

Robert Janitz

TEAM GALLERY

Robert Janitz titled his second show at Team “Kerckhoffs’ Principle,” named for a century-old theorem, postulated by the Dutch cryptologist Auguste Kerckhoffs, that states that a system will remain secure if everything about that system is known, so long as there is a key that remains secret. (Since illimitable permutations of digits are possible, a complex-enough numerical key is functionally uncrackable.) Once intended for military ciphers, the principle now guides the development of algorithms via which data is encrypted online. The apposition of such a program to the suite of ten Reverse Portraits in this exhibition is itself both obvious and not. Markedly different from the works in Janitz’s last New York show—which consisted of large-scale gestural abstractions thickened with cold wax and flour and oversize metal plant sculptures—the smallish panels (each 25 x 20 inches) here feature accumulations of brushstrokes that just barely transcend their raw materiality to conjure the backsides of human heads.

In some cases, the wide, impasto strokes behave rather well as “hair.” In *To Photograph Perfume* (all works 2015), for example, sable streaks have been “combed” to the head’s center. Meanwhile, the brushstrokes in *Interpreting Reality from an Unacceptable Point of View* and *Play of Tropes* have been torqued and then cascade convincingly past the shoulder line; in these two works, coiffure integrates the upper and lower register of head and torso more fully than it does elsewhere. Beyond this, portraiture is present in a more primal sense: Circle plus a base reads inescapably as human. But Janitz, who has described his efforts as attempts to “conceal painting with painting to show painting,” appeals to portraiture only to disassemble it. Even the aforementioned examples—as legible as they are—never foreclose the possibility that they’ll be read simply as accretions of paint. These marks that make pictures, as well the procedural operations that generate the would-be forms themselves, are the codes Janitz invokes with the show’s title.

What is the difference, then, between pigment-laden gestures that form nothing and gestures that form something? Open description—representations of heads, aggregations of strokes, or semiotic systems—here meets the impossible time horizon of knowing the thing, which remains if not hypothetically then at least practically indecipherable. Janitz’s figures, remaining featureless and generally obscure, grant the viewer neither face nor narrative. Even as the artist supplies a range of hues, from red and black to white, as if bestowing upon each of his pieces the gift of formal individuation, subjecthood remains far away. Standing amid a room full of eyeless totems is an oddly disconcerting experience, one that, for me anyhow, gave rise to the fantasy that they were gazing into a void. This scenario, which is of course fictive, nonetheless made me aware of the other personifications and vantages not given, and of ones that were. These are paintings that hide in plain sight.

—Suzanne Hudson



Robert Janitz,
*To Photograph
Perfume*, 2015, oil,
wax, and flour on
linen, 25 x 20".