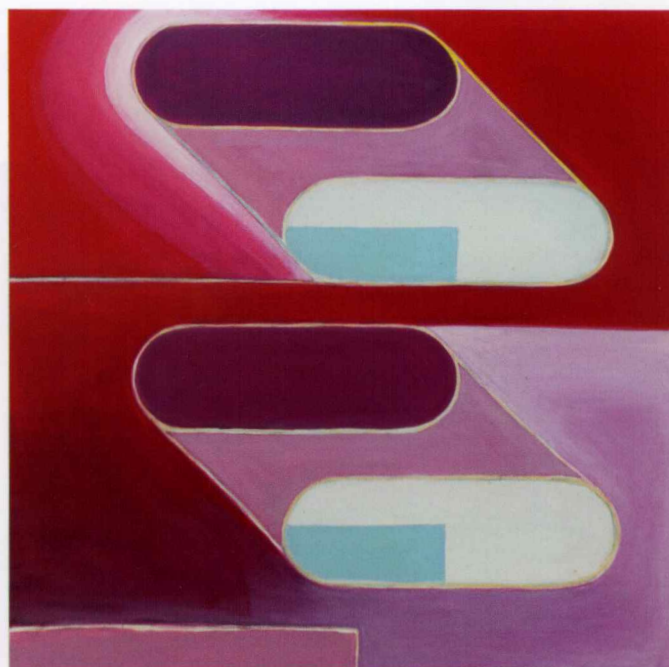
LUCILLE LEGER

Dans ses peintures comme dans ses dessins, Paul Pagk nous donne à voir l'Amérique dans ce qui fait son essence et, à travers elle, celle du monde contemporain. New York est la ville du présent absolu, de l'organisation mondiale en train de se faire, véhiculée par les images de Charles Clyde Ebbets ou Lewis Hyne qui nous font le récit de ces hommes bâtissant des empires qui dominent le monde d'aujourd'hui, érigeant un « village global » tel que le décrit Jean Baudrillard. Mais ce n'est pas tant sur cette aliénation de l'homme contemporain que s'exprime Paul Pagk, mais plutôt sur la place que peut lui faire l'artiste dans ses tableaux. Il lui a fallu pour cela dépasser certaines problématiques, comme celle notamment présente dans la pratique des peintres minimalistes, de valoriser « le plat absolu ». Paul Pagk a ressenti la nécessité impérieuse de tourner sa peinture vers l'autre, dans une relation nécessaire, inévitable, où l'autre serait intégré par le peintre. Les formats de ses tableaux rendent possible l'accueil de celui qui le regarde, ils ont la taille du corps de celui par lequel ils ont été réalisés. Ce sont, nous dit Paul Pagk, « des géométries habitées avant d'être vues. » *La Balzacine* (2020) donne la mesure de l'effort qu'il a été nécessaire pour la composer. Coordonner des segments ne suffit pas pour exprimer une pensée cohérente. Les œuvres ne se construisent pas non plus dans le seul univers plan mais par un travail en profondeur. Il s'agit pour Paul Pagk de travailler l'épaisseur du temps, de faire que le regard qui se portera sur son œuvre entrera dans un territoire.

Il y a beaucoup de lutte, de joie et d'émotion dans la réalisation d'un tableau.

Chaque ligne tracée engage une narration, faite de présences et d'absences, d'encrages dans la feuille ou de suspensions, de décrochements. L'histoire se raconte dans la peinture, à travers le geste de la main en train de faire. Il contrevient ainsi à l'idée d'opposition entre peinture et image, entre abstraction et figuration. La ligne raconte sa propre histoire, elle est une part de soi, la marque d'une dextérité, de choix contradictoires d'un tableau à l'autre, d'une émotion et d'une tension vibratiles. Autour d'elle apparaît un spectre de tonalités, fait d'expériences de rugosités différentes qui créent des expériences sensorielles aussi intenses qu'une sculpture lumineuse de Dan Flavin.

Chaque tableau est la réinvention de cette histoire. La ligne naît parfois de la réserve de blanc qui sépare deux couleurs (*DeepNoon*, 2021), ou émerge en même temps que la couleur (*The Offering*, 2020). À la différence du projet minimaliste d'un Robert Mangold pour qui la couleur contient la ligne, ou d'un collage de Matisse chez lequel la découpe des papiers colorés définit la ligne, Paul Pagk associe les couleurs et tente, par des associations atypiques, de casser la ligne et de voir si elle-même peut, selon son expression, « parler de la couleur ». La ligne ne fixe pas nécessairement l'attention du spectateur dans une zone du tableau mais l'incite au contraire à parcourir la toile, elle ouvre sur des possibles et se perd souvent dans un hors champ (*Andromeda*, 2020), « elle n'est jamais parfaite et c'est dans ses imperfections que se trouve son humanité. » Elle peut exister pour elle-même dans *Saltimbanque* (2020) où ce n'est plus alors la couleur qui définit l'espace de la toile, mais le blanc du

