

MAX ESTENGER



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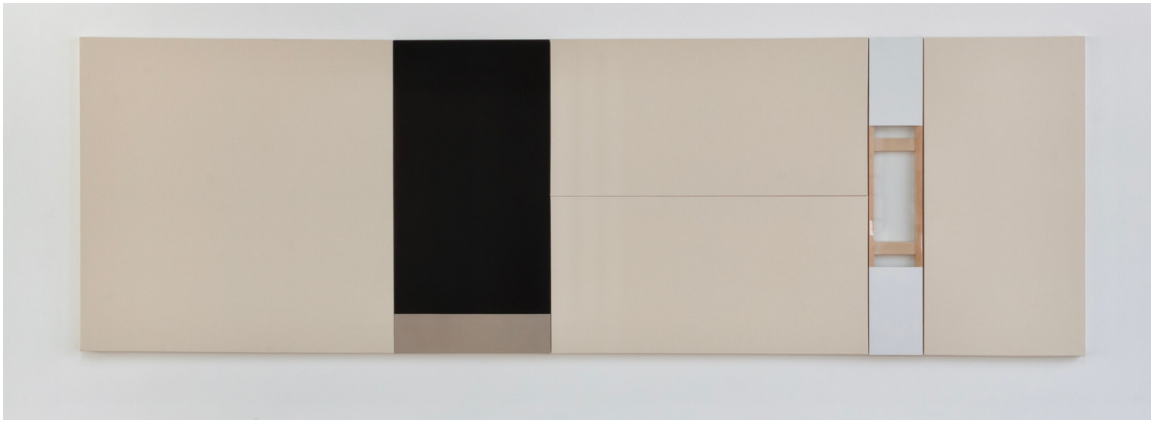
NEW PAINTINGS

SEPTEMBER 9 - OCTOBER 15, 2017

norte maar  
88 Pine Street  
Brooklyn, NY 11208



Installation view *Holdings: Selections from MCASD'S Collection*, June 4-September 4, 2016 (Foreground) **Max Estenger, Red See-Through Painting** (1991) Clear vinyl over wood, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60" four panels. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Gift of John and Eileen Simon, Yorba Linda, California (Background) **Robert Irwin, 1° 2° 3° 4°** (1997) Apertures cut into existing windows. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego



**Black and White** (2015) Oil on stainless steel, clear vinyl; raw canvas, 72 x 228" (six panels)

## MAX ESTENGER WITH MATTHEW DELEGET

NORTE MAAR  
AUGUST 2017

**MATTHEW DELEGET:** We've known each other for years now, so I'm really excited we finally have a chance to spend some quality time together discussing your work and ideas. You are rare among artists in that you've been thoroughly committed to making reductive, abstract work for more than three decades. How has your thinking about abstraction evolved during this time? What were your concerns at the outset and what's motivating you right now?

**MAX ESTENGER:** I've rarely thought about "reduction" in any profound way. My initial work was most informed by Robert Ryman's paintings that referenced the support and how that support was fastened to the wall, such as in my *See-Through Paintings* from the early 1990s. In fact, I think I've been wary of the reductive endgame especially in terms of the monochrome tradition as seen in the work of the Radical Painters. I do admire a lot of that work, but I reacted to it by thinking more in terms of exploding and fragmenting that monochrome and creating something else. So if anything, I've thought more in terms of building out than reduction.

I have always thought that abstraction was as epochal as Renaissance illusionism and if that tradition could last 500 years or so, abstraction could yield at least 200 years. We are in abstraction's second century and I see no reason why interesting, fresh, and inventive work can't still come from what started in 1912.

**MD:** I often wonder that myself. Your work can assume a number of different formats. Whether hanging on the wall, sitting directly on the floor, or installed in relation to the particulars of a given space, your work possesses a strong sense of clarity and directness. You usually present materials as themselves, unedited. Linen is linen, wood is wood, sheetrock is sheetrock. This takes a lot of courage. How did you arrive at this strategy, to just let things be what they are? I imagine the precepts of Minimalism may have played a role here.



**Thirty** (2006) Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 80" Collection of Steffany Martz, New York City

ME: Folly might be another word, but I think that certain materials left alone can be very seductive. And other times partially painting sections and leaving some parts of the material untouched can be just as interesting. It's not a set program and certainly Donald Judd, Fred Sandback, and Dan Flavin dealing with materiality qua materiality were an important precedent. I think initially I had this kind of hard-assed materiality that I have been letting go of over the last 25 years. I was also inspired by the example of Morris Louis and all that raw, unprimed canvas.

**MD: It's really exciting and also somewhat unusual that you cite Morris Louis. I don't hear his name mentioned all that often among painters. What is it about Louis' late work that holds your attention? Have any of those qualities been reflected in your own work or worldview over the years?**

ME: I think what Louis did in that small DC townhouse over the course of his last four years is pretty remarkable. He was isolated, focused, and driven. And then he died tragically. I am still profoundly moved by his work. I think his *Veils* are among the most audacious paintings anyone ever made. They are so strange and original. They are monumental and yet so thin and light. One of the paintings from this exhibition at Norte Maar, *Red* (2017) has certain affinities with Louis' *Veils* especially the attention to top and bottom edges.

**MD: One other quality that strikes me every time I see your work is your color usage. It reads as highly selective, acute, and buoyant. To me it feels optimistic. Tell me about your color concerns and decisions. When does a work need an applied color (or set of colors)? And how do you choose one specific color over any other one?**

ME: Well, when we talk about color, that's where the "rigor" and certainty in my work is thrown out the window. The color has been more or less consistent—high keyed, and all those other attributes you mention. And I don't even mind the term optimistic. There's obviously certain ideas that I have about color that I think are just very subjective.

