

MSSNDCLRCQ
Meessen De Clercq

ADAM HENRY

Repetition (Repetition)

April 3 – May 16, 2015

2a Rue de l'Abbaye B 1000 Brussels
meessendeclercq.com

There is no gesture in my painting. The gesture is outside the work and primarily in the ideas. Perhaps because my paintings have no "hand" in them, the only way to humanize them is to repeat them and show that difference is in the anomalies that happen naturally in making and in painting.

For his second solo exhibition at the gallery, Adam Henry (° 1974, USA) occupies the entire building with a display combining retinal persistence with conceptual rigour. Building on the symmetrical, almost organic, arrangement of the exhibition rooms, Henry has hung nine paintings on the ground floor; four on one side and five on the other. Each canvas is composed of six chromatic discs based on a 4-colour system influenced by Goethe's observations on the light spectrum. These coloured discs are spaced out regularly and seem to be repeated on each canvas. The repetition of the pattern makes us think that the artist is following a system strictly bound to a predetermined logic. On closer examination, the visitor realizes that the position of the colour on one canvas is subject to a 90° rotation in the next canvas. These works are part of a whole; as a sentence consists of words, this series shows that each work has an independent existence and gains depth when you consider the overall "phrasing".

What we think we are seeing is not what it actually is. The similarity is but illusion, and the differences between each canvas, although subtle, by-pass the initial perception. Paradoxically, we see that the fact of duplicating the image (one could speak of replication as they say with regard to genetic material) does not detract from or diminish the power of attraction of these works but rather emphasises the uniqueness of each painting. Henry stresses that by saying something twice, it underscores the particularity and specificity of the proposal. One could argue that ultimately the only thing that is repeated in this series is the difference.

Anchoring his pictorial work in conceptual thinking that makes it unique on the contemporary scene, Henry reinforces the idea that there is something to see beneath the surface of things or between things. He also puts a painting between parentheses as if to show that there is an underlying language in his work, as if to signal that his painting is not made up of random events but is based on a completely controlled structure. This painting is the double of one of the other four paintings placed on the same wall, which amplifies rather the idea of duplication within the same repetition.

The mirror effect of this hanging is perpetuated on the first floor with a variety of works that show more a grid



system, superimpositions, shifts, geometric shapes that interlock, overlap, combine. Although from a formal point of view, one can detect a source of inspiration in colour field painting, one is rather tempted, for this exhibition, to see links with more conceptual or serial works (F. Gonzalez Torres, A. Warhol). One could also cite the two canvasses *Factum I* and *Factum II* that Robert Rauschenberg painted in 1957,

although Henry is far-removed from the gestuality characteristic of Rauschenberg.

F. Gonzalez Torres, *Untitled (Perfect lovers)*, 1991

In Henry, the reproduction of the gesture annihilates any urge, any expressionist gesture. Where many contemporary artists highlight the gesture and work on the surface, Henry dismisses the subjective side as far as possible. Through

repetition, the discourse shifts; the artist no longer seeks to express a feeling on canvas but instead to establish a language that is based on a non-figurative and conceptual logic system.

There is no room for improvisation or error, nor repentance. Anything random is banned. Duplicating the same painting opens up questions such as: What is uniqueness, what is multiplicity? Which is the model, which is the copy? Can a copy be more successful than the model? How can you know which is the original canvas? Recreating identically also opens up the question of the relationship with time. The notion of time is crucial. The gesture is isolated, the time is repeated in the production but also at the time of looking at the works, comparing them. Repetition calls to mind images filmed and fixed on film, all nearly identical, with tiny changes, with this time fragmented and divided but when projected at the desired speed, it creates a moving image. The artist also points out that the surface of his paintings is reminiscent of the brilliance of these films.

Henry uses an industrial gloss paint usually used for mass production purposes (i.e. repetition). The gloss of this paint has the effect of obtaining a black with reflective qualities similar to those of a mirror. This black has the distinction of being composed of the four colours mentioned above. Therefore one can ask this question: how to open up a space by saturating it with colours?

Besides time, space is paramount in Henry's work: space in the works themselves (for example, the use of white in the large canvases) or between them (the three works in the alcove, for example). The case of the work *Untitled (III)* also illustrates this relationship with space but with more guile. The work is positioned in the small corridor between the two rooms on the first floor in the exact spot it occupied during Adam Henry's first exhibition at the gallery two years ago. Besides the spatial repetition, this painting poses the question of the fragmentation of unity (it implies that any multiplication process derives from a single source). By repeating this hanging, Henry is making a subtle allusion to his first exhibition in 2013 and repositions his current exhibition in a clear axis.

Henry is also showing two videos, *Post Prelude (cave painting)* in the Videobox, *4 May 2014 May 4* in the Wunderkammer. Both deal with the subject of duality and repetition. One, with inverted polarities, shows a pair of hands where the shadow cast is reminiscent of the early days of cave painting. The hands seem silvery, shiny as are the paintings and the impression that a dark, magical force is contained in the space created between the hands and the shadows strengthens over time.

The other video is projected on a monitor; the image is separated vertically in two, recalling certain of Henry's pictorial compositions, and shows the same event filmed by two different people (the artist and Noel Anderson). This double sequence, also contained in the title *4 May 2014 May 4*, is a perfect counterpoint to the paintings.

On the wall, two text boxes take this idea of repetition, duality and perpetual change even further. Henry took as his starting point a text by the writer Jorge Luis Borges and translated it consistently using antonyms to the original text as in a gesture of transgression. Does this not indicate a desire to be on the other side of the mirror? The font used was created by Henry about fifteen years ago; each letter is duplicated in a mirror effect. Once again, a *mise en abîme*. Ultimately, there is a final reversal; on the ground floor, painting as language, and in the Wunderkammer, language as painting.