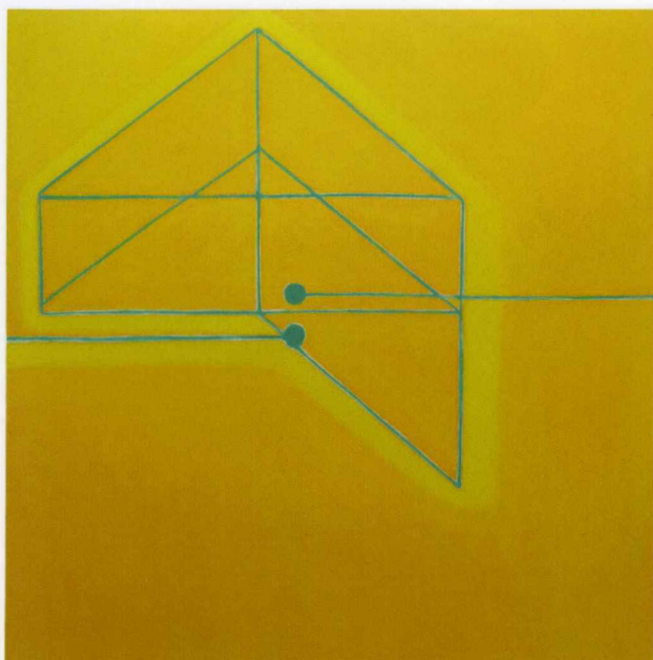


La Balzacine, 2020. Huile sur toile, 178 x 178 cm
Courtesy et photo artiste

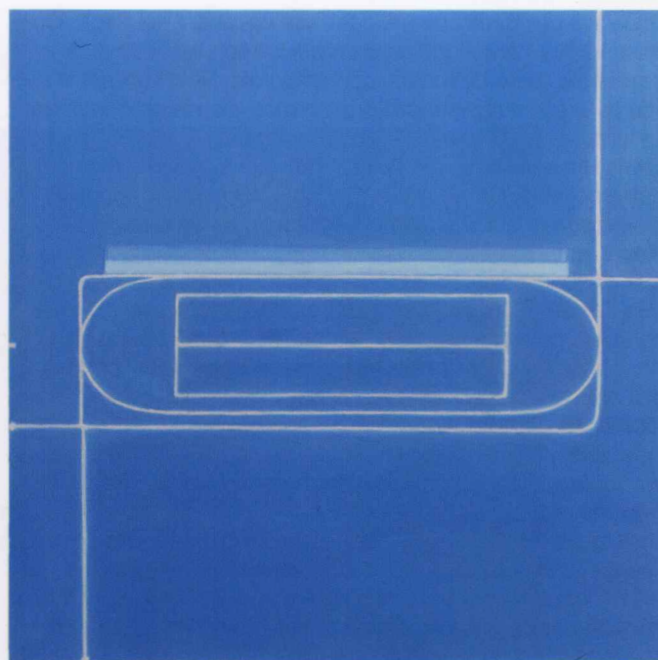
fond. La ligne qui le traverse dessine un itinéraire soumis à une infinité de variations qui, passant le spectre chromatique en revue, concourt elle aussi à donner sa lumière au tableau.

Un travail sur la couleur qui se traduit chez Paul Pagk par une mise en mouvement au sens musical du terme. Utilisant une combinaison toujours économe de couleurs afin de provoquer un effet de puissante conflagration ou recherchant d'infimes variations tonales comme avec l'utilisation du rose dans l'œuvre *Ishtar* (2020), il nous rappelle, citant Mondrian, que la peinture n'est pas statique, qu'elle a des liens avec la musique par ses rythmes et sa faculté à « donner à voir l'invisible. » Certains titres de ses toiles comme *Duke* font d'ailleurs de manière explicite le lien avec le domaine musical, notamment le jazz. Il prend pour exemple Schubert ou Miles Davis, chez lesquels on peut découvrir à chaque écoute des notes ou des accords nouveaux. Une condition essentielle d'existence du tableau qui est là, nous dit-il, « comme une musique intemporelle, pour vivre tout le temps. »

Je ne veux pas que le tableau meure dans l'œil de celui qui le regarde mais qu'il soit une source à laquelle on peut revenir avec pour principe d'y découvrir toujours quelque chose de nouveau.



Five 2 One, 2017. Huile sur toile, 163 x 165 cm
Courtesy Galerie Eric Dupont et photo artiste



The Offering, 2020. Huile sur toile, 178 x 178 cm
Courtesy et photo artiste

La peinture de Paul Pagk se donne en profondeur, par sa structure et par ses couleurs, par le dessin. S'il peut être embrassé d'un seul regard, le tableau ne doit pas se livrer entièrement au risque de devenir aliénant, de renvoyer à un sentiment qui est de l'ordre de la finitude soit parce qu'il ne donne rien de plus à voir, soit parce qu'il est enfermé dans sa propre image. Il est fondamental que celui qui le regarde ne se reconnaisse pas en lui, mais qu'il le découvre comme une architecture physique ou mentale qu'il est invité à visiter ou à s'approprier.

De même, Paul Pagk attache une attention particulière à ne pas circonscrire l'exposition dans une monotonie et à ne pas conditionner les toiles. Ainsi, l'accrochage de sa dernière exposition personnelle à la Galerie Eric Dupont a été pensé, nous dit-il « comme une combinaison de tableaux variés et complémentaires afin de ne pas chercher à mettre en place une sorte de logo visuel comme l'ont fait beaucoup de peintres abstraits. » Il a ainsi favorisé dans l'espace d'exposition le déploiement de tableaux distincts en les rapprochant, dans l'esprit des compositions dodécaphoniques d'Arnold Schönberg, pour que surgissent des émotions à l'intensité cumulative. Une recherche d'amplitude que Paul Pagk envisage de développer prochainement à la Fondation Fernet-Branca à Saint-Louis et au CAP de Royan, en rassemblant des œuvres de périodes différentes afin, nous dit-il, « de rendre possible la compréhension d'une pratique faite à la fois de continuités et de ruptures. »

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www.paulpagk.com

Représenté par la Galerie Eric Dupont Paris
www.eric-dupont.com

Expositions récentes (sélection)
2021

Doomed and Famous: Selections from the Adrian Dannatt Collection
Miguel Abreu Gallery, en collaboration avec Sequence Press, New York
2020

Abstract Art from the Miettinen Collection, Miettinen Collection, Berlin
MULTILAYER with 50 abstract artists, commissariat Ivo Ringe et Juliane Rogge
RAUM SCHROTH, Museum Wilhelm Morgner, Soest (Allemagne)
Art Paris Art Fair, Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris
2019

Interaction, solo show, Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris
La Couleur, CAP Royan
2018

Introspection, Shonfeld Gallery, Bruxelles
2017

Summer installation of works, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York
Focus DRAWING NOW Art Fair, Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris
2016

Visages de la ligne, Frac Picardie, Amiens

Actualités

Du 30 octobre 2021 à fin février 2022
Fondation Fernet-Branca, Saint-Louis (France)

À venir

Exposition personnelle, CAP Royan (France)

MagMag

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Paul Pagk

by Bill Clarke



Installation view of ON PAPER: Mamie Holst & Paul Pagk at 33 Orchard, New York, January 15 - March 8, 2015. All images courtesy 33 Orchard, New York.

Paul Pagk

33 Orchard

New York

January 15 – March 8, 2015

British-born Paul Pagk remains something of a cult figure among New York painters even though he has been living and producing work in the city for over 25 years. His paintings consist of geometric (bordering on diagrammatic) forms, and manage to feel casual and spontaneous, and yet, at the same time, considered and complex. Pagk does not seem concerned with producing bodies of work that are visually consistent, but his paintings are often comprised of compositional elements — shapes, gestures or colours — that allow viewers to make connections among them if they spend the time.

