



MAX ESTENGER



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MAX ESTENGER: THE THING IN ACTUALITY

It's a summa. Or call it a philosophy, mission, quest. A road taken with extreme deliberation. It is a profound belief in, and allegiance to, what Max Estenger identifies as "critical abstract painting," a term borrowed from art historian Hal Foster. Foster has singled out Robert Ryman and others as engaged in "serious" and "critical" abstract painting. That is, painting "in historical involvement with its material practices," as seen in the work of Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and a host of others.¹

In his curatorial essay for *After Reinhardt—The Ecstasy of Denial*, the exhibition he organized at New York's Tomoko Liguori Gallery in 1991, Estenger used the critical abstract painting label to distinguish painters who redefine the painting support and often the relationship of that support to the wall—among them Alan Uglow, Karin Sander, Steven Parrino, and himself. Ryman was the initiator of this approach, particularly in the '70s, when he made the actual hardware by which a painting is attached to the wall a central facet of the work. Specifically, Estenger inserts his own *See-Through* paintings into the dialogue because the supports and attendant materials, screws or nails, that make them hang on the wall, are salient features and integral to his argument.

It must be said, however, that when it comes to Estenger's artwork, there's much more to it.

Estenger's process is not the reinvention of the wheel but an attempt to find something different and new while participating in a respectful, time-traveling collaboration with acknowledged precedents. A rigorous formal language is the driving force, a making of adamantly non-pictorial "specific objects" in conversation with art history and an ongoing grappling with the ideological parameters of abstract painting. Resolutely anti-illusionistic, this art comes from a commitment to a systematic campaign to, as has been said many times, take a flat surface and organize something compelling on top of it. Sounds demanding, and it is, but right away a contradiction arises because the work is totally enthralling, winning, and pleasing to the eye, even if the viewer doesn't know Robert Ryman from Robert Rauschenberg. A decades-long cogitation, rationale, and practice absolutely inform Estenger's art and the results are beautiful objects. That might be a paradox, though an intentional one, as the balance and play of dualities, formally and intellectually, are paramount. Just because the paintings are exceedingly pleasurable to behold doesn't mean that diligence and exactitude have been compromised.

The extensive sampling included in the exhibition and this accompanying catalogue is a consequential and long-overdue consideration of an artist who melds learned elucidations of direct experience and aesthetic gratification with integrity, a moral dimension, and tough-minded tenacity.

MOCA's Great Hall seems tailor-made for this mid-career survey of Esterger's work, close to twenty-five years of painting and sculpture. Also included is a new large-scale architectural piece modeled on a Brooklyn MTA subway-token booth, constructed specifically for this exhibition. The paintings, seen separately and together, look as crisp as ever, consistent yet varied, an ongoing investigation of form and color and material. And *Booth* is a knockout, an impenetrable space, harkening back to such three-dimensional constructions as 1997's *Perfect Day*—part painting, part architecture, part sculpture. This new work at once frustrates and arouses the curiosity of the viewer, who can't see inside unless taller than 6 feet 5 inches, thus bringing scale and the body's relationship to itself and the piece into sharp relief. A peculiar, unconventional presence. More generally the artist walks the tightrope of art and design, both high-minded and agreeable, with élan. For almost three decades his output has

stayed relevant and interesting, and now it's time to see the breadth of it, the continuum, the interrelationships, and give it its due. Contemplating and taking into account the more than twenty years I've been looking at this work, its value seems increasingly solid, impressive, the continuance of guiding principles deployed in always new and sometimes eccentric ways. Staying on the true path while straddling variation with steadfastness.

That's why bringing Esterger's work to MOCA is such a delight. Taking recent painting trends into account, this appraisal is a timely counterbalance to the current deluge of market-friendly, accessible, formalist pastiche. The conviction, the continuous tactical rigor, smarts, and perfectionism are an antidote to a glut of indiscriminately borrowed moves and decorative, not to mention lucrative, recycling. What is presented here is oppositional in its seriousness and in its ambition to be "about" something, using as a benchmark the artist's reverence for Barnett Newman, who, with his fellow travelers in the 1950s, employed scale, bold new formats, and audacity in a quest to do something genuinely new. That sincere strain of abstraction that isn't in quotes or playing with tropes is to this true believer a directive to take the genre

somewhere fresh, no matter how hard that might be. It's especially important to note this stance when remembering how unfashionable it was when Esterger arrived in New York in 1988, and how unfashionable it has continued to be in the face of, subsequently, Neo-Expressionism and its attendant self-aggrandizement, the shrill hectoring of "political" art, and then the following twenty years of willy-nilly pluralist mishmash. Along with a few others of the faithful mentioned above he has exhibited a resistance to prevailing winds from way back, and, continuing into the present, an artistic and philosophical insistence and consistency of vision that deserves both analysis and attention.