I did an entire series of over twenty paintings using the eight OSHA Safety Colors (1994-95), but ironically, those were all colors that I liked already anyway. In the mid-2000s, I was at a sort of impasse with creating new work, and I decided that I would just do some really hedonistic color paintings with stripes, bands, and sections. This is as old a Modernist trope as there is—the stripe—but I put mine through a simple compositional progression and ended up with a group of paintings that I was satisfied with.

**MD: I often think about the stripe, or the grid for that matter, as readymades. No one really “owns” them artistically. I know you grew up in Southern California. You also went to college and graduate school there. Immediately afterwards, you moved permanently to NYC in the late 1980s where you continue to live today. You might be uniquely positioned to talk about the similarities and differences between the East and West Coast reductive abstraction traditions that have evolved over the past 50 years. I’m specifically thinking about Color Field Painting, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Neo-Geo, the Abstract Classicists, Light & Space, Land Art, etc., among so many other interesting moments. What are your thoughts here? And how do you see your own work in relation to these two parallel, ongoing conversations?**

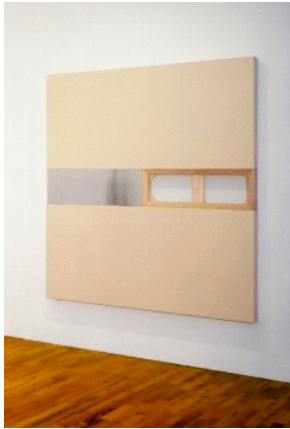
ME: For me, the New York School was always paramount—everyone from Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, but also early Stella, Jo Baer to Robert Mangold. Mangold’s survey show at MOCA San Diego in 1985 knocked me out especially coming right at the apex of the Neo-Expressionist moment. My bible is basically that three-volume set of books called *The New American Abstraction 1950-1970* that you are probably the only other person I know owns (laughs). My grad school advisor at UCSD was Sheldon Nodelman, who wrote a book *Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality* and later on a monograph on the Rothko Chapel. And I also studied a lot with the great Allan Kaprow while there.



**Blue See-Through Painting** (1992) Clear vinyl over wood; acrylic on canvas  
16 x 64" (four panels). Private Collection, New York

In Southern California, Light and Space was always around, but definitely lower profile in the 80s. I was fortunate that MOCA Los Angeles and MOCA San Diego had great examples of that work. The other interesting artists for me in California besides Turrell and Irwin were people like Tony DeLap and Mary Corse in terms of painting. The Norton Simon Museum owned a grand Ellsworth Kelly multi-panel work that I saw at age 19 and inspired me a lot. There were some galleries focused on showing abstract painting, especially the kind that we now associate with your incomparable MINUS SPACE.

Peter Halley was important in attempting to introduce another narrative into the discourse of abstraction. I thought I had to engage that somehow, but when I moved to New York, I saw the work of Imi Knoebel at Dia in 1988. He is so under appreciated in the United States. I met people like Alan Uglow, Olivier Mosset, and Steven Parrino. It was important for me to see that you could plant your feet, take a stance, and make this kind of work. Not that it was ever going to be easy, but the urgency of that post-formalist rap as exemplified by Halley became less compelling.



**Unpainting #1** (1993) Raw canvas, aluminum, clear vinyl over wood, 68 x 60" (four panels), Private Collection, New York

A few years later in 1994, I was in my first and only “ethnic” show. My parents came to the United States in 1961 from Cuba, so I am a first generation Cuban-American. It was a group show called *Cuban Presences* on the Upper East Side. One of the other artists in that show was Carmen Herrera. She was one of the most generous and kind people I had encountered in the New York scene. I loved her work. I remember many phone conversations with her about art, but unfortunately we sort of lost touch. But obviously her example and emergence in the past decade has been really heartening and thrilling. She stuck to her guns. There was never anything but the work—tough, innovative, and beautiful. Never an appeal to “identity.”

**MD: Yes, I agree. I wish it was only ever about the work, the work, the work, but alas... Since you mentioned it, is there anything specifically Cuban about Herrera’s work? Or in your work for that matter? Is there a particular Cuban worldview or approach present here? Can a specific cultural context or values be expressed in abstraction?**

ME: I can’t speak for Carmen’s work and she actually was born and raised there. I have never traveled to Cuba and I don’t think it plays out in any direct way in my work. I think there are instances in other artists where cultural context has been expressed in abstraction.

**MD: So much conversation about abstraction today is concerned with where abstraction has been in recent decades. It rarely discusses the innovations taking place right now, in real time. I’d like your thoughts about abstraction in the current tense, the present, and also where you think it’s all going. Where are there still opportunities – conceptually,**





Installation view from *Max Estenger 1991-2016* Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson 2016

**materially, contextually, presentationally – either with your own work or with abstraction as a whole?**

ME: Abstraction as a whole is such a small segment of the art scene compared to anytime in the past 50 years that the intramural differences within the abstraction camp that used to be a big deal are no longer big deals. In this social media age, everyone has to “like” what everyone else is doing or so it seems (laughs). So I think instead differences are expressed through one’s artwork rather than in some critical treatise that says this or that kind of abstraction is retrograde or what have you.

When I was coming up, I definitely thought a lot about where my own work’s entry point was in terms of history and contemporary abstraction. I came up with the idea of critical abstract painting from a Hal Foster discussion of Ryman versus Neo-Geo. He singles out Ryman and others as engaged in a serious and critical enterprise. A type of painting, which is in historical involvement with painting’s material practices. He contrasts this to Neo-Geo and its reliance on pastiche. I can go through each of my first few painting series and locate where I think maybe I added something fresh. But eventually that positivist thinking peters out and instead what happens is that one’s work turns into really being about its own development. I’m basically working with the visual language and parameters that I set out for myself 25 years ago.



