

Reading Rämistrasse #87: Noah Merzbacher on Paint by Numbers at Galerie Eva Presenhuber



Shadowbanning the aesthetic effects of contemporary paintings is very easy. All one has to do is dismiss them as naively decadent or as the offspring of macho egos. And sometimes this is justified. Paintings, at heart, are playful children who can't communicate efficiently but won't shut up about their aesthetic depth. I find that very likeable. And what's even better is that you cannot pare a painting down to its conceptual skeleton without losing all its flavour. The soup is the tasty bit, not the bones. And the soup is a painting's aesthetic reality, an infinite abyss never fully accessible even to the artist. (1) That's why seeing a painting is as much a translation as writing or yodelling about it. You're stuck in metaphors and lost in translation. (2) No matter how much you try to account for a painting's specific way of existing. (3)

Galerie Eva Presenhuber's exhibition curated by Gianni Jetzer is called *Paint-by-Numbers* and shows an array of local artists who share a similar and serious interest in painting with a wink.

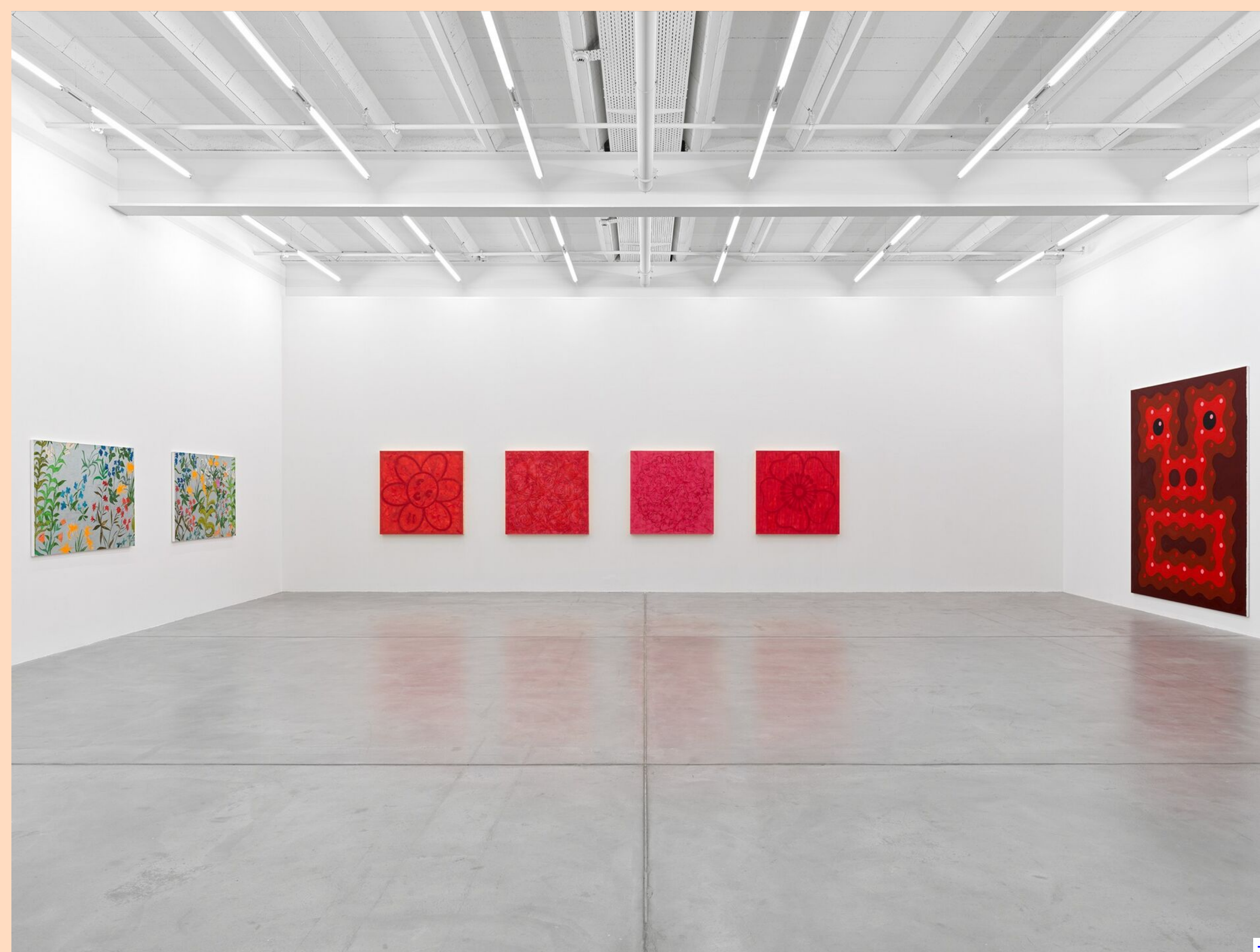
In the first room, Gianni Jetzer calls them chapters, the curator presents paintings that reference art history in one way or another. I loved Gina Fischli's wooden frame series (*WNW, NNW* and *SSE*, 2022). The works resemble cartoon renderings of a window, and I couldn't help but think of that dusty metaphor 'a painting is a window to another world'. A familiar object (the window) is paired with a useful function (pointing somewhere). Fischli replaced the actual painting with the metaphoric object itself. Exposed to be ridiculed publicly. With nothing to point at, the metaphoric object seems slightly confused or naively unwithered. It has lost its purpose. It's a little child pouting because you just took away their favourite toy. Or an antithesis to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, 1954. Every attempt to follow the direction in which it points us would lead to cheap caricature.