This terrific show at this Lower East Side gallery featured over 60 works on 15 x 11-inch paper titled *November Drawings*, all produced during that month last year. Like his paintings, the drawings — tacked to the gallery walls and not titled individually — presented a wide range of abstract forms rendered in combinations of graphite, pen, watercolour, pastels and gouache. Pagk worked rapidly in the creation of these drawings, producing anywhere from three to 20 a day. The final selection on display were bursting with energy and full of movement, and strongly conveyed a sense of tactility and their maker's hand. Picking standouts from among the works is difficult because there were so many. Some, like a horizontally elongated indigo triangle set atop a magenta square, or a loosely stacked arrangement of small rectangles in alternating shades of chartreuse and pink, catch the eye with their vivid colour palettes. Others challenged the eye with their intricate networks of lines, while the rhythmic patterning of others brought to mind the work of artists associated with the Neo-Concrete movement like Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. The early abstract expressionist work of Alfred Leslie, another long-time New York-based painter who deserves wider recognition, also came to mind, so wide-ranging was Pagk's approach to mark-making.

These works on paper provided a playful look behind the artist's painting process, coming across like a stream-of-conscious inventory of his practice. Pagk's drawings were hung alongside a suite of colourful paintings on paper by the Florida-based artist Mamie Holst, whose work was equally fine, if more contained formally. Overall, this show, which was simply titled *On Paper*, illustrated that contemporary abstraction can be dynamic and thought-provoking in the hands of the right artists.

Bill Clarke was the Executive Editor of *Magenta Magazine Online* from its inception in September 2009 until May 2017. His writing has been published in *Modern Painters*, *Art Review*, *Canadian Art*, *Artnews* and several other publications. In January 2017, he assumed the position of associate director at Angell Gallery in Toronto.

PORTRAIT

PAUL PAGK

En introduction à l'un de ses séminaires, Jacques Lacan définit la « géométrie euclidienne », la « ligne droite » et, au-delà, le « raisonnable » comme des fantasmes. Le fantasme est ce proche et ce lointain, un désir équivoque vers lequel on tend mais que l'on rejette, il est un double de soi dans un espace et une situation reconfigurés par son propre désir. Travaillant sur les notions de perception, de construction de l'espace, de vide et de plein, de présence et d'absence, de rationnel et d'irrationnel, Paul Pagk n'a de cesse d'interroger ce « raisonnable » par des dédoublements répétés que cela soit par les motifs en peinture, les formats, la sérialité mais aussi par le recommencement du geste et du trait, jour après jour, dans ses dessins. La pensée de l'artiste nous devient accessible dans le voisinage des œuvres, dans les liens qui les unissent et qui se manifestent lorsqu'il les dispose dans des accrochages mettant en évidence la persistance d'une recherche qui dure depuis plus de 30 ans. Une recherche à double sens, qui nécessite des allers-retours et en cela, qui est elle-même équivoque, engageant le corps comme l'esprit, et qui n'a de cesse de nous troubler.

Le dessin est à considérer pour Paul Pagk comme une expérience qui mérite d'être renouvelée tant il ne se prête ni à une seule interprétation ni à un seul regard. Chaque dessin est l'empreinte nouvelle, journalière, datée, d'un

état encore indéterminé. Vraisemblablement, on est « à la fois » dans l'unité et la distinction car persistent entre tous, un vocabulaire, un volume, des gestes, des situations qui s'interpellent. Utilisant depuis 2012 des feuilles de très grand format qu'il fractionne en quatre, l'artiste exprime, tout en rendant visible le caractère sériel de ses dessins, l'impossibilité de fixer une forme. Des « objets spécifiques » pour citer Donald Judd, multiples et protéiformes, indépendants car non revisités d'un jour à l'autre, alignés sur les cimaises, qui se mettent immédiatement en mouvement et en correspondance, interrogeant toutes les sensibilités.

Tout dessin est une mémoire passagère qui conserve la présence physique de son auteur. L'œuvre est elle-même un corps, une sorte de double dont la structure est à l'image de son propre corps, doté d'un épiderme et d'une structure interne. Dans certains dessins, l'artiste trace dans un premier temps des lignes, « une charpente creusée dans le papier », sur lesquelles il pose une peau de graphite « qui laisse apparaître la charpente en négatif ». Un travail « qui se construit sur la mémoire. » Travaillant à même le sol, tout le poids du corps marquant la feuille de son passage. Celle-ci devient « un lieu d'incision » et par-là même de révélation. En datant chaque dessin, l'artiste a la volonté d'en montrer tout autant l'évolution que les procédés mis en œuvre. Il en souligne aussi les difficultés d'en restituer par un langage plastique ce dialogue acharné entre l'homme et la feuille, cette pensée sédimentée.

« Bien qu'il y ait une certaine répétition du procédé, je veux que chaque dessin soit unique, une représentation spécifique de ce moment où il a été exécuté. Une temporalité qui doit se sentir dans le dessin. »



Vue de l'exposition *Introspection*, Schönfeld Gallery Brussels 2018
Courtesy artiste et Schönfeld Gallery, Bruxelles

Paul Pagk a cette tâche d'empêcher cet amour de faillir et il s'ingénie à partir de peu ou de presque rien à le rattraper. Il doit parfois réparer ses propres actes, les imprévus, ses lassitudes comme sa fureur, quand il projette de l'eau sur un dessin de plusieurs couleurs. Il effectue comme tout homme « ce travail de destruction » qu'évoque Sartre, car l'homme ne peut créer sans détruire. Un amour qui ne peut se vivre dans une relation tempérée mais qui, à l'image de nos humeurs, se nourrit du présent, de ses tentatives et de ses fantasmes quand l'esprit cherche à occuper le corps défendu. La relation au dessin est forcément physique, elle met en jeu des notions d'échelle, de rythme, de présence. Une lutte qui s'est engagée bien plus tôt avec l'artiste car dans son élaboration même, il avait déjà tenté de fuir son espace. « Le dessin a besoin qu'on le force à rester dans son cadre. » nous dit l'artiste. Pour parvenir à ses fins, il le ligote, l'ensevelit dans la matière picturale mêlant dans sa chimie, pastel sec, pastel à l'huile, peinture à l'huile, graphite, gouache, encre, aquarelle, stylo-bille... L'un d'eux, lui inspirant l'évocation du livre d'heures *Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, rappelle une enluminure

et ce temps des filtres et des enchantements chers à Chrétien de Troyes.

