

MAX ESTENGER

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NEW PAINTINGS

March 6 - March 29, 2014

 **JOHN MOLLOY**
GALLERY

49 East 78th Street Suite 2B, New York, New York 10075



Yellow and White 2013

Oil-based spray paint on canvas and stainless steel
45 x 36" (5 panels)

MAX ESTENGER

INTERVIEWED BY
JOCKO WEYLAND
JANUARY 2014

*"You do this because you like it, you think what you're making is beautiful.
And if you think it's beautiful, maybe they'll think it's beautiful."*

Lou Reed, 2013

JOCKO WEYLAND: When we first met at the University of California, San Diego, in the 80s, you were an MFA student and I remember being really impressed by the severity of your work. You were so committed to non-representation and it seemed radical to me, heterodox. At the same time I wondered how you got there at such a fairly early stage. And I've pondered since, what came before? Is there a secret, figurative high school past? And related to that, was there some epiphany, some eureka moment or encounter with an artist's work that made you renounce all illusionism so early?

MAX ESTENGER: In high school, I was interested in the then-burgeoning punk scene in Southern California and formed a band. I was not interested in art until my Freshman year of college. That was when I was in an art survey class with about 200 other students and after leaping through 20,000 years in 10 weeks, which I enjoyed, one day in the vast darkness of the room, the professor began to show the iconic Hans Namuth images of Jackson Pollock in his studio. I was 18, and I was transfixed. This was not like anything I had seen before either in or out of that class. So yes it started with Pollock, but then I had to take the traditional drawing and painting classes though not too many. There are a few surviving painted still lifes in my parents' garage but not much else. After that it was Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Marcel Duchamp. But by the time I graduated it was still Pollock and then Ad Reinhardt. So there you go.

When we first met I was also a bit amazed that you had been so involved with the LA punk and hardcore scene that I'd so much wanted to be a part of but due to geographical impossibility only could hear or read about. You were telling me about seeing T.S.O.L., The Adolescents, and Black Flag, and I was so jealous. And again, intrigued, because on the face of it your paintings didn't seem to have any connection to that, to the messy aesthetic of a lot of punk "art." But looking back, the stripped-down and spare quality of punk or



LEFT: *Red See-Through Painting II* (1991) 60 x 60" (four panels) Installation view. RIGHT: *Black See-Through Painting I* (1992) Poly-vinyl over wood, acrylic on canvas 12 x 72" (four panels)

post-punk and industrial, somehow maybe there was a relationship there. Almost a political convergence. Was there any correlation between the musical interests of your teenage and early college years and your work at that time, and later?

That's a great question. First of all, let's face it, punk is the last new thing to happen in Anglo-American non-black youth culture and that was over 35 years ago! But where it really impacted me was in its insistence on authenticity—you didn't want to be called a poseur—so you really had to believe in something and stand for something. So making the kind of really reductive paintings I was making forced me to know my stuff and be able to defend it. Also for better or for worse the punk ethos made you distrust anything that sold (laughs). Of course now that's all most everyone cares about—selling something. Since punk, what has been new and dominant is the technology culture we have but it certainly hasn't created any new way of thinking. As a culture, in fact, we've become more obsessed with money, fame, etc. So for all the wonders of Silicon Valley I would say that a new age of narcissism has been ushered in.

By the end of the 80s you had moved to New York, and a couple years later so did I, and I saw your first shows, group shows, and saw your *See-Through Paintings*. And to put it mildly, abstraction was not in vogue at that time. Again, against the grain. Let's talk about the situation with abstraction then, and over the last twenty years.

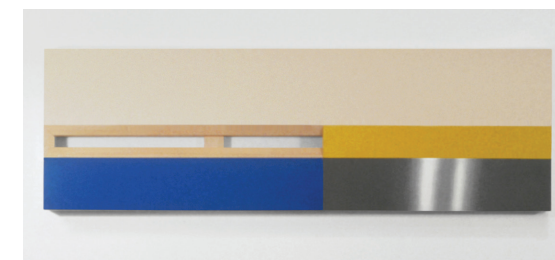
When I arrived in New York City in my mid-20s, the prospects for abstract painting particularly the kind I was interested in—the tradition that had emerged out of Barnett Newman, Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, and into Robert Ryman, Robert Mangold and Agnes Martin—were dim. The Neo-Expressionist onslaught of the early 80s and then the rendering of serious abstraction as another mere pastiche of style—Peter Halley, Phillip Taaffe et al., in the guise of Neo-Geo was the *coup de grâce*.