**Black and Yellow** (2014) Oil on stainless steel and raw canvas; clear vinyl over wood, 67 x 30" (three panels)

As far as what's been happening the past 10 years, obviously Wade Guyton's work has received a lot of attention. He came up with this way to make a painting with printers—and fusing Reinhardt to Warhol in the process. Jennie C. Jones is doing an interesting and weird hybrid of painting and music. There are always new materials and supports, new paints, new frameworks, and new contexts for making work.

**MD: For the past 18 months, the conversations I've been having with artists and others at my gallery have been dominated by politics and for obvious reasons. Does abstraction have a role to play vis-à-vis our most pressing social challenges today? And more specifically, where do you think abstraction will go in response to the great Orange Menace? Is abstraction still relevant? What can it contribute in the age of populism and nationalism?**

ME: Abstraction has had a long 100-year history with the political, whether the Russians or the Supports/Surfaces group. Artists are by and large more politically engaged than the average person. As far as abstraction, a good role model is Ad Reinhardt who was involved in the Civil Rights and anti-war struggles while still maintaining a rigorous abstract art practice. Art is art and everything else is everything else, but I think sometimes events reach such a point that of course politics overshadow art.

I find what you did in your work Matthew, physically attacking the monochrome, as a response to the war in Iraq and other foreign policy issues, a novel way of expressing an important point of view without sacrificing any of the integrity of the object. That is not easy to do.

Politics and art are always tricky. It's better to do great art and great politics, but it's almost impossible to do both together at the same time, at least in the visual arts realm.

I never want to see artists align themselves with the illiberal forces of some on the Left, particularly the types who want to shut down debate on campuses, who want safe zones to censor thought and expression. I am a free speech absolutist and we make a huge mistake making the Right look like the tolerant ones.

Kaprow taught me that all artworks embody a worldview that is inextricably linked with its creator. My own work has embedded within it certain values, which I believe express a clear world view, one that could be applied to many situations and even critically vis-à-vis the current regime—transparency, facticity, and honesty of materials; not to mention harmony, order, and clarity.

*Matthew Deleget is a painter, curator, writer, and co-founder of the gallery MINUS SPACE in Dumbo, Brooklyn. He has exhibited his work internationally in solo and group exhibitions in the US, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. His work was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial by Michelle Grabner at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Deleget teaches at the School of Visual Arts, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Creative Capital. He holds an MFA in Painting and an MS in Theory, Criticism and History of Art, Design and Architecture from Pratt Institute. Matthew lives with his wife, artist Rossana Martinez, and son Mateo in Brooklyn.*



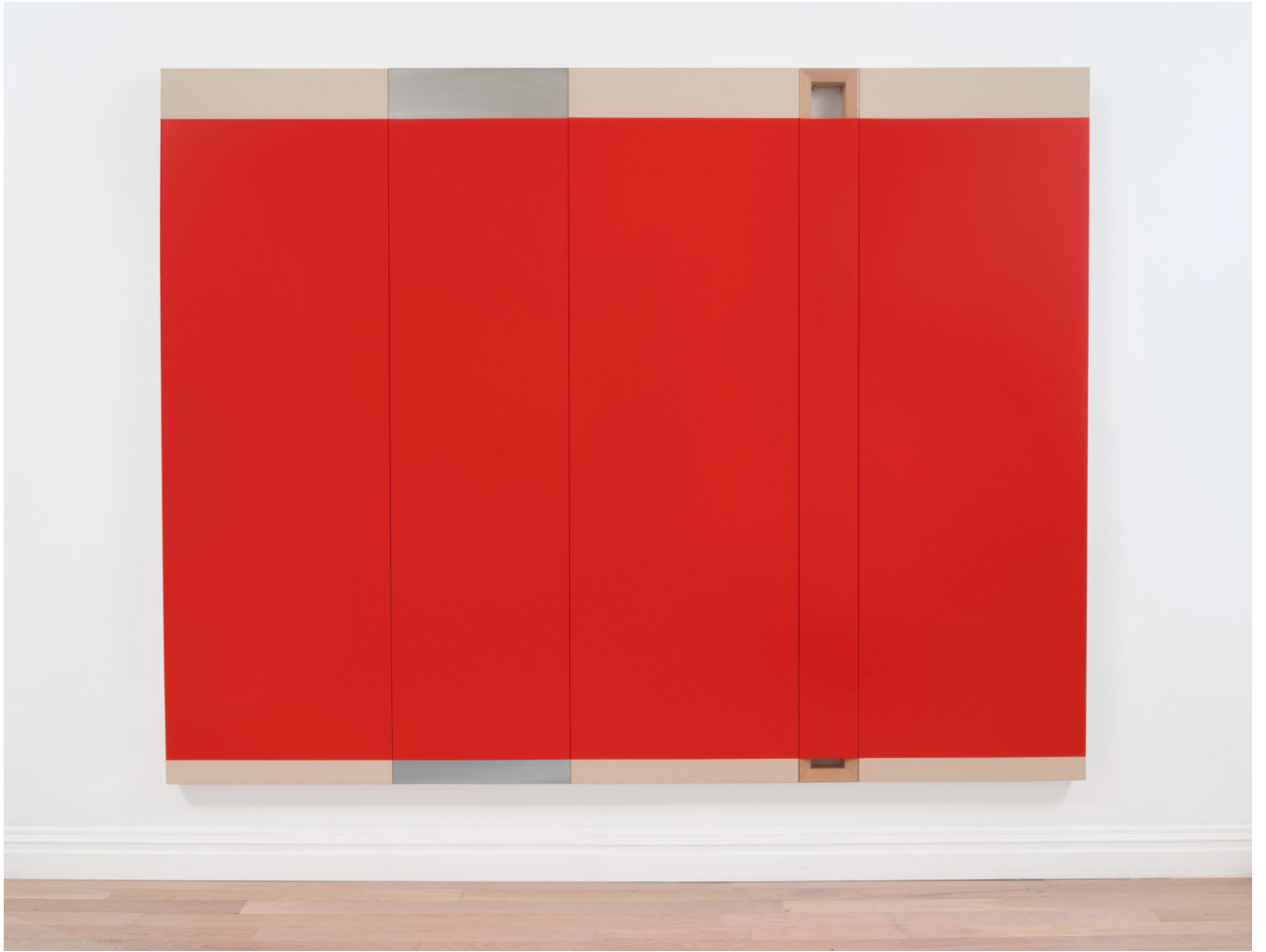
# PLATES

**Red (2017)**

Oil on canvas, stainless steel, clear vinyl

72 x 93.5" / 183 x 237 cm

(five joined panels)