Pourtant rien ne peut maîtriser le déploiement de l'œuvre dans l'espace qui l'environne. Elle a cette faculté virale de se répandre, de déborder de son contenant, de dépasser notre propre échelle. Malgré toutes les précautions de l'artiste, le dessin qui se déverse de son cadre, atteint le visiteur, lui communique ce tourment car il recèle ce trop-plein de l'implication psychique et physique de l'artiste, son agitation. Au point que Paul Pagk avoue « je ne comprends pas qu'on puisse se sentir apaisé par ce dessin. » L'œuvre est tout autant un espace d'accueil, qui a cette prédisposition à accueillir l'altérité, qu'une faculté à activer l'espace entre elle et le regardeur, à aller le quérir, le séduire même. D'où cette absence qui nécessite d'être à nouveau comblée et qui témoigne pour le regardeur d'un moment de « co-existence ». Lors de la performance *Children of The Revolution Cosmic Sex Poem* (2009) avec DDD, les tracés de Paul Pagk occupent les murs et les sols, les traits accompagnent la

« Je crée des tableaux qui captent le regard.
En quelque sorte au lieu que ce soit le regard qui aille vers le tableau,
je veux que ce soit le tableau qui aille vers le regard, qui comble ce vide. »



Vue de l'exposition *Interaction*, exposition personnelle, Galerie Eric Dupont Paris, 2019. 3 tableaux de 193 x 188 cm. Courtesy artiste et Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris

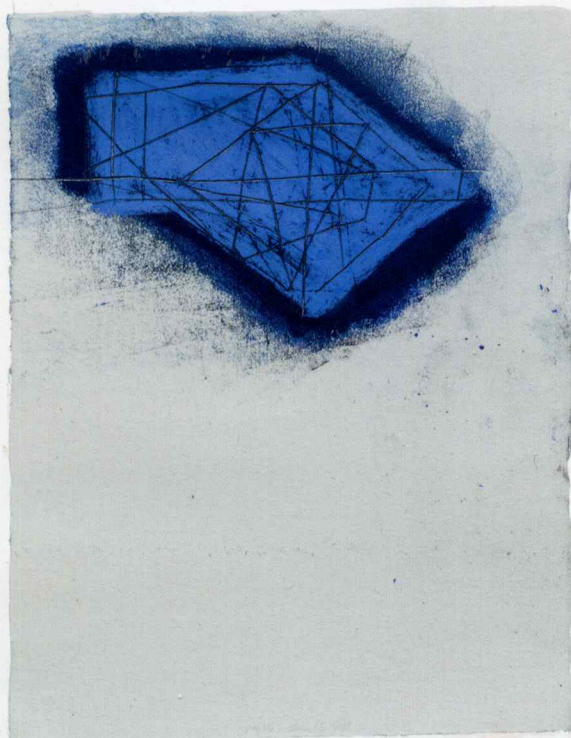
ligne de peinture, se prolongent par la voix, deviennent écritures et symboles, clameur même, quand l'artiste utilise un porte-voix. Si le rapport à l'espace diffère complètement dans ses peintures, la sérénité n'est là aussi pas toujours de mise car bien que paraissant plus rationnel et apparemment plus propice à l'analyse tant la relation avec les formes peut s'accommoder d'une description de sa « géométrie élémentaire » (Sol LeWitt), l'équivoque par le dédoublement des motifs se fait insistante. Les courbes et les tracés rectilignes scindent méthodiquement l'espace, élaborent des constructions composées de motifs qui s'étagent, se répètent et s'imbriquent. Ils forment une unité close, finie, soudée destinée « à accueillir la lumière », « creusant l'espace et distendant le temps ». Pourtant demeure une part non élucidée qui nous empêche de nous y inscrire de manière complaisante. Le dédoublement, les renversements tout autant verticaux qu'horizontaux, toutes ces permutations deviennent une énigme en cours d'élucidation. La sérialité s'affirme comme un outil comparatif, met en évidence des variations incorporant la boucle, la diagonale dans une sorte de système quelque peu subversif. Se fait sentir une présence qui est celle d'une mystique qui renvoie à l'impossibilité de contenir toutes les formes, toutes les clefs qui sont pourtant inscrites dans la géométrie de notre propre corps et dans la mécanique de notre esprit.

La réserve blanche dans certaines toiles qui occupe une large surface, donne le sentiment que « l'objet principal n'est pas là, ce qui a pour première conséquence que n'étant pas

peint, l'arrière-plan devient lui-même objet ». L'œuvre, par la présence très forte du vide, est tout autant un vide qu'un plein, s'appréhende comme un « espace initial » à réinvestir sans cesse. Sans ce point d'ancrage focal, placé au centre de l'œuvre et à hauteur du regard, l'artiste pose d'emblée la question de la perception, de ce qui est vu, reste à voir et fondamentalement ce qui nous échappera à jamais car par les procédés d'effacement et de recouvrement, la lecture en sera à jamais incomplète.

Les gestes propres au dessin deviennent des motifs en peinture, des signes même, qu'il convient alors de percevoir dans une spatialité. Dessins et peintures sont indissociables, le trait esquissé accompagne la ligne peinte ou cette même réserve de blanc qui le nourrit de sa lumière, même s'il affirme « Mes dessins sont réalisés de manière très impulsive à la différence des toiles qui évoluent beaucoup plus lentement. Je suis dans d'autres types de décisions. » Nous pourrions dire d'autres types de respirations. Si les dessins sont comparables à des « flashes » avec pour effet « de laisser comme la mémoire d'un événement dans l'œil », la peinture nous fait « ressentir son échelle », son amplitude, une respiration à plein poumon. L'expansion semble arriver à son comble, atteindre le spectateur lui-même. Paul Pagk s'intéresse à la manière dont « le spectateur s'approche du tableau », et dont il ressent ce souffle. Pour ce faire il se demande, quand il peint, comment « faire sortir les pensées du tableau » et atteindre le spectateur pour mieux « ralentir son regard dans un monde aussi rapide ».

« Le dessin est un amour qui peut constamment faillir. »



July 15, 2018
 Graphite, crayon, pastels secs et à l'huile sur papier, 38 x 28 cm
 Courtesy artiste et Schönfeld Gallery, Bruxelles

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Summer installation of works, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York
 Focus Drawing Now, Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris
 2016

Visages de la ligne, Frac Picardie, Amiens

Actualités

Du 05 juillet au 30 septembre 2019
 La couleur, Centre d'Arts Plastiques de Royan

Du 30 août au 1^{er} septembre 2019
 Paréidolie, Salon international du dessin contemporain 6e édition
 Château de Servières, Marseille

Octobre et novembre 2019
 Constructed, Contemporary Art Galleries, University of Connecticut, Etats-Unis

Paul Pagk

"Drawings from the Series: The Mesquite Drawings"

Chris Ashley

About Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* Joan Ockman writes, "...space is the abode of human consciousness."¹ In this book Bachelard, "considers various kinds of 'praiseworthy space' that attract and concentrate the poetic imaginations: spaces of intimacy and immensity,"² such as rooms, closets, corners, cellars, huts, forest, nests, shells, and human bodies, what he calls "primal images." His interest is in how we subjectively experience "intimate" spaces as we daydream within them; he writes, "I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace." Dreaming, in this sense, means to imaginatively inhabit these spaces, to associate towards and from them, and to feel and think about these spaces and our place in them. These primal images are attractive entities of concrete essence that transcend memory and hold intimate, fundamental values.

