

PETER HALLEY

PATTERNS AND FIGURES, GOUACHES 1977/78

February 23 – April 7, 2018

In 1977 and 1978 Peter Halley stayed in New Orleans and created a substantial group of gouaches, a selection of which is now on view at Galerie Thomas Modern. In these early works, which are shown in Europe for the first time, Halley renders geometric forms and abstract signs in bold, strong colours, which reveal his interest in non-European cultures and their symbols. Looking back, Halley himself describes these works on paper like this:

“The work from this period was about turning geometry into images, but unlike my present work, the images were drawn from ethnology and based on symbolic representations of the rhythms of nature as underlying truths about the world. They had symbolic resonance to me at the time.”



Four Crosses, 1977, 35,5 x 37,5 cm

Boat, 1977, 55,9 x 74,9 cm

Tree, 1978, 30,5 x 22,9 cm

At the same time, the influence of Matisse and the Bauhaus, of Classic Modernism and Abstract Expressionism become obvious. In Halley's beginning concern with geometric abstraction, which is already noticeable in these works, lies the seed for his mature formal language and colour analysis, which characterize his painterly oeuvre since the early 1980s and make it unmistakable.

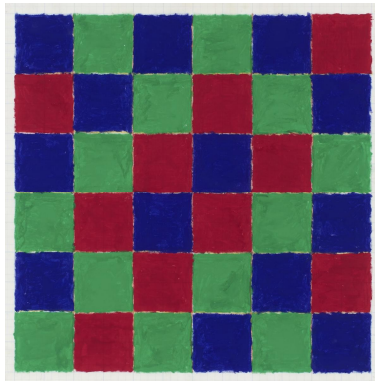
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As early as 1977/1978, these works on paper show that for Halley, geometric abstraction always has a figurative/referential component as well, which separates him distinctly from the tradition of Abstract Expressionism. Richard Speer outlines this aspect in Halley's artistic development as follows:

"In light of their overlap with, and divergence from, his post-1981 paintings, it is intriguing that on both sides of that pivotal divide, Halley adopted essentially the same strategy: deploying the vocabulary of geometric abstraction to articulate forms that are in fact pointedly referential."



Two Crosses, 1977
30,5 x 30,5 cm



Persian Tomb, 1977
49,5 x 33 cm



Landscape with Tree, 1978
30,5 x 30,5 cm

Halley's intelligent struggle with the high claims of abstract art and his later harsh criticism can already be recognized in these early gouaches. Peter Halley himself articulates it like this:

"The idea of a connection between geometry and the natural order – the idea that behind appearance there might be some kind of abstract order in nature...became impossible for me. I think at that time there was a watershed, reflected in many artists' work, after which many of the truisms about cross-cultural experience, nature, as well as various other claims associated with Modernism and modernity, became problematic."

But his gouaches also possess a beauty and freshness, which emanate from their source at the Gulf of Mexico – Richard Speer has a wonderfully apt description for this:

"The gouache paintings, with their cheery checkerboards and gold-star appliqué, gaze at us across the divide as from another world. Is it possible for squares, rectangles, and the occasional triangle to engender nostalgia? If so, then the gouaches conjure up the sweet, heavy scents of the Vieux Carré: magnolia, bougainvillea, oleander, and the faintest whiff of apple blossom wafting through the garden."

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