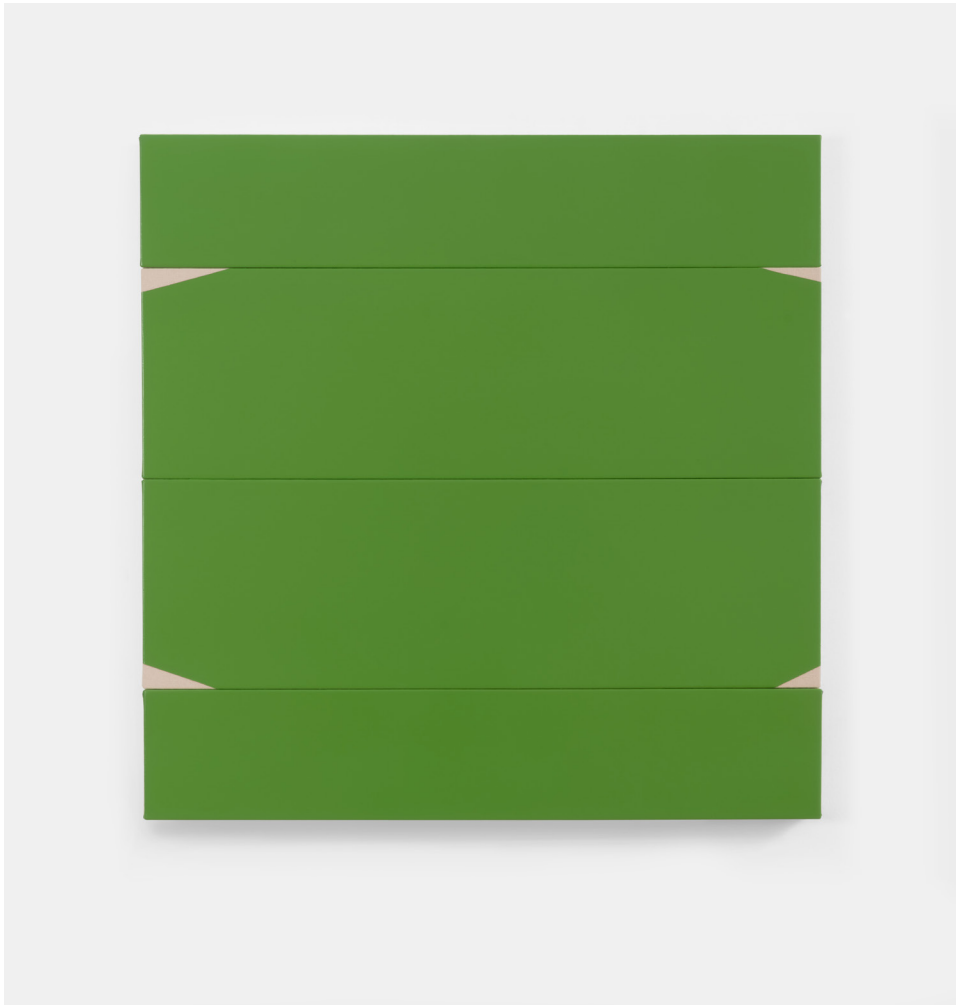
**Green (2017)**

Oil on canvas

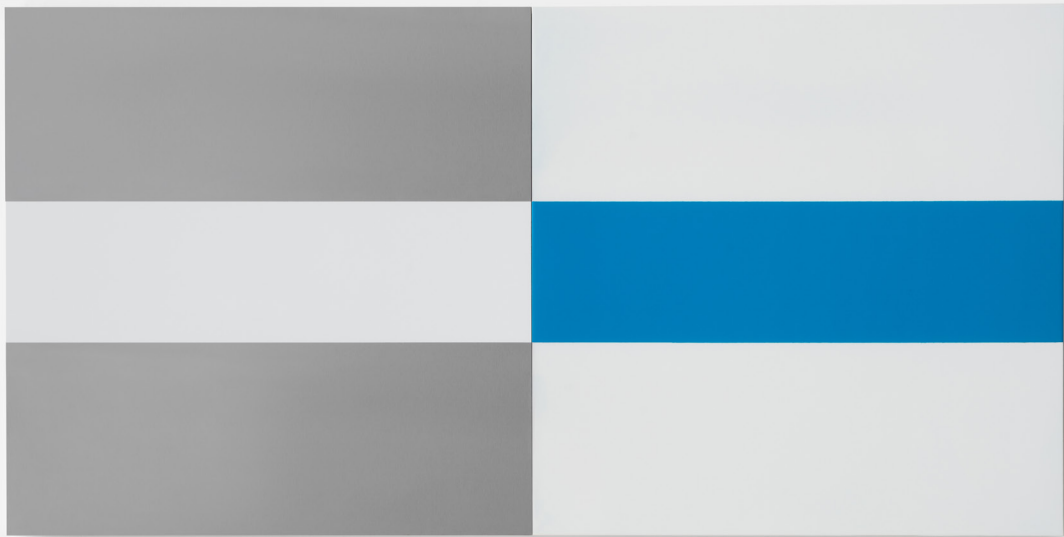
26 x 26" / 66 x 66 cm

(four joined panels)