"OSHA Safety Colors Paintings" Installation view, Steffany Martz Gallery, 1995

Everything since then having to do with abstract painting in particular has been in "quotes," or largely marginalized. There have been outposts here and there but the art world had moved on to chase the big bubbles of commerce. Collectors like Panza who would sustain whole galleries of largely monochrome painting were dying off. There were collectors here like the Formans who were donating their collection to the Albright Knox. I had my own issues with the monochrome itself, especially as it stood in many eyes as the end of the line in terms of painting and in most cases, deservedly so. But, there's amazing great abstract work out there that is going to get recognized. We always have these shifts in taste that swing back and forth. Artists just have to continue to make their work.

When you say everything to do with abstract painting has been in "quotes," do you mean it's not sincere, that it lacks seriousness and commitment? And do you see a direct correlation between the decline of serious abstraction and the triumph of market capitalism and the art it likes during the same period, starting with the early 80s?



OSHA Yellow and Blue (1995) Raw canvas, oil enamel on poly-vinyl over wood, oil enamel on stainless steel 25 x 80" (three panels)

I'm saying that what has been institutionally championed has generally been abstraction in "quotes." It's sincere in not wanting to take the medium anywhere fresh, and just make another tired sort of ironic commentary. The second part of the question is very interesting. Certainly I think that the collector has become a different species from before. Art is the ultimate luxury commodity and so you have the hedge funders and the foreign oligarchs who treat it as one more Maserati. And they get off on being able to point to the work and see how much it seemingly represents a departure from how they make their money.



West 37th Street loft, New York City, 2007. Photo by David Morgan.

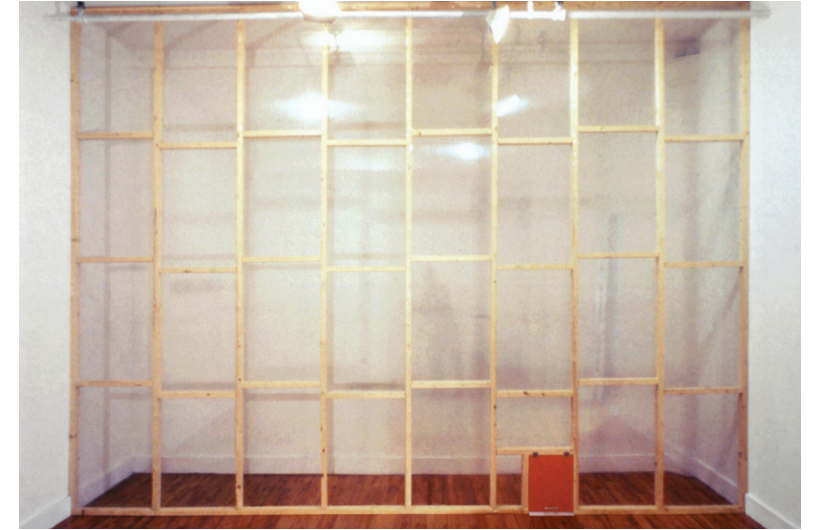
Its messiness either formally or content-wise is the sign of the collector's "edginess." Critics have very little power and artists even less.

You have always been interested in architecture and design, and that has been reflected in your home, particularly the loft that you had for so long on West 37th Street, and in your studio, and more recently on your blog. The loft, with the furniture and the works of art that you hung, the arrangement of everything, was a mini-opus of high modernism. And you seemed way ahead of the game, with an early strict anti-Post-Modernist bias, in favor of what you might call "classic" modernism. Do you see it that way? What I mean to ask is, has this concurrent interest and passion off the wall and into the space of the room or gallery or structure contributed to your take on contemporary art and architecture? That's an overly obvious question, but what's your view on that?