Installation view, *Paint-by-Numbers*, Curated by Gianni Jetzer, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Maag Areal, Zurich, 2022
Othmar Farré, Damien Juillard, Laura Langer
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The second room includes Laura Langer's *Moon Skull*, 2021, paintings. Each of the two *Moon Skull* paintings confronts you with a big, white, two-dimensional letter 'A'. The background is seemingly out of focus. The letter 'A' floats on a sea-green tinted void and different green circles, mimicking the 'bokeh' effect typically created by cameras. Laura Langer is known for using photographs as points of departure. The most fun I had with the paintings was when I tried to attune myself to their spatial qualities. The paintings show a flat object floating on an infinite abyss. They emit a specific field of focus, space and light, occasionally feeling hyper sharp due to the crisp rendering of the green bubbles in the background. Pair this feeling with the title *Moon Skull* and you got yourself an intriguing crisscrossing net of metaphors. Beware of the fact that the title *Moon Skull* already fundamentally shapes your perception of the moon and its qualities, such as having bones, let alone a skull. Following the structure reveals many metaphors. The letter *A* is like a moon's skull. The spatial feeling of the paintings is like the spatial feeling of how we usually see the moon. The distance evoked in the painting is like the distance one has to the moon. Bokeh bubbles are like stars in the night sky. A painting is like a photograph. I never questioned what the letter *A* means – for all I know, its meaning is somewhere far away in Laura Langer's brain galaxy. A metaphor can only work if the two objects involved already share some qualities. The bones, moon and letter *A* share their white colour and the night sky and the sea-green abyss share a 'background quality'. But metaphors also need a basket of ambiguous aesthetic qualities, such as the ambiguous sense of depth, scale and crispness in *Moon Skull*'s specific aesthetic way of existing. On the other hand, normal perception as well as literal statements seem to fuse an object with its qualities. When perceiving Laura Langer's *Moon Skull* paintings you're seeing a specific painting with specific qualities, not some random blob or any other random painting. (4)

Othmar Farré's *Given Circumstances*, 2019, series and the *Blue Perspectives* series, 2015–2022, are also amongst the artworks in room two. Both work with a familiar stylised landscape or archetype. *The Blue Perspectives* series renders slightly warped iterations of the famous McDonald's 'M' on blue paint-textured backgrounds. The 'M' probably refers to the 'M' in Museum. Each of the paintings is named after an art institution, like *Blue Perspectives*, *Puppenmuseum Basel*, 2014. So institutions are like fast-food chains? But literally translating artworks completely misses the point in an exhibition like *Paint-by-Numbers*. The Basel Puppenhaus and the blue painting crack open like an egg only when you stop feeling it literally. (5) If objects withdraw from us, then metaphor and beauty seem to crack objects open by making the many qualities of an object (like the unhealthiness of a fast-food chain) available for sensual experience. (6) We could feel the sweet comedy of being left with a crooked monument or museum visits drenched in McDonalds' frying oil or smile at the seemingly extroverted, slightly pompous advertisement font warp of *Kunsthalle Palazzo Liestal*, 2015.



Installation view, *Paint-by-Numbers*, Curated by Gianni Jetzer, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Maag Areal, Zurich, 2022
Laura Langer, Mitchell Anderson, Anton Bruhin
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The third room's paintings have flowers in common. It is said that poems about flowers are really poems about poems. Maybe a similar thing could be said about paintings; the motif is definitely a classic. Every flower wants to be looked at by humans and insects alike. They fundamentally rely on their sensuality for reproduction. (7) Mitchell Anderson writes on Instagram about his *Flowers* series, 2022, shown at the gallery: 'Here's a sequence of flowers kinda returning some sensuality to stolen pop'. Mitchell's paintings revamp existing flower motifs, such as the one drawn by Michel Majerus in *Untitled*, 904, 2000–01. I love his simple statement. It highlights an aesthetic layer I find very important in contemporary painting. Artworks can have interesting shimmering qualities by evoking things such as an art history. One can account for this philosophically as well – according to object-oriented ontology a relation, like an artwork relating to an art historical discourse, is itself considered an object and therefore sculptural and aesthetic. (8) His red paintings sculpturally shape their way into the world through their specific way of existing. They shape their own rendering of an art historical discourse with it as well. It could look a bit like a mural of delicate pop flowers that Anderson infuses with sensuality like dried tea leaves. This sensual deed turns out to be a militant temporal dimension of Anderson's *Flowers*.

Paint-by-Numbers isn't an assemblage of mumble rappers. The lines, colours and jokes are much more pungent and seemingly unambiguous. It's a language that builds around straight lines, clear boundaries, solid blocks and intuitive readability. But most of all, *Paint-by-Numbers* works towards more subtle rumbling aesthetic reverbs that spread and brim over the initial physical artworks. (9)

(1) Slavoj Žižek, There is Hope for Humanity, Timothy Morton talking with Slavoj Žižek, in: *Real Review* 12, 2022, p.91

(2) Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Michigan 2013 p.131

(3) *Ibid.* p.216

(4) Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Illinois 2005 p.163

(5) *Ibid.* p.163

(6) *Ibid.* p.108

(7) *On Kant* in Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, New York 2016 p.102

(8) Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Illinois 2005. p.159

(9) Timothy Morton, *Realist Magic: Objects, Ontology, Causality*, Michigan 2013 p.19

Paint-by-Numbers, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zahnradstrasse 21, 8005 Zürich, 23 April–28 May 2022

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