

frieze

Rafał Bujnowski

Johnen Galerie

'The new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but it is nearer to painting', wrote Donald Judd, describing works by his contemporaries in 'Specific Objects' (1965). The essay, a theoretical benchmark that defined the Minimalist aesthetic through the evolving relationship between the two mediums, became a manifesto for Judd's own sculptural practice as well as a guideline for generations of artists to come. Its strong impact was indeed palpable in Rafał Bujnowski's recent exhibition, 'Corner'.

The first work encountered in the gallery was Cyparis (all works 2010), a hand-scrawled headstone – made from black volcanic sand – for a legendary survivor of the devastating 1902 Martinique volcano. Hung on a wall – that is, displayed as a painting – it was a nod to Judd's method of turning sculptures into 'specific objects' by bringing them 'nearer to painting'. However, this manoeuvre on Bujnowski's part was only an introduction to what followed: the stratagem at work in Cyparis was instantly inverted in the series of 'Corner' paintings. Untitled (Corner 1), Untitled (Corner 2) and Untitled (Corner 3), all small-scale deformed paintings, resting on the floor in various corners of the gallery, where they resembled gravestones. This graceful gesture established the objective of the show: transforming paintings into objects by bringing them nearer to sculpture; or, in other words, Judd reversed.

All the paintings in the show, including the 'Corner' works, were made by applying a glossy 'lamp black' paint – a recurring material in Bujnowski's work – to the canvas in thick layers with wide brush strokes. The production process for these works is less artistic and more industrial, not unlike the manufacturing of vinyl records, which the texture of these paintings strongly resembles. It is only once the light hits the modulated surface of the painting that the rough product truly becomes the work that the artist intended. In the sense that the essence of paintings produced in this way is determined by the space around them, they share something with Minimalist sculpture.

Bujnowski further played on this aspect in his 'Landscape' and 'Exit' paintings, large-scale framed rectangular pieces. In a classical context, this arrangement would suggest a treatment of the works as paintings or, at least, as two-dimensional. Yet in this case, the glass functioned in the opposite way, by interrupting the distinctive reflectivity of Bujnowski's 'lamp blacks'. Instead of acting as silent containers for the paintings, the frames and the highly reflective glass became part of the work. While the perfectly coated panoramas Untitled (Landscape 1) and Untitled (Landscape 2) were coherent wholes, all five 'Exit' paintings had an additional factor at work: Bujnowski left a part of each canvas untouched. Extending beyond their surface with the help of the glass frame, these works also reach inward, where the underlying structure of the painting is revealed.

The carefully thought-out process behind Bujnowski's subtle

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exercise reveals that, despite the seeming diversity of his practice, the ongoing investigation into the potential of painting always lies at its heart. Be it passing a painted self-portrait off as a visa application photograph, installing paintings in Ikea stores or reproducing 'lamp blacks', he challenges the relationship between the production of paintings and their consumption. These works always presuppose an active viewer who is either assessing the passport picture, browsing in a furniture shop or, in this case, reflected in the surface of the 'lamp black' paintings. By shifting his role as an artist from a distant creator to a facilitator of experience, Bujnowski manages to make work that surpasses the customarily passive role occupied by contemporary painting.

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