It's interesting that after the Post-Modernism or Anti-Modernism of the 80s in art and architecture the world of architecture embraced Modernism once again in the 90s and beyond with a vengeance in the continued development of form and materials. But the art world went in the opposite direction with people like John Currin and Elizabeth Peyton to name just two examples. As far as my own interests, this is all the stuff that excited me like my first encounter with Pollock whether it was Mies, Charles and Ray Eames, or the Bouroullec brothers. Great architecture or design sometimes stimulates my own production more so than other art will.

For this exhibition, you are working in a smaller size and scale than you have in the past. What challenges has this presented?

Yes, well the sizes of the individual works are smaller in most cases but I've tried to maintain the same scale I have always used, which is to say, a large scale. There are not small elements



Perfect Day (1997) mixed media, 141.5 x 187 x 46". Steffany Martz Gallery

juggled around because the sizes of the overall works are smaller. Real space is still created by the actual supports themselves and the colored areas are the color itself and not a representation of color. These works are decidedly not in the realm of the digital or the non-real or the virtual—whatever term you want to use. The virtual space of digital technology is the new illusionism.

In the late 90s you started taking your work "off the wall" into the space of the gallery, creating sculptures that were based on earlier paintings. Those were great to see and surprising in a positive way because they combined both painting and sculpture, and though they were undoubtedly cool they also had warmth. Maybe that had to do with the color choices and their sizes. You're probably going to hate this, but they had an intimate quality that belied their sobriety.

Yes, for two of my Steffany Martz exhibitions, the central works were these large installation, site-specific sculptures made of wood, clear poly-vinyl and painted metal. That meant to me that the vocabulary I had established for myself could be taken in a lot of different directions.

And then the Steffany Martz Gallery closed.

Yes, that was a sad moment because I don't think there was any commercial gallery anywhere with as daring a program as the Martz Gallery. So then after awhile I just started making a bunch of paintings based on many progressions of colored bands. I had not really dealt with color so exclusively before and though the format was fairly conventional, I enjoyed making them. And I also made some sheetrock sculptures which were left raw. I treated the sheetrock more or less like I have treated raw canvas. It was prepped with spackle for painting but not painted.



Civilization (1998) mixed media, 36 x 216 x 151". Steffany Martz Gallery

But for this return show, you are really referencing your earlier work, correct?

I think there are so many possibilities in this work that I think I want to continue exploring not only in this show but in subsequent shows. There are a lot of choices. The challenge for a painter is always how to take that flat surface and organize something compelling on top of it. What I have done that is different than most is to take what have been the supporting structures (metal, the canvas itself, stretchers) and foreground those elements into the content of the work. Not to make some pedantic point, but mainly for the sake of the aesthetic qualities of the materials themselves. To show that those materials can be just as compelling as a lot of what you might put on top of them.

You've always had an affinity for raw canvas. What's that about? I could play the devil's advocate and say it's just empty, it demands a picture, an image, and that it's lazy or uninspired to use the "raw" material like that.

There's such a seductive quality for me in that tan cotton surface. It's the possibility and promise that it holds. I love looking at it in the art stores on the big roll. It's this pristine virgin roll (laughs) which will probably soon be defiled by some horrible painter. Writers hate the blank page, but I love the blank, raw canvas. I also will never forget Clement Greenberg's quote that a "stretched or tacked-up canvas already exists as a picture—though not necessarily as a successful one." That would obviously be as banal a Duchampian strategy as making monochromes with ink-jet printers is. Ryman came closest to fulfilling that picture except that he always put paint on it. I just use the raw canvas as another formal device to create what I hope is a dynamic painting. It has color, texture and surface and it is planar. I also think there is always something wonderfully challenging about someone like Morris Louis who would have huge canvases with more raw canvas than paint. But everything in art is ultimately what the thing looks like in actuality.