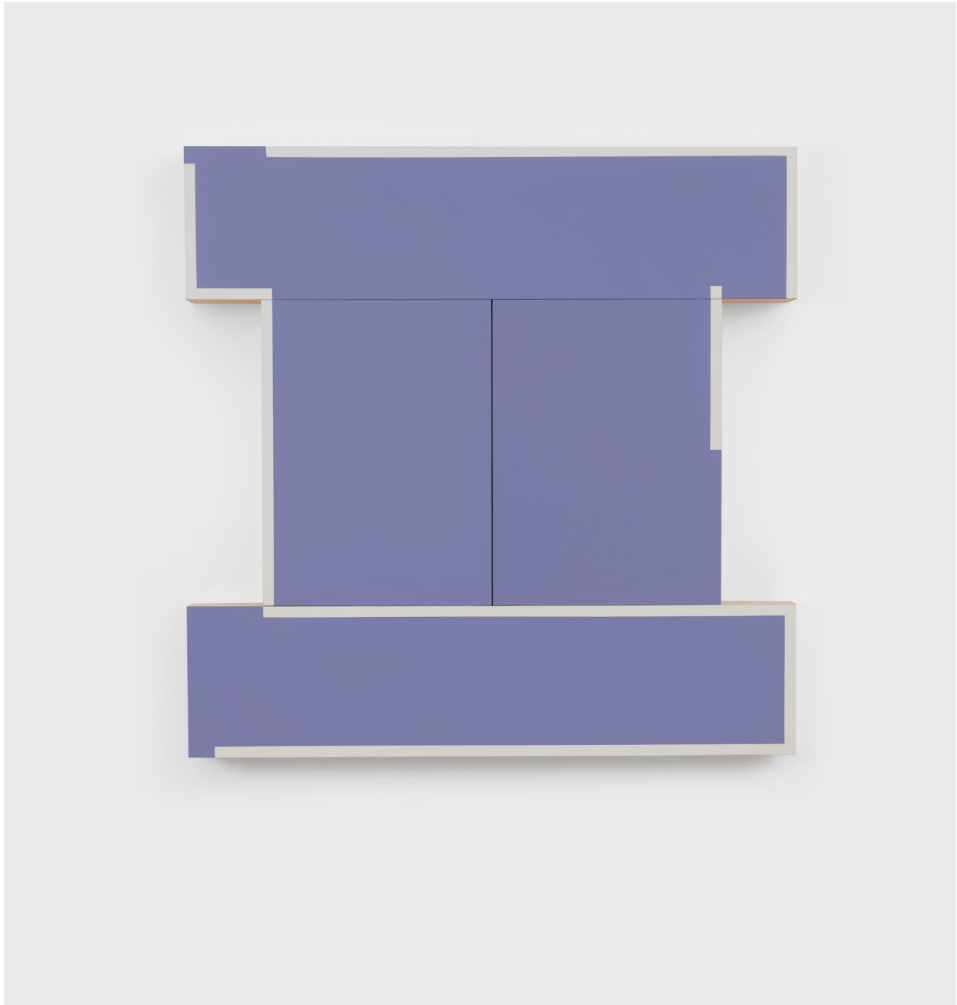




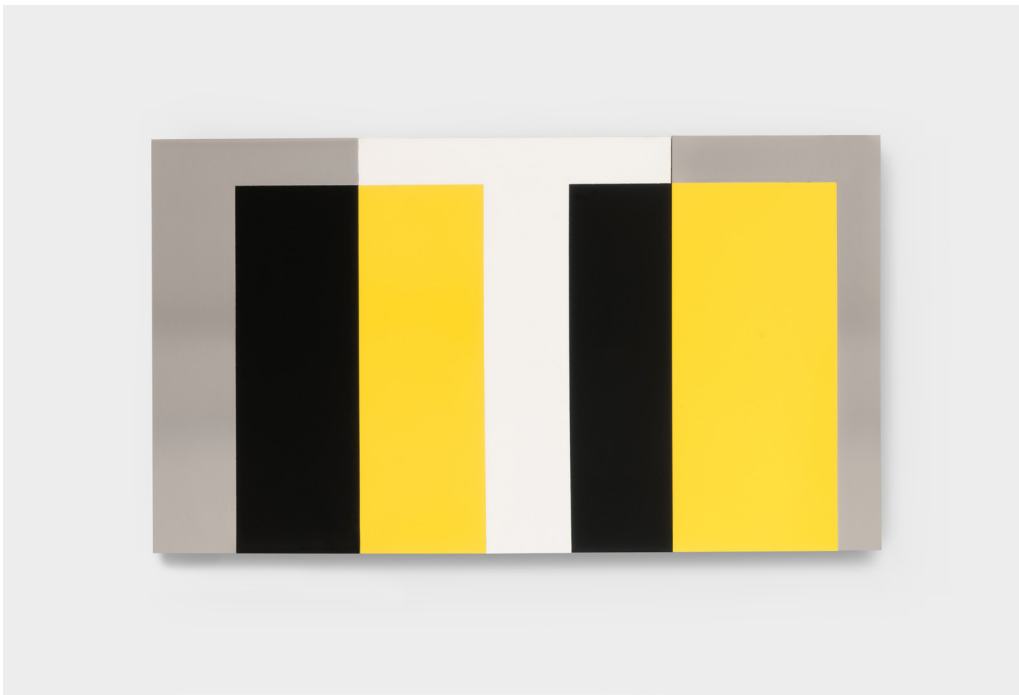
**Blue and White (2017)**  
Oil on stainless steel  
30 x 60" / 76.2 x 91.4 cm  
(two joined panels)