Paul Pagk's paintings, larger and materially denser than his drawings, are more heavily worked and layered, often undergoing radical changes in form and color during their making. This text's concern, though these comments can also be applied to his paintings, is his "looser," quicker work on paper, in particular *The Mesquite Drawings*, about which Pagk says, "I made these drawings and others in two drawing pads during and after my visit to Marfa (Texas) and the Chinati Mountains."

The spaces and construction in Pagk's paintings and drawings appear logical but are often slightly and suddenly otherwise: they may not abide by the absolute rules of perspective or physics, or are sometimes simply incomplete or unexpected. Each work's image, however, a combination of field, diagram, and gesture, is a definite structural place emanating light and atmosphere. Scale may be either or both intimate and monolithic. Color is strong yet natural, marks are searching yet confident, surface is built yet porous. Pagk's work hints at primal imagery, presenting a wide variety of spaces of "intimacy and immensity," and create material situations, visual structures, and pictorial space that prompt affective responses, the poetic imagination, and identification of and yearning for archetypal places and spaces, and the body's relationship to these things. While the handmade spaces Pagk draws can function as primal images, the several ways he draws does not aim straight at archetype but is instead intentionally ambiguous and open for the purpose of varied personal and public experience. Using poet Jules Supervielle's words, which Bachelard quotes (p187), we become:

Habitants délicats des forêts de nous-mêmes

(Sensitive inhabitants of the forests of ourselves)

On paper, using pencil, crayon, oil pastel, and watercolor, Pagk develops and rehearses motifs that may or may not find their way into the paintings. His imagery incorporates geometry and nature, design and incident, rendering and marks. Spaces and structures are made with line, gesture, colored field, outlining, and overlay. Skewed or incomplete perspective creates cubes and open boxes, wedges, channels and canals, planes, frames, notches, braces, curves, shells, spirals, and a sense of assembling and collapse. Diagrammatic drawing, schematic like a wire frame model and composed of straight, curving, spiraling, and repeated and layered lines, make both solid and fragile human spaces. There is the architecture of design and DNA, order and wildness, inside and outside, measured proportion and rhizomatic progression, and there is a full sense of light and atmosphere, whether natural, urban or artificial. Additionally, and in contrast, there is a touch of the (decidedly lower-case) surreal, "the disorienting, hallucinatory quality of a dream; unreal; fantastic."³ But always, as David E. Denton's comment about Bachelard's images affirms, "The image always breathes the vibrations, the rhythms of intimacy, warmth, and attractiveness, and always functions on the 'human plane.'"⁴

There is nothing without narrative; that is, everything has a story, and without story nothing exists to us. It is how we experience and know and remember everything. To deny narrative is to deny past, present, and future, and to deny our relationships to each other and the things around us. To deny narrative of any type in an artwork is to be in stark and terrifying existential denial. Narrative in an artwork has multiple strands, the immediate of which are: our seeing, reacting to, and thinking about the art work; the evidence of the work's making, the materials, the artist's hand, and the process; its place in history and relationship to other art; the context and institutional frame in which the work is seen; the memory carried away from it; and so on. Pagk's art not only works within and uses these narrative strands, but also allows us entry as sensitive inhabitants to the structures, spaces, and forests of the spaces he creates, as well as the structures, spaces, and forests of ourselves. This is a complex yet fundamental and necessary visual, intellectual, reflective, and meditative function.

A final Bachelard quote reminds us of the primacy and experience of the kinds of images Pagk conjures: "The grace of a curve is an invitation to remain. We cannot break away from it without hoping to return. For the beloved curve has nest-like powers; it incites us to possession, it is a curved corner, inhabited geometry."⁵

Originally published on the occasion of *Paul Pagk: Drawings from the Series: The Mesquite Drawings* (Oakland: Some Walls, 2011)

¹ Joan Ockman. Harvard Design Magazine. Representations/Misrepresentations. Number 6, Fall 1998. http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/research/publications/hdm/back/6books__ockman.html

² Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Beacon Press. Boston. Translated by Etienne Gilson. 1964.

³ "Surreal." Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/surreal>

⁴ David E. Denton. Notes on Bachelard's Inhabited Geometry. Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter. N.d. <http://www.arch.ksu.edu/seamon/Bachelard.htm>

⁵ Ibid.

The pleasure principle

Franklin Sirmans

In the state of spiritual clarity there are no secrets. The effort to achieve such a state is monumental and agonizing, and once achieved it is a harrowing state to maintain. In this state all becomes clear, and Pollock declared the meanings he had found with astonishing fluency, generosity and expansiveness.

Frank O'HARA

While art follows closely in the wake of economic globalism, the speed of international commerce, and the most recent advancements in communication via internet lines, the concentrated effort of looking at "art-for-art's sake" has taken a backseat to visual representations of concrete subject matter. It is as if the "shrinking" size of the globe has fostered a desire for "primitivist" visual consumption that has more to do with anthropology than visual art. In this atmosphere, the English painter Paul Pagk courageously paints beautiful geometric abstractions at the end of the millennium in spite of the current fascination with global works of representation. Often it takes a dead poet (O'Hara) speaking on a heroic dead painter to get at the specifics of such an endeavor--the ritual of painting. There is this ironic spiritual sense to be derived from Pagk's paintings.

Pagk, along with contemporaries like Karin Davie, Udomsak Krisanamis, and Amy Sillman, are reviving central tenets of visual appreciation while creating unique pictures that offer more than visual satisfaction. Much of what has come to be perceived as abstraction in the 90s somehow references post-W.W.II versions of abstract expressionism -- drips, splatter, and heavy impastoes. While not shunning references to a sensibility defined as "pleasure in paint", Pagk's abstract paintings, like those of Mary Heilman, take more overt cues from geometric abstraction and minimalism. Like Jo Baer or Frank Stella, Pagk frequently works monochromatically, and like Barnett Newman, he employs linear bands of paint that echo the edges of the canvas and create a compositional form that alludes to the optical experience of the viewer's gaze. His heavily built up surfaces (Pagk often works on a single painting for three months) reemphasize the quality of the paint itself, and serve to expand the parameters of the visual space, represented by painting. Oil is applied by brush and reapplied, thickening the skin of the paintings' surface. After being worked over and refined with a small brush, a sensual texture begins to form. Encountering these paintings does play with a spiritual sense of being, if contemplated as I have at Pagk's stu-

dio, though Paul is more inclined to discuss them in more down-to-earth ideas. But, why not be taken over by a painting – mind, body, and soul? While our daily existence is predicated by a bombardment of advertising images that aim to hook you in, in the fastest period of time, there is a modesty to be valued, that goes along with viewing paintings at the end of the millennium. It is also the visual density of the paint that is reminiscent of spirituality in a way that references the baroque quality of early Dutch painting.

