

Variations on a Jack-o'-Lantern: Andrew Gbur at Team Gallery

BY GRANT JOHNSON, MODERN PAINTERS | MAY 28, 2015



An installation view of Andrew Gbur at team (bungalow) in Venice, California.
(Courtesy of team (gallery, inc.), New York)

Two eyes, a nose, and a mouth — though somewhat abstract, Andrew Gbur's face paintings are immediately recognizable for what they are. For his first Los Angeles solo exhibition, at Team Gallery through May 31, Gbur offers four large-scale canvases and four related drawings of the same affectless motif. In these works, jaggedly cut forms rendered in flat, opaque gouache and screenprinting ink assembled on unpainted white grounds, suggest the same ghastly jack-o'-lantern face caught in several slightly distinct vantages and palettes. His variations on this theme articulate the mutability of these stark faces, both leering and placid. A graduate of Yale, he now lives and works in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, slightly afield of the urban orbit, in a land known if at all for dynamic dairy products and the Pennsylvania Dutch.

The artist's painted forms clearly take Henri Matisse's joyous cutouts as their point of departure, only to leave the jazz and lyricism of these works behind. Assembled into representations rather than abstractions, they remind that representation's success depends on careful composition. The uneven edges of Gbur's forms recall the torn paper of Jean Arp's *Untitled (Collage with Squares Arranged according to the Laws of Chance)*, 1917. His palette, too, suggests haphazard methods that seek out surprises. A mix of Jordan almond pastels, flat inky blacks and blues, earthy beiges, and synthetic chemical hues, it's a folly of the construction paper color range or the coloring book given over to the whims of the crayon wielder. In *Untitled*, 2015, Gbur sullies a complementary teal, lavender, and royal blue trio with a dusty taupe, and, in another also-untitled work, refuses the conventions of the color chart completely when he insists that neon yellow, mint, army green, and crimson come together in one canvas.

Like the jack-o'-lantern, an artifact of a bloodier pagan past sublimated into less messy vegetal violence, Gbur's elemental portraits reduce the emotive spectrum of the human face to a streamlined alphabet of childlike building blocks. These faces could be ready-made symbols of unmitigated joy, although like clowns or carnival masks, we might recognize them more completely as Janus-faced propositions, duplicitous and stonily unyielding of any truly human pathos or sympathetic mood. Noting how these works flicker between glib self-confidence and wide-eyed naïveté, we might see these paintings as the product of a kind of insider's outsider, smart enough to know better but cool enough not to care.

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