**Lavender (2017)**  
Oil on wood  
24 x 24" / 61 x 61 cm  
(four joined panels)



**Yellow and Black (2017)**  
Oil on stainless steel, wood  
12 x 21 1/8" / 30.5 x 53.6 cm  
(three joined panels)



**Black and White (2017)**

Oil on stainless steel, clear plastic

48 x 16" / 121.9 x 40.6 cm

(three joined panels)



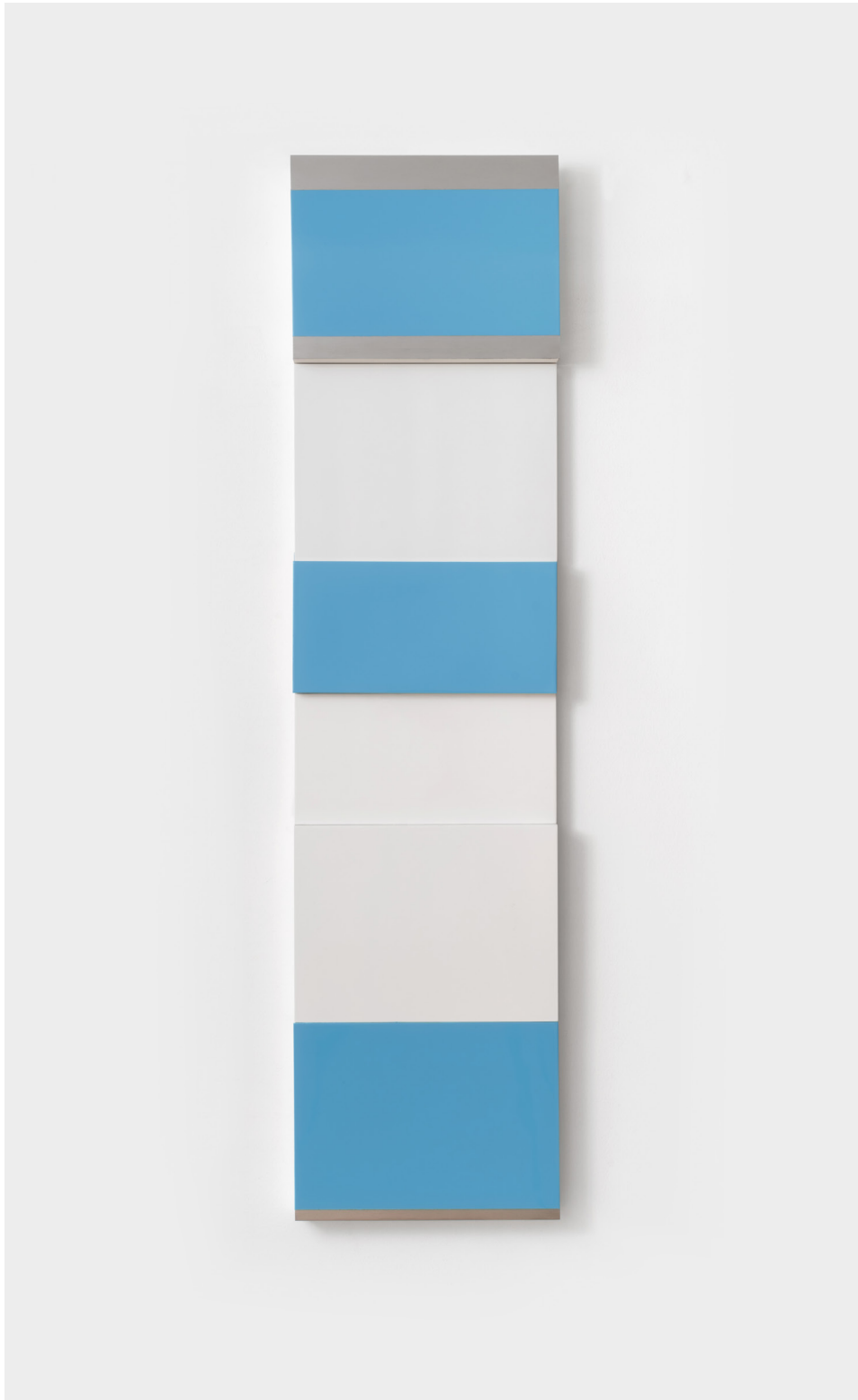


**Red and White (2017)**  
Oil on canvas, stainless steel  
45.5 x 36" / 114 x 91.4 cm  
(five panels)



**Blue and White (2017)**

Oil on stainless steel and wood  
48 1/8 x 12" / 122.2 x 30.48 cm  
(six joined panels)



**Black (2017)**

Oil on stainless steel, canvas, clear vinyl

72.5 x 40" / 184 x 101.6 cm

(six joined panels)