Experiencing Pagk's paintings at his downtown New York loft is reflective of the multiplicity and diversity of today's young painters. What strikes me after continually encountering his paintings over the last couple of years is the earnestness of the artist's endeavor which actually takes you on an art historical ride from Russian Constructivists like Malevich, to the deductive abstractions of Reinhardt and Newman in the 50s, to the conceptually-influenced monochromes of Ryman. While these canonical references allow the viewer to connect the dots in a fashion suggestive of thematic painting, that is not necessarily the case. The artist's style is thoroughly unique avoiding any burdensome odes to modernist or postmodernist longing.

He discusses artistic references sparingly for a good reason, preferring to concentrate on the very practice that he has confidently and rigorously plied for the last ten years.

The paintings also raise the questions that have stood the test of time: differences between light and substance, or depth and flatness, yet there is something inescapably new about the works. It is as if Pagk has absorbed all the previous concerns of his style and is delivering an ambiguous importance for the viewer who actually completes the painting by entering its frame. In order to get a sense of just how concerned the work is with Painting, you have to get up close to the picture which in turn deliberately puts you inside that picture. This intimacy is nothing short of being a fantastic reward. When viewing the paintings closely one sees through a shimmering skin layered through the paint, a richness that seems all the more remarkable in contrast to the often opaque surface quality of the painted lines, giving the work an objecthood beyond the picture frame to compete with the body. The four new paintings in the exhibition are a turning point for the artist in regard to a painting's structure and relation to the body of the viewer. These most recent works emphasize Pagk's interest in finding a

different relationship to the square canvases he has painted for more than a decade. At 82" high x 76", they are what the artist refers to as "fat". At first glance they seem to be squares, but the difference of 6" inches displaces our knowledge of what a painting is supposed to look like hanging on a wall. What all this creates is a sense of beauty in the eye of the beholder.

This idea of objecthood, further emphasized by the linear activity that is the subject of the paintings' has been and will continue to be debated. For Pagk, each painting is a challenge unto itself with the final gesture representing the completion of a composition. Like jazz, the vocabulary may be repeated, but like improvisation, he says "by not repeating the image, I'm saying there is no image, but there is a living language." And, there's a certain specificity, indeed an importance to the placement of linear energy lacking any degree of expression though creating pictorial tension. This tension exists formally between positive and negative painted space, and the lines that create the geometrical partitioning of the surface – tension between rectangles and the surface on which they are placed, and between the edges of the canvas. There is a push-pull between the sensuousness of the paint and the

geometry that simultaneously emerges and resists the painting, emphasizing the significance of something (painting) with such a long history. The greatest tension lies in the crosspoints and interstices where Pagk's lines meet up, bleeding into one another and suggesting a gap between the painted line and the all-over style of monochromatic painting. Yet, nothing is privileged over something else, there is an equal value distribution. Though the landscape painter Nicolas Poussin may not reside in the back of our subconscious while viewing a Pagk painting, they do have something in common. Both aim to create a seamless whole in which aesthetic unity is achieved with composition, color, line.

Conclusions on the viability of an art form, e.g. "painting is dead", lie in a sea of banality after viewing the works of Paul Pagk. Pagk's paintings are the visual expression of surface, an offering and a statement that amplifies the abundance of material and possibilities for abstract painting.

Franklin SIRMANS

Paul Pagk: Field Commander

Adrian Dannat

The activity of painting is the most marvelous, elaborate, complete way of making up one's mind.

Michael Andrews

The art work should be a field for noticing.

Richard Foreman; In The Mind

The struggle within the process of painting, a struggle with the weight, density and proportion of the problem before one, is best frankly admitted. Paul Pagk does nothing to hide the manifold dilemmas that surround the simplest rectangle of canvas, the complexity and contemplation each decisions requires, but he is not afraid to work, to labour in steady pursuit of what, ultimately, will appear as the only solution.

Here are the orthodoxies of Greenbergian formalism, the plane, the field, the border, elaborated and exhausted by a sense of choice, of potential that Pagk deploys in defiance of the agreed codes for pictorial resolution. These are works that do not want to be right, to be attractive, decorative, ideal, but rather will take an essential gamble with their elements, often proposing the "wrong" choice, the improbable manoeuvre in place of the obvious, decreed formula. Pagk plays with the edge of the field, jousts with the limits of his canvas like a bold navigator from the middle ages determined to establish exactly where the flat world ends, how far he can push it before he falls right off.

This is the exquisite tension in Pagk's compositions, between the certainty, the firmness of the forms and the hovering doubt of their deployment on the plane, a rare willingness to blunder rather than deliver the self-evident. The turning of the edge, the abstract problem of the corner is resolved with a firmness that seems arrogant in the best possible sense, the strength and self confidence to let oneself be weak. As studies in what Bruce Bernard termed "The refusal to be certain where to put the paint" each canvas seeks its own resolution, comes to an understanding of itself, with a simplicity that then appears self-ordained.

These are moral paintings, their gravitas, the profundity of their resolve, is evident. Here we find some of the same integrity manifest in the chiaroscuro of Goya or Zurbaran, the sheer depth of colour of Titien, a rich, luminous darkness, a seriousness of tone that donates morality to the composition.

Such comparisons might seemed forced, but it is both formality of structure and profundity of palette that such historic heritage is evoked, not the plastic concerns of Old Masters but rather, and more importantly, the cultural and social solemnity of a moral universe, a place of values not conservative but human.

These are paintings about, well, painting of course, about shade, proportion, shape, colour, texture, about those fundamental elements that an artist spends his life working through and against, a mathematical equation whose solution can never be finite.

But they are never exercises in a good taste, in balance, harmony, laws of beauty, their purpose is not visual titillation but aesthetic consumption, the giving and receiving of laws, the fulfillment of the task. Such Works give the cumulative impression of a biblical hermetic tradition, a rabbinical edict that can only be revoked by further, lengthy study of the original issues. Not that these are literary paintings in any sense, for they revoke the limitations of the alphabet the sign, by proposing a wider, perhaps deeper arena, in which shape and colour replace linguistic ambiguity.