Esterger has said he believes that what artists write is often just as important as what they make, and indeed he follows in the footsteps of Newman, Reinhardt, Judd, and Halley, vociferously staking his claims, explicitly stating what he considers truthful in others' art while applying those high standards to his own. He has also written eloquently on art as it relates to culture at large, particularly in his championing of art that is against a "what is old will be new again" ethos, not only in art but also in film, advertising, and politics. Opposing the endless regurgitation of the tried and true as

the enemy, the absence of creativity in favor of reclamation. "What is crucial in order to resist complicity with the culture of regression is for the nature of innovation after Post-Modernism to center not on new relationships between old forms but on the disintegration of those very forms and relationships. It is only through this project that the viability of art as a meaningful component of living culture can be salvaged."²

A clarion call to attempt, no matter how Sisyphean, to make something new in order to keep art viable, vital, and meaningful. The writing illuminates the artwork and vice versa, making the "aesthetic depths that defy empirical description," that he ascribes to Newman an aspiration as well as a marker for his own work.

After at least seven hundred years of European figuration and more than a hundred years since the abstraction breakthrough, the mute, not-a-picture object remains fascinating. Analogue, not video or film, not a window onto anything. Esterger's oeuvre displays a passion not only for the blank, raw canvas, the seductive tan surface, but for non-traditional spray and industrial oil enamel paints as well.

PLATES

“I’m trying to use this vocabulary of materials and forms that I’ve developed and combine it in as many fresh and inventive ways that can still constitute painting,”³ is his straightforward declaration of intent. Playing a long game, art as a marathon, delivering narrative and visual newness. All this is Estenger’s aesthetic, forthright, and forceful. “Everything in art is ultimately what the thing looks like in actuality” serves as a succinct manifesto for his dedication to his course of action.

Distinct and firm, the whole project is expansive and ever-evolving. Strength in the endeavor, in the commitment, in the opposition. There is idealism in these works. The image is not there, yet appears fleetingly, in shadow and reflection, on the polyvinyl and stainless steel, an ephemeral casting back of the transient nature of existence—particularly in *Unpainting #4* (1993) and *Red* (2016). Here are, to use the words again, moral and political underpinnings, evidence of an engagement with the world. Interests and passions in everything from baseball to statecraft to avant-garde movements in music and dance to astrophysics and education are hidden but resonate, a tribute to the work’s nuances and power. And even more so, touchingly, somewhat at odds with its deceptively “cool” appearance, is an idealism and worldview on display, a sincere

effort to combat the world’s messiness and ills by showing how it could be, how it should be. There’s also something charming and poignant about that, a presentation of a philosophy and conception of life that in these days of strife and knee-jerk irony and mean-spiritedness, of facile sarcasm and pandering to the audience, are rare to say the least. And the products of that sentiment, that wish to communicate, that striving for expression, are also easy, in the best sense, amiable even, and beautiful to regard.

Jocko Weyland

1. Hal Foster’s “Signs Taken for Wonders,” *Art in America*, June 1986, pp. 90–91, 139, argues that the Simulationist abstraction then in vogue (Halley, Taafe, et al.) suffers from “conventionalism” and is contrasted with “serious” and “critical” abstract painting, which is “in historical involvement with its material practices” (p. 86). Estenger discusses all of these issues in his “After Reinhardt” catalogue essay in *After Reinhardt: The Ecstasy of Denial*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Tomoko Liguori Gallery, 1991), pp. 3–8.

2. Max Estenger, “Innovation After Post-Modernism,” *Tema Celeste*, Summer 1992, p. 21.

3. This quote and all subsequent quotes are taken from “Max Estenger Interviewed by Jocko Weyland,” in *Max Estenger New Paintings* exhibition catalogue (New York: John Molloy Gallery, 2014) 28 pp.