Untitled (2006-07) Sheetrock, plaster, oil on plexiglass. 80 x 37.5 x 30"

From first coming upon your work way back when, up through the present, what still strikes me is its audacity, for lack of a better term, its resolute anti-illusionism, and your unwillingness to compromise. That gives the whole ongoing endeavor strength. And again, with the punk aspect, gives it an anti-something fervor. There are many dualities there, things under the surface, coming from your personal life and into the work itself. On a formal level, could you talk about those contrasts and oppositions?

I don't see them oppositionally the way you do, but then you have a largely photo-based practice and might see it that way. I see it as more positive—the world of forms and materials. And with that you can get into the hardness vs. the softness, the reflective vs. the matte. With the clear vinyl, it's the transparent vs. the opaque. There are other factors and choices that make up the whole. Donald Judd referred to 'polarities,' and it's a complex idea, but it's much the same thing. 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 a painting.

I find it curious that you have used commercial spray paint for many of these new paintings.

Every new body of work suggests to me a new idea in terms of process. With these paintings I became interested in just seeing what Rustoleum and Krylon cans could do and I found that they could get the surface down in an even way and with a certain sheen that regular artist's paints couldn't achieve. I've always liked working with these kinds of non-traditional paints—the *OSHA Paintings* were all done with industrial oil enamel paints. The only real problem is that sometimes you wish you could tweak the color this way or that. I did



Twenty-Seven (2006) Acrylic on canvas 38 x 145.5"

realize that the so-called premium spray paints like Montana that artists use were not as good for my purposes.

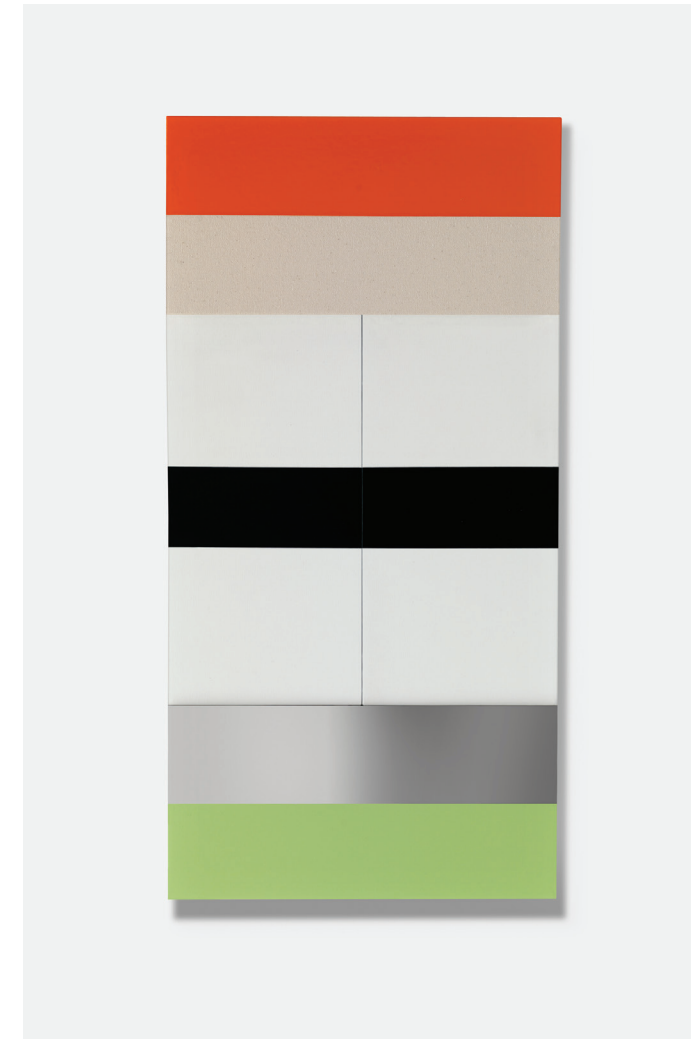
The kids on the street tell me nothing beats Krylon.

I would definitely agree with that.