Pagk presents us with his commandments, carved methodically into the surface of culture, whose laws are fixed and immutable for their own universe, only in another world could they be challenged, and indeed once outside their private domain they are in immediate danger.

But for anyone provoked to challenge them, and there is undeniably provocation in their measured, stately pronouncement, they defend themselves as any command defends itself, by never heeding the attack, refusing to let it into its sphere of power. The only questions being asked here are within the works themselves, tother queries or demands, adressed face on, will simply be refused. The arrogance of this proposal is part of its character and the core of its integrity. The works are arrogant not because they need to hide their weaknesses, but on the contrary, because there are never ashamed of them, they need them.

Within Pagk's paintings we are treated to a study in character, where composition and colour hold each other in mutual respect, where the final verdict is built from the whole, where we are given nothing that is not needed.

The curious fact is that you do not judge Pagk's work, rather it judges you.

If this seems unecessarily serious, why not? They are serious because they do not lack humour, sometimes catching themselves out at a certain pompous tone, redeeming it by an almost clumsy gesture.

These paintings are fully aware of their dangerous potential to seem self important or bombastic, and that is why they never are. This is the seriousness of a commitment, not to pat resolutions but a reframing of the task each time, a commitment that takes time and devotion, shared between artist and watcher.

If we do not want to give ourselves over to this bond, if we feel we do not have the time or energy to spare, then we cannot help but walk away with a queasy sense of loss, of having failed in some minute unfocussed way, a small, itching sensation akin to guilt.

These paintings do not demand our attention, they are solid enough to withstand any amount of rejection or neglect, but if we do not give it we know that we have failed ourselves, not them.

We have failed in our human capacity to look, to study, to receive, to be given even when we are confident we have nothing left to learn or accept. These are gifts in the way the tablets of divined law were gifts, rewarding only those prepared to obey, and in accepting such apparent dictates discovering that the solution, the knowledge, was within themselves all along.

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On Painting

Stephen Westfall

Why, after all the years, the arguments and troop movements, positioned at what some have argued to be the end of Art History, why would an artist want to make another painting? Why would anyone want to look at one? It's easy to go limp at the sight of stretched canvas leaning face to the wall. It doesn't seem possible to lift it around for all the cultural baggage and expectations burdening it down. It carries the weight of a collapsed star, a gravitational field that sucks in light.

Our sense of possibilities is foreclosed almost in inverse proportion to the extent to which we harbor expectations. The expectations we bring to painting have for many years been shaped by narrow readings of the will to abstraction and the push in Modernist painting to a formal breaking point. The standard formulation of the Modernist "advance" in painting states that what was not felt to be intrinsic to the act of painting and the apprehension of the result was rejected. It is easy to see how this trajectory of the reductive logic would be confined primarily to abstract painting, which already turned from the world of appearances and narrative continuity to the language of the diagram and the austere mysticism of the fragment. And now, nearly a century after its revolutionary appearance, the disappointment of abstract painting resides in the triumph of its logic over its heart, a triumph which has contributed to the estrangement of painting from the concerns of everyday life.

Formalist discourse has failed to address the deep ontological basis for painting, its commemorative function, and the nurturing dualities at the core of our experience of the painted surface. There was another discourse running parallel and sometimes overlapping the Formalist track, which held that painting had to advance itself into the social field. Neither of these viewpoints were wrong, except to the extent that they hardened into orthodoxy. Neither presents painting as something that anyone might actually want to do; but instead as a task, a duty, a chore serving the advancement of narrowly conceived historical continuities. Somewhere along the line a painting has become Exhibit A in a didactic argument for how paintings should be made; instead of something to be lived with and looked at over time a painting became something we registered, an event in a historical field. Artists themselves talked about "well made" or "good" pictures, as though there was some certainty as to what that might be, a paradigm to serve as a gauge against which to measure their efforts.

It has also become clear that the aesthetic criteria applied to Modernist painting has little to offer the ongoing reality of cultural debate. Renaming the world from a fresh consciousness of class, multi-culturalism, gender orientation and psychological development currently overrides the contingencies of Modernist aesthetic rejuvenation. Those choosing to make abstract paintings appear more likely to suspend or forgo an inquiry into our troubled social field. They also appear less likely to question their own aesthetic convictions from this shifting dialectical ground.

To rediscover an enthusiasm for abstract painting in our time one must step outside or away from the formal determinist view that has been used from the beginning to explain the very emergence of abstract painting (e.g., "Malevich refines Cubism into the square," etc.). The most penetrating discussion of painting restores the sense of ritual value to the painting act. Painting is, after all, an apparitional art. Abstract or not, what takes place on the canvas is an appearance of another place-light, memory-brought about by the artist's manipulation of concrete material on a flat surface. Painting is itself an act initiated at some other time and from some other place, the aim of which is to physically and visually manifest itself here before the viewer. In his essay, "Painting and Time," John Berger describes painting as an act of prophecy, "of the moment of its being looked at."¹

¹ John Berger, "Painting and Time," *The Sense of Sight*, (New York, Pantheon, 1985).

To the extent that we apprehend the distance a painting travels we are, before the painting, more deeply inserted into the mystery and pleasures of our interlocking realities. It may sound strange to assert that abstract painting is particularly suited to the sort of address Berger describes. This is because the recognition of a depicted subject is held in abeyance, however temporarily. We are momentarily denied the window space he might count on to takes us "out." We are held back from interpretation, however briefly, by the absence of overtly displayed content.

The radical development of abstract painting was accompanied by the apprehension within each artist that he or she was breaking away the conventions of pictorial representation. Virtually all the major early abstractionists discussed this break in spiritual terms of renunciation, specifically of the material world in favor of the transcendental world of "pure feeling," and "pure plastic relationships." Here, then, is the ironic duality within which contemporary abstract painting finds its identity, for it is above all a material creation. Whatever absence it may describe, is couched in the conditions of its material presence.² The abstract painting swiftly confronts us with the appropriate visual model for painting in general, which is not a window but a wall. Instead of dissolving the picture plane into a pocket of deep space, the painted surface functions as wall upon which what is far away is brought near. The referential alchemy of the painted surface is a self-renewing revelation. Paintings can and will be about anything, but to dissolve the place of painting into the slipstream of aesthetic and social content is to deny its incantatory function and essential magic.