Yellow and White (1987)
Acrylic on canvas
60.5 x 27 inches / 153.7 x 68.5 cm
(five panels)



Red (1989)
Acrylic on raw canvas
40 x 40 inches / 101.6 x 101.6 cm
(four panels)



Black See-Through Painting (1991)
Polyvinyl over wood; acrylic on canvas
70 x 70 inches / 177.8 x 177.8 cm
(four panels)
Collection of Dr. Paul Curtis Bellman, New York



Unpainting #4 (1993)

Polyvinyl over wood, stainless steel, raw canvas

85 x 40 inches / 215.9 x 101.6 cm

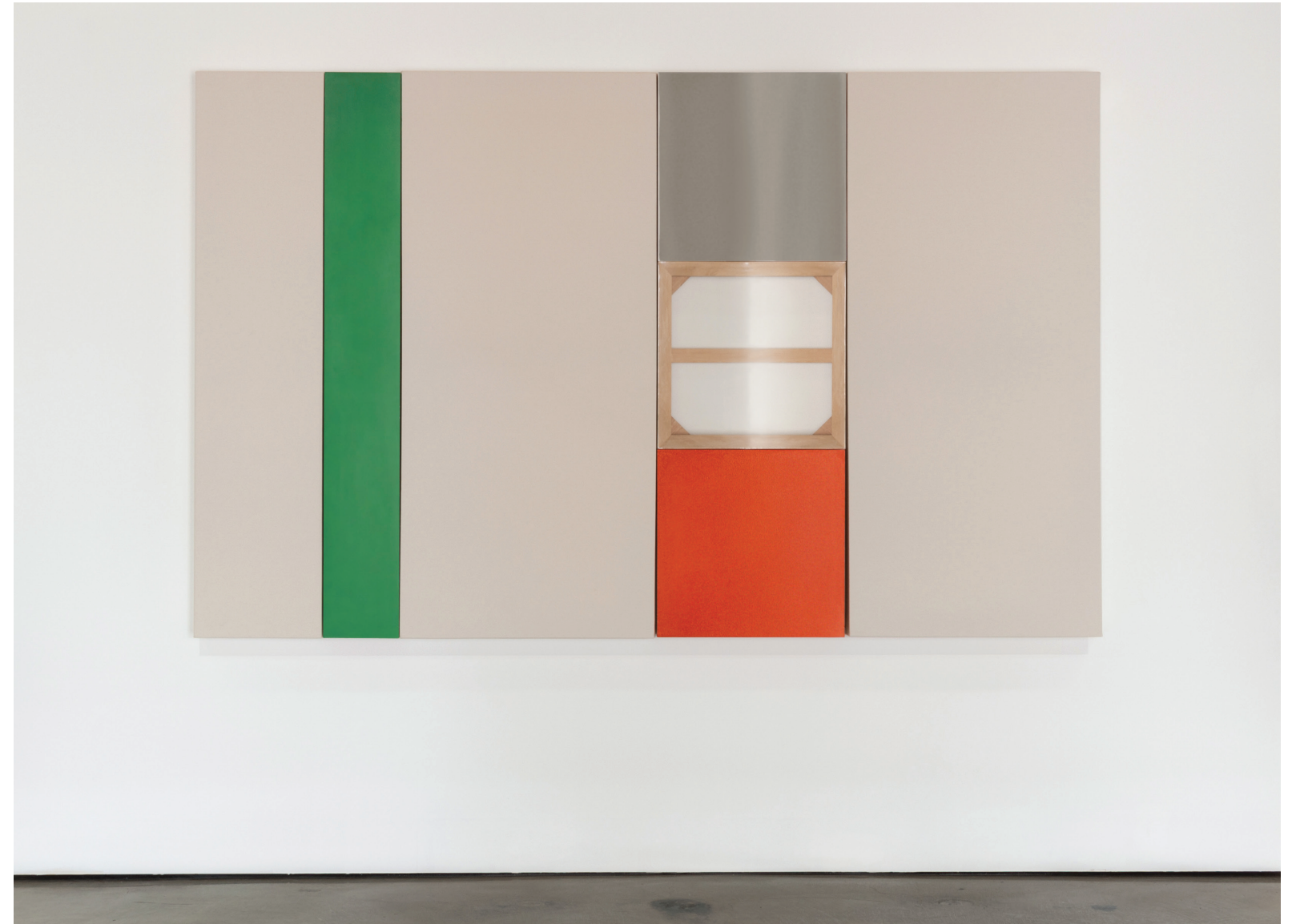
(three panels)