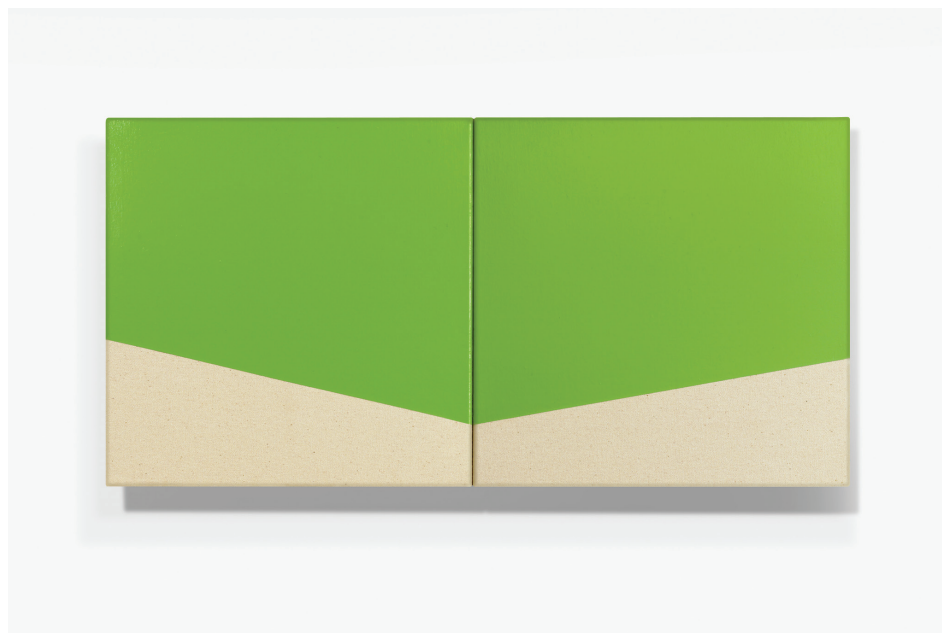
This is sort of a catchall, and a broad, broad subject, but where do you see abstract art going?

A lot of the most important work is still being done by the Light and Space artists who are all in their 70s and 80s. That's still the most advanced work in the field of art today. As far as object-making which is still such a challenge because there have been so many paintings and sculptures already made by humankind, abstraction is only what, one hundred years old? How long was the great age of European Representation? Five hundred years? I know that for some the object itself is passé, but I find the object to be infinitely more interesting than film, or video or whatever. It's the fact that the object is so mute and yet can be so powerful. Now, in terms of what I see happening here in New York, I can say that I am meeting a lot of younger artists making really good new non-representational work. And they are meeting each other and that is important. So I think in the next few years as things start percolating from the huge migration to the hinterlands of Brooklyn and Queens by wave after wave of young artists we are going to see this work publicly. The next few years are going to be really exciting I think.