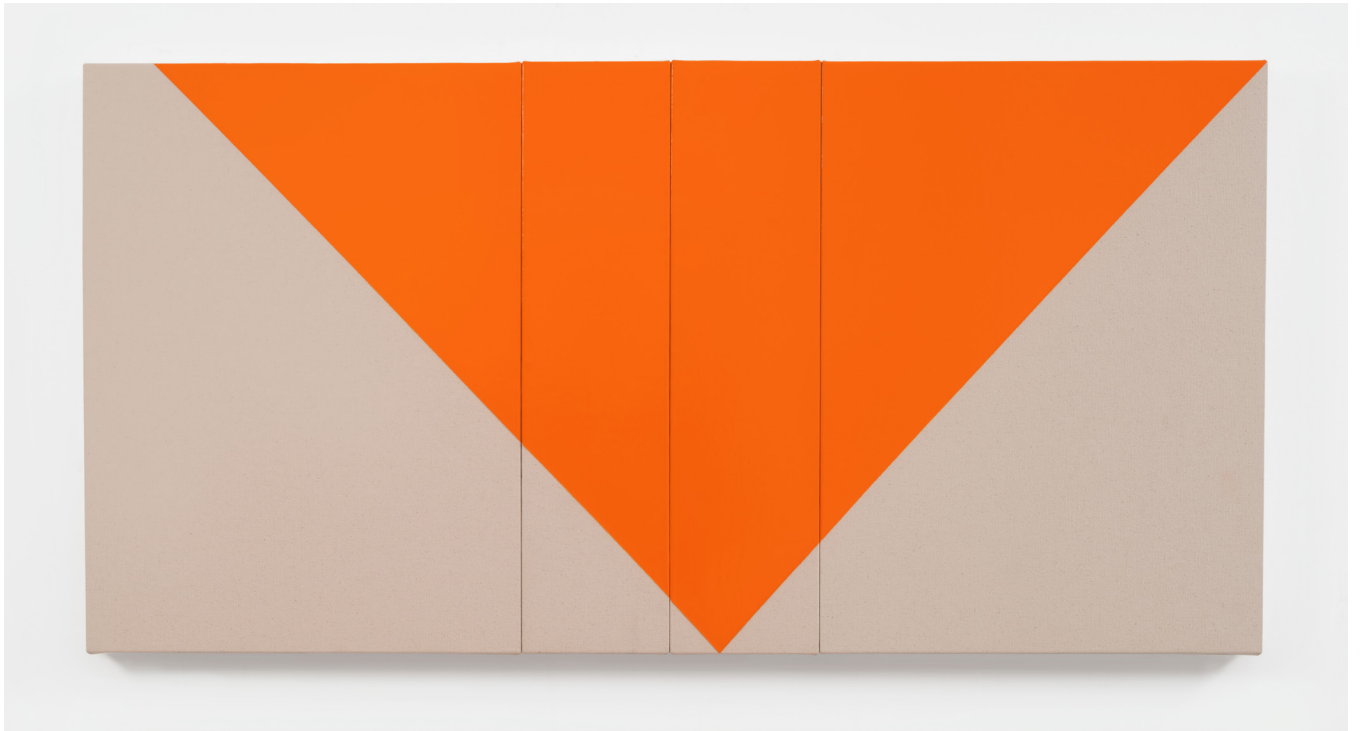
**Orange (2017)**

Oil on canvas

24 x 48" / 61 x 122 cm

(four joined panels)



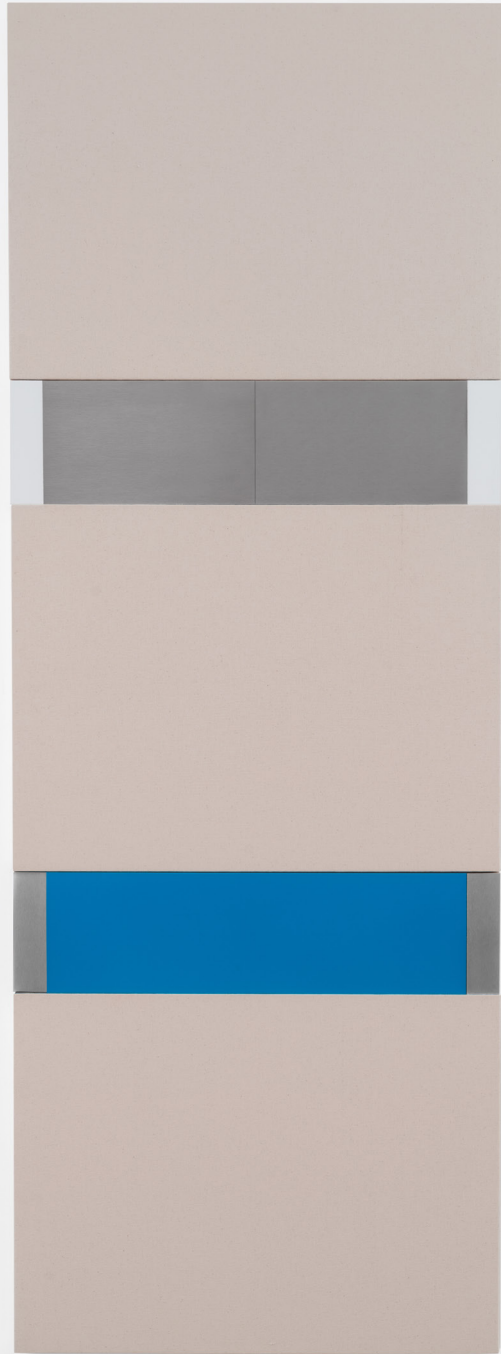


**Blue and White (2017)**

Oil on stainless steel; raw canvas

66 x 24" / 167.6 x 61 cm

(five joined panels)