Collection of Steffany Martz, New York



OSHA Green and Orange (1994)

Oil enamel on stainless steel; polyvinyl over wood, raw canvas
60 x 91 inches / 152.4 x 231 cm
(seven panels)



Perfect Night (1997)
Wood, enamel on steel, plexiglass
8 x 168 x 12 inches / 20.3 x 426.7 x 30.5 cm



White (2001)
Oil enamel on polyvinyl; raw Belgian linen
29 ¼ x 84 inches / 74.3 x 86.5 cm
(five panels)



Untitled (2006/2007)
Sheetrock, plaster, enamel on plexiglass
27 x 36 x 28 inches / 68.6 x 91.4 x 71.1 cm



Twenty Four (2007)
Acrylic on canvas
40 x 130.5 inches / 101.6 x 331.5 cm



Black and Yellow (2014)

Oil-based spray paint on stainless steel and raw canvas; polyvinyl over wood

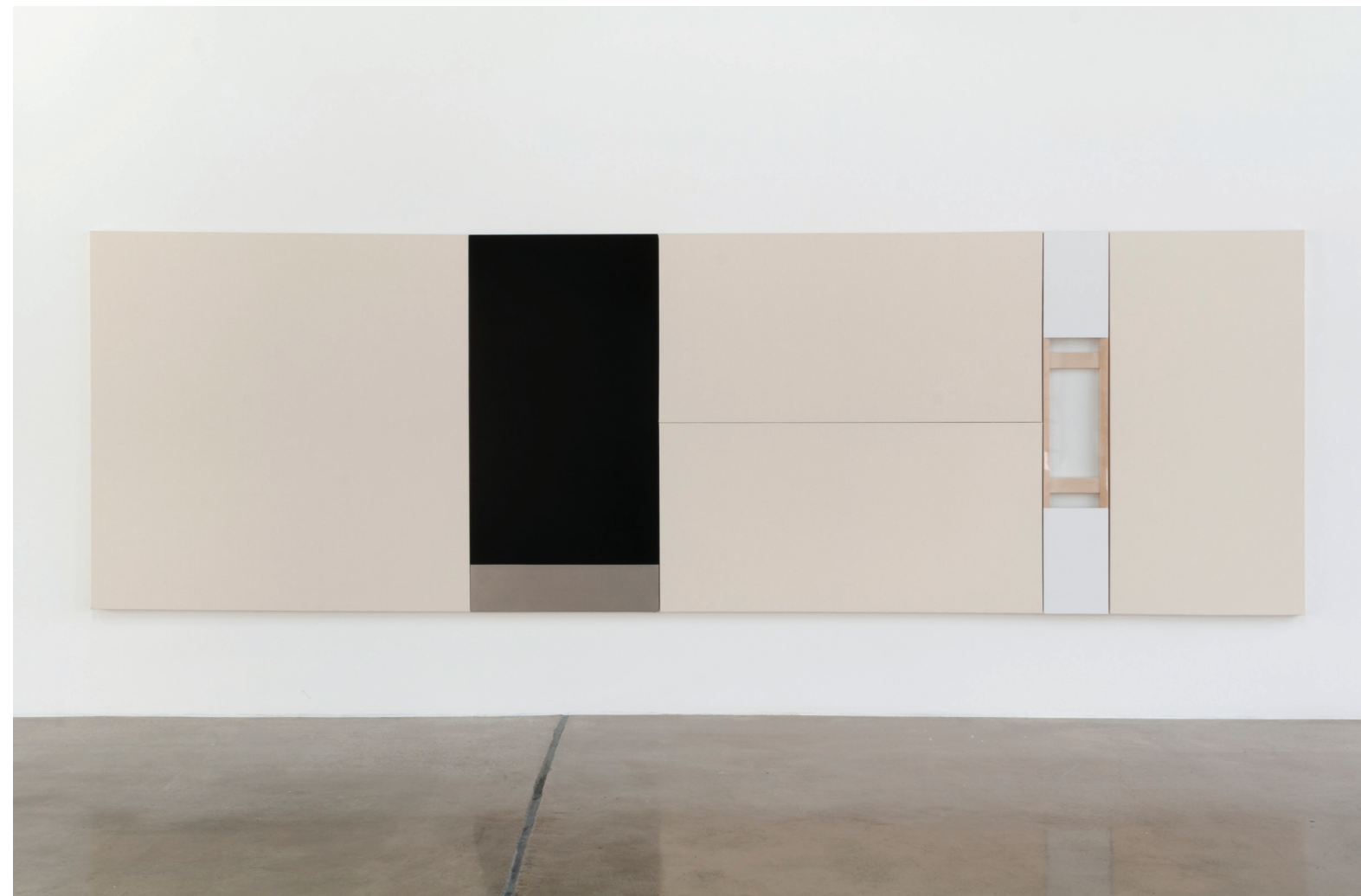
67 x 30 inches / 170.1 x 76.2 cm

(three panels)