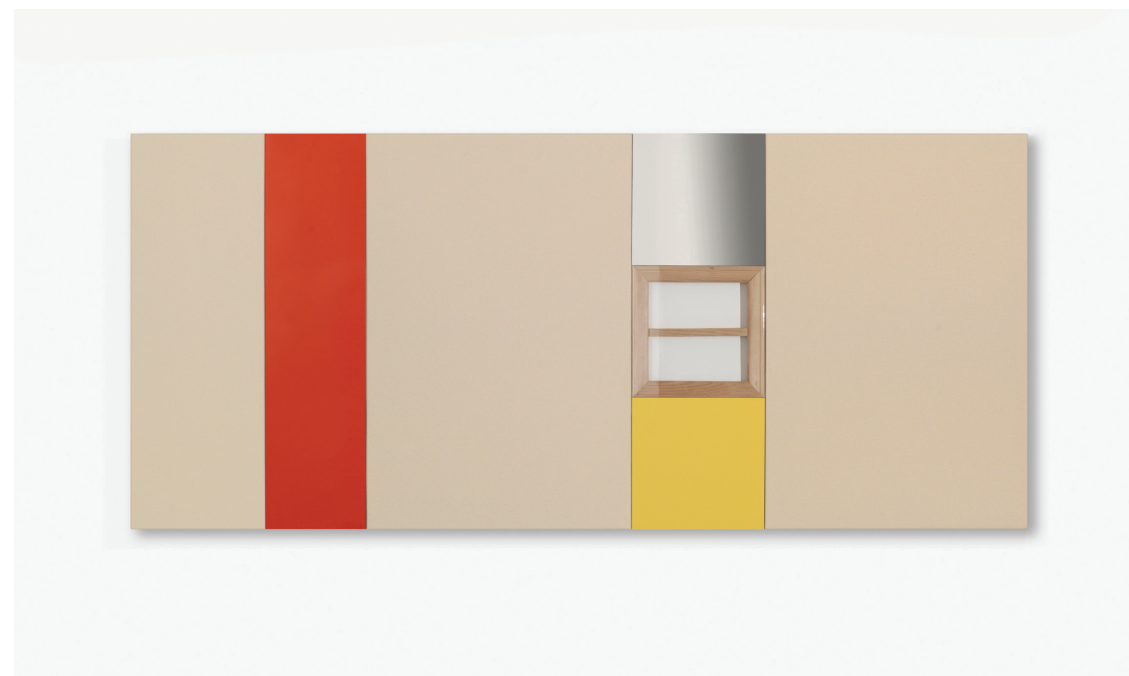
Jocko Weyland is an artist, writer and the curator-in-residence at MOCA Tucson in Tucson, Arizona. He is the author of The Answer is Never—A Skateboarder's History of the World (Grove Press, 2002), the founder of Elk zine, books, and gallery, and is represented by Kerry Schuss in New York.



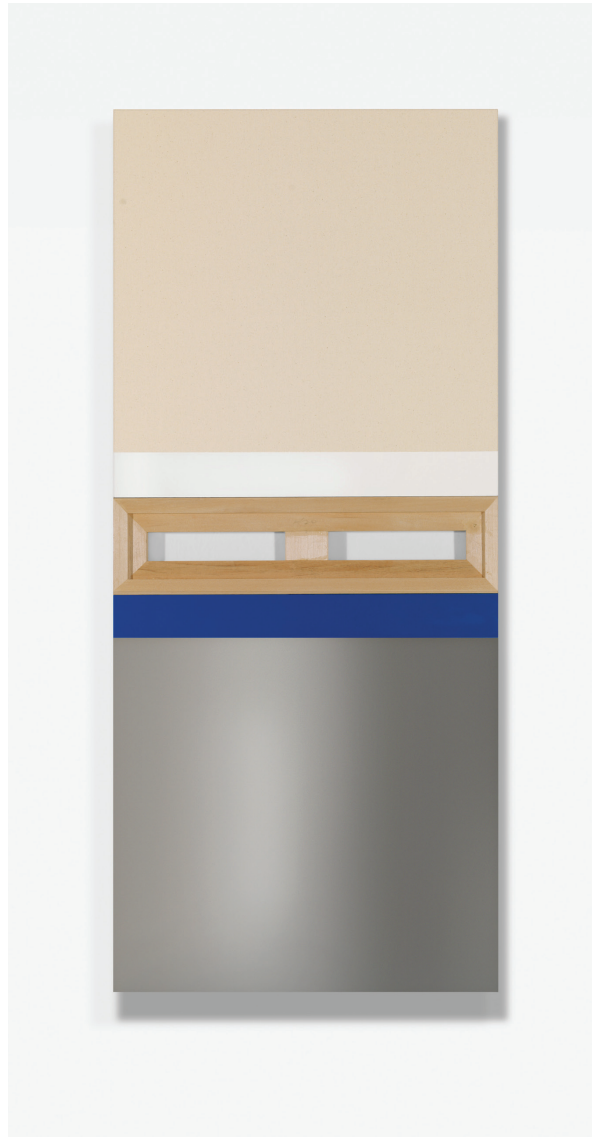
Orange, Black and Green 2014
Oil-based spray paint on raw canvas,
artist's panel, and tin-coated steel
24 x 12" (4 panels)



Green 2014
Oil-based spray paint on raw canvas
12 x 24" (2 panels)