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² "The Place of Painting," *ibid.*

Paul Pagk: The Survival of Pagan Geometry

Meyer Raphael Rubinstein

"...the Pythagoreans regarded surface and color as synonymous." – Aristotle

Picture a carpenter working with a wood plane, moving his hand and arm back and forth in a straight line, rhythmically running the blade over the wood, his practiced hand gauging exactly the resistance of the material. With each push away from his body the plane shaves off a thin curl of wood, but the process is not only one of taking away for with each sweep of the plane, a new layer of wood appears, slightly different from the one that has just been shaved off.

Or imagine a more domestic scene, a figure at an ironing board, passing the iron over a freshly-washed, somewhat wrinkled garment. But this is a novice at the subtle art of ironing, perhaps our carpenter again, preparing for a special occasion of some kind, a union meeting possibly, or a wedding, or a heavy date. He takes aim at a wrinkle and flattens it down, erases it, with the heavy, steaming iron. But, lo and behold, what is that? Another wrinkle! Where there had been none! He makes another pass. It's gone, but at the edges of the iron's most recent path, two more have appeared... We'll leave our struggling carpenter (hoping that his shirt will be ready in time, that he will master this task, so similar – albeit slightly more metaphysical – to the one which provides his livelihood) for we too have an appointment, at a third workplace, at a painter's studio.

In Paul Pagk's paintings the process of addition and subtraction which all paintings share (at the first stroke, a blank canvas becomes exactly that much smaller) is given an especially prominent place, thanks to the patient, repetitive motions by which he makes his paintings. Although he permits almost no discrete traces to remain of the thousands of individual brushstrokes, it is easy for us to intuit how the forms were brought into being, to reconstruct the sensitive give and take where figure and ground meet. (And yes, these are figure/ground paintings – it is the occasional positive/negative flip-flop which, by its exception, proves the rule.)

In several recent paintings where Pagk has slimmed down his carefully hewn, formerly more bulky shapes, one becomes even more aware of this oscillating friction between figure and ground. In the untitled square painting whose black on ochre recalls so evocatively the paintings on Greek vases, we can see how the darker letter-like forms have been shaved down, eaten into, by the surrounding orangish ground, but also how, likewise, the thin, dark stripes have struck back, swelling and rippling over the ground [Plate 3]. Through a process of mutual erosion, the figures and ground arrive at their slender, balanced proportions. And as Pagk has narrowed his shapes, he has also slipped away from the grid in favor of a more linear, frieze-like composition.

Like that other arena of ceaseless give and take, the ocean, there is a fascinating ambiguity about the borders of the forms in Pagk's paintings. The more closely we examine them, the more difficult it becomes to tell where one begins and the other ends. The edges turn into a vaporous cloud where various colors seem to be evaporating into each other.

It is not only in the present evenness of his paint handling that Pagk reveals his capacity for balance and restraint, but also in the overall proportions of his composition, their architecture. Each canvas is broken into intervals of varying length whose interrelation provokes a sense of visual justness. In the untitled canvas [Plate 2] where three thin yellow forms (an I, an upside down and reversed L, a reversed N) stand against a green-grey background, there is an almost musical sense of progression, reminiscent of the slow measured cadence of one of Satie's *Gymnopédies*. (The instructions Satie gave to his three *Gymnopédies* might almost be applied to Pagk's paintings: *Lent et douloureux*, reads the first, followed by *lent et triste* and *lent et grave*.)

This sense of cadence is helped along by the presence of harmonic-like intervals for if Pagk's paintings evoke a sense of musical measures, this is because they are so successful in establishing visual ones. Along the top edge of this painting, for instance, compare the following intervals: the spaces between the I and the L, between the L and the N, and the squared off angle where the diagonal and vertical legs of the N come together. Given a compass or a pair of calipers, we would probably find that these were very close in length.

One can almost imagine Pagk himself wielding such instruments, like Blake's famous vision of Newton seated on a rock, plotting the future of physics, or after the fashion of a Greek geometer. Yet as much as Pagk's compositions might suggest the harmonies of Greek geometry, his is not the realm of pure mathematics. The impurities and imperfections such as the wavering lines, the sense of searching, almost blindly at times, for balance, these suggest a highly sophisticated operation being executed with somewhat primitive instruments, incapable of the "precision" on which our civilization prides itself, but all the more effective and affective for that. Pagk's proportions – always just ever so slightly awkward – and his unassuming marks of handmadeness are like the slight dissonances in the opening chords of Satie's first *Gymnopédie*. The care and attention Pagk lavishes on his paintings, his satiny, almost licked surfaces, show an artisanal sense of self-effacing craft; not to the extent of effacing the premise of a maker – Pagk's surfaces are not the featureless, machine made skins of Minimalism – but only so far as to avoid loading every gesture with the burden of self-expression.

It is perhaps not accidental that his work brings to mind Satie's reimaginings of Greek dances or that one of his paintings uses the colors of Greek vases, or that he seems to possess a Classical belief in the inherent value of good geometry. There is a stillness and grace to Pagk's work that seems to owe more to a memory of Greek civilization than to any modern painter. Of course, he is in the tradition of Barnett Newman and Gottlieb's pictographic period, as well as recalling the early paintings of Jannis Kounellis and some New Image painters of the late 70s (minus the image), but these echoes do not tell us that much about his work and intentions. What strikes one most in Pagk's paintings is the abundance of patience, both the patience of their making and the patience of how they present themselves to us. Like Brice Marden's monochromes, but in a way all their own, Pagk's paintings need a good deal of time to achieve their full effect. This willingness to wait, this lack of anxiety about the audience's attention span, is remarkable in so young a painter. (Possibly it is Pagk's mixed cultural background, his position as a "French" painter actually English and Czech—transplanted from Paris to New York that helps him take such a long view.) The generally somber, muted colors add to the atmosphere of deliberate grace.

To the casual observer, for whom they care little, Pagk's paintings may seem quite straightforward, "classic" (rather than "classical") abstract paintings, offering no startling new development in the history of painting. While it is true that they are neither "last" nor "first" paintings, it is equally true that they have their own secrets and that these are well-guarded. Like inscriptions in an ancient language, they seem prepared to wait millennia if necessary before the world takes cognizance of their importance, their hidden wisdom, their arcane knowledge, their complex system of inner harmonies. One knows that, regardless, Paul Pagk will carry on constructing his human-scaled pantheons stroke by stroke, that no matter what, his paintings will continue to emit their quiet glow, like epistemological batteries, yet also one hopes that, as much for our sake as for theirs, they will emerge further, like excavated temples or salvaged marble statues, perhaps to assist at some unexpected rebirth.

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