Black and White (2015)

Oil enamel on stainless steel, oil-based spray paint on polyvinyl; raw canvas
72 x 228 inches / 182.9 x 579.1 cm
(six panels)



Red (2016)

Oil-based spray paint on wood panel; stainless steel and raw canvas
120 x 48 inches / 304.8 x 122 cm
(seven panels)



Booth (2016)

Sheetrock, plaster, oil enamel on stainless steel; polyvinyl over wood
90 x 142 x 73 inches / 228.6 x 360.7 x 185.4 cm







BIOGRAPHY

Born: 1963, Los Angeles, California
Lives and Works: Brooklyn, New York

Education:

University of California, San Diego, M.F.A. 1988-1986
California State University, Fullerton, B.A. 1986-1982

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 *Max Estenger 1991-2016*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson
- 2014 *Max Estenger: Digital*, rumba, Santa Monica, California
Max Estenger New Paintings, John Molloy Gallery, New York
- 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 *Learning to See Color*, Vicki Myhren Gallery
University of Denver, Colorado
- 2016 *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
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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- Jacques, Alison, "DIATRIBE," *Flash Art*, March-April 1994, p. 63 (photo).
- Morgan, Robert, C., "The New Endgame," in *After the Deluge: Essays on Art
in the 90s*, (New York: Red Bass Publications, 1993), pp. 62-67 (photo).
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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Yellow and White (1987)

Acrylic on canvas
60.5 x 27 inches / 153.7 x 68.5 cm (five panels)

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson is pleased to present “Max Estenger 1991-2016.” Despite its title, we have included two works that were made before 1991. *Yellow* (1987) and *Red* (1989) lay the foundation for Estenger’s eleven other works made in the decades that follow. Some of the pieces were exhibited as part of Estenger’s three solo shows at the Steffany Martz Gallery in New York, in 1995, 1997, and 1998, and two are on loan from generous private collectors. One large-scale sculpture, *Booth*, is an entirely new site-specific sculpture fabricated at MOCA Tucson for this exhibition.

Particular individuals deserve special credit for bringing this exhibition to fruition, chief among them Anne-Marie Russell, the former executive director and chief curator of MOCA Tucson, and now executive director of the Sarasota Museum of Art, who was an early proponent of Estenger’s art and remains an avid supporter. Her continuing interest and championing of his work was part of the path that led to “1991-2016” happening at MOCA after her departure.

Special recognition is likewise due to Jocko Weyland, Tony Diridoni, Wylwyn Reyes, and Thomas Saffle for their

invaluable efforts in making the show a reality. Thank you, too, to the entire MOCA Tucson staff, crew, and volunteer force for your tireless efforts: Eli Burke, Elise Christmon, Alyssa Ferguson, Connor Furr, Luc Goodhart, Mary Griffin, Tomm Johnson, Ryan Lawrence, Nathan Myers, Victor Nuñez, Tori Oswald, Özlem Özgür, Max Provost, Joe Quarnberg, Christian Ramirez, Ben Schneider, Claire Seizovic, Valerie Sipp, Alexis Page Smith, Jessie Smith, and Dominic Valencia.

Finally, on behalf of MOCA Tucson’s leadership and Board of Directors, I would like to offer profound thanks to Max Estenger. It’s been both a privilege and an honor to work with him.

MOCA Tucson was founded in 1998, and in 2010 moved to its current home in the former Tucson Fire Station No. 1, a structure that provides a perfect setting for Max Estenger’s artwork. MOCA’s mission is to inspire new ways of thinking through the cultivation, interpretation, and exhibition of cutting-edge art of our time.

Samuel Ireland
February, 2016



This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition:

MAX ESTENGER 1991-2016

13 February-29 May, 2016

Curated by Jocko Weyland

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