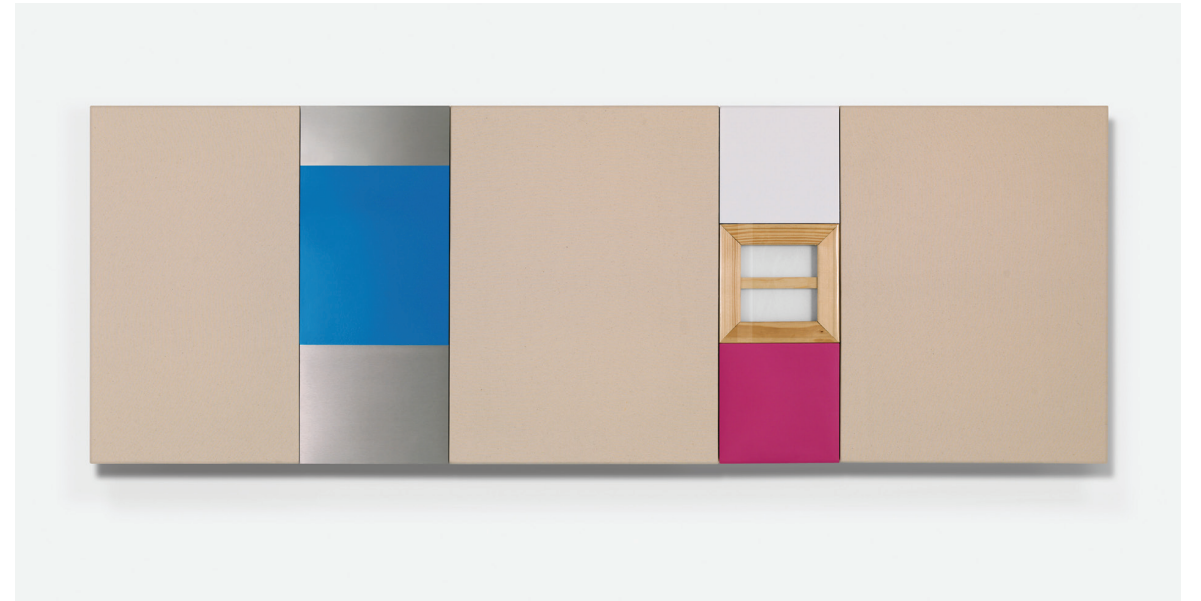


Red and Yellow 2013
Oil-based spray paint on stainless steel;
raw canvas, poly-vinyl over wood, stainless steel
36 x 81" (7 panels)



Blue and White 2013

Oil-based spray paint on stainless steel
and raw canvas; poly-vinyl over wood
45 ¼ x 20" (3 panels)