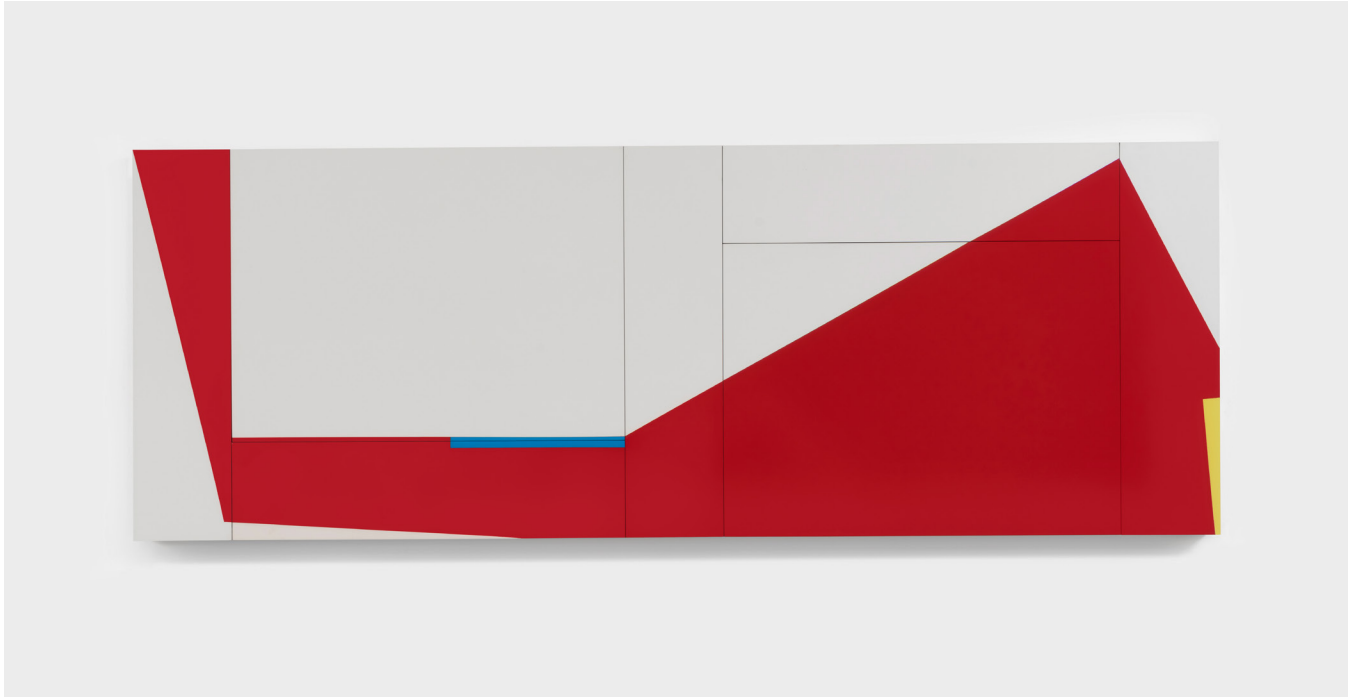


**Red, Yellow, Blue (2017)**

Oil on wood

24 x 66" / 61 x 167.6 cm

(seven panels)



# MAX ESTENGER



## BIOGRAPHY

Born: 1963, Los Angeles, California

Lives and Works: Brooklyn, New York

Education: University of California, San Diego, M.F.A.  
California State University, Fullerton, B.A.

## ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

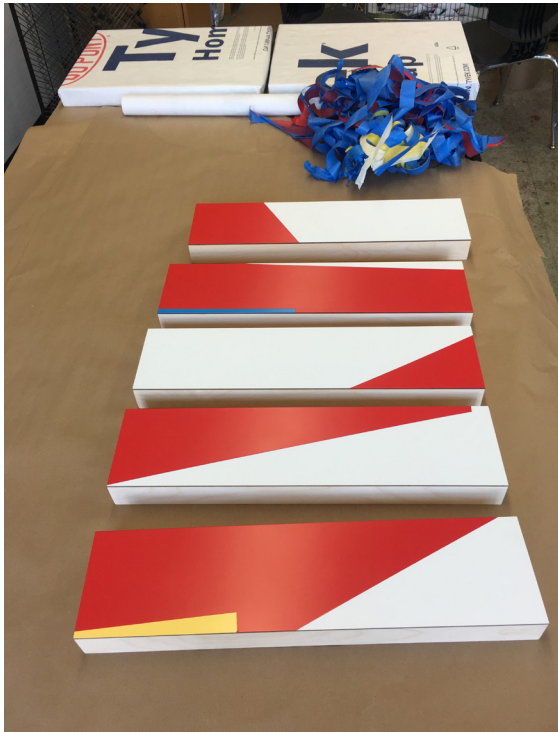
- 2017 Max Estenger New Paintings, Norte Maar, Brooklyn, New York (cat)
- 2016 Max Estenger 1991-2016, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson, Arizona (cat)
- 2014 Max Estenger Digital, rumba, Santa Monica, California  
Max Estenger New Paintings, John Molloy Gallery, New York (cat)
- 1998 Max Estenger Watching Forever, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York
- 1997 Max Estenger Headquarters, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York
- 1995 Max Estenger OSHA Paintings, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 Holdings: Selections from MCASD's Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego  
Learning to See Color, Vicki Myhren Gallery University of Denver, Colorado  
Ways and Means, Norte Maar @ 1285 Avenue of the Americas Gallery, New York  
(curated by Jason Andrew)  
Geometries, John Molloy Gallery, New York
- 2006 Minimalism, I-5 Gallery, Los Angeles, California (curated by Mat Gleason)
- 2001 Anymore, Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut (curated by David Borawski)
- 2000 Latent, Limelight Gallery, New York (curated by Eduardo Casares)  
Goodbye, Farewell, So Long, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York
- 1998 Sofa Not Included, gallery: untitled, Dallas, Texas
- 1997 Chelsea, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York
- 1996 The Future Last Forever, Steffany Martz Gallery, New York
- 1995 Other Rooms, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York  
Pleasant Pebble, The Work Space, New York (curated by Mary Jones)
- 1994 Group Show, American Fine Arts Co., New York  
Cuban Presences, Vista Gallery, New York (with Carmen Herrera)  
20th Anniversary Exhibition Part III, Artists Space, New York  
We Destroy the Family, The Greene Street Project, 34.5 Greene Street, New York
- 1993 DIATRIBE, Tomoko Liguori Gallery, New York  
What To Say What Not To Say, Achim Kubinski Gallery, New York  
Art-Quake! Art After Post-Modernism and Other Natural Disasters, 450 Gallery, New York
- 1992 Behind Bars, Thread Waxing Space, New York (curated by Meg O'Rourke) (cat)  
Pushing Painting, Stark Gallery, New York
- 1991 After Reinhardt: The Ecstasy of Denial, Tomoko Liguori Gallery, New York (cat)

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