Blue, White and Fuschia 2013

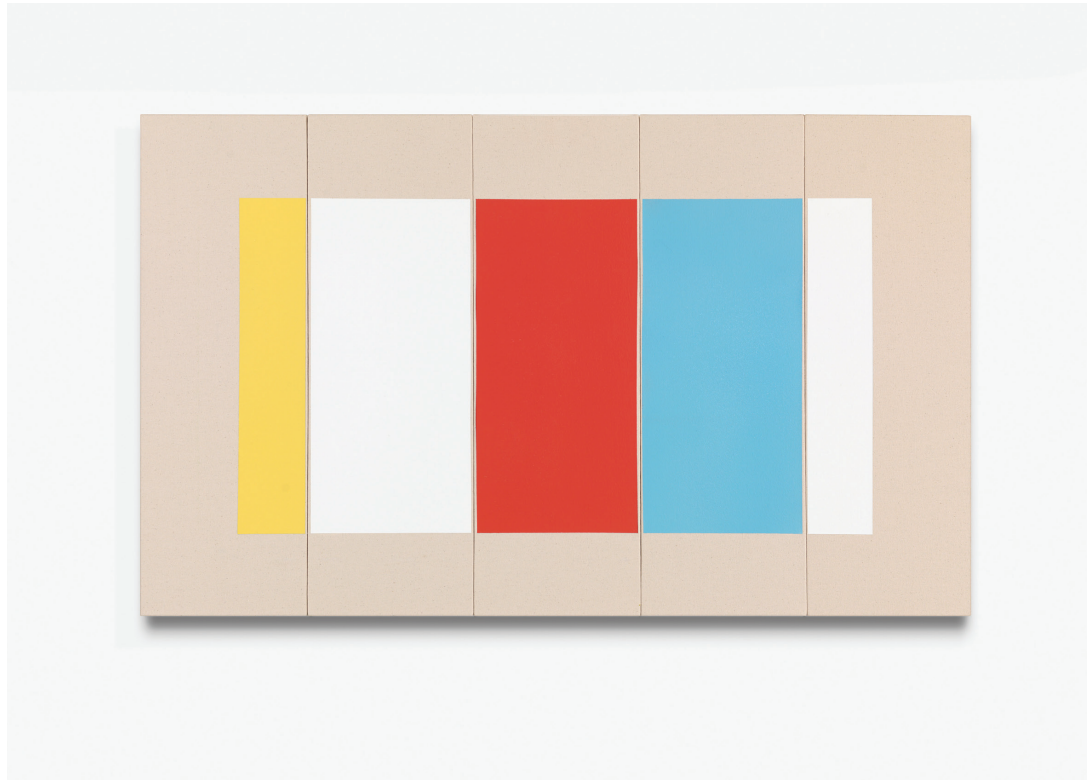
Oil-based spray paint on stainless steel, and wood panel;
raw canvas, poly-vinyl over wood
24 x 68.5" (7 panels)



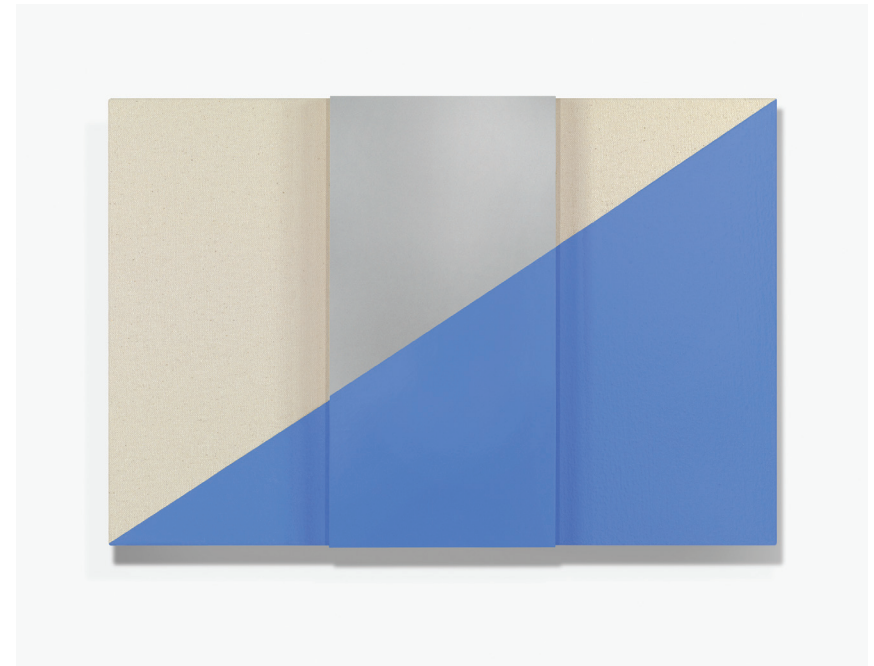
Red and White 2014
Oil-based spray paint on stainless steel and wood panel
12 x 24" (two panels)



Blue, White, Blue, Yellow, Orange 2014
Oil-based spray paint on aluminum, and raw canvas
12 x 30" (5 panels)



Yellow, White, Red, Blue, White 2013
Oil-based spray paint on raw canvas
24 x 40" (5 panels)



Blue 2014
Oil-based spray paint on steel, and raw canvas
12 x 18" (3 panels)



Fuschia and Yellow Diptych 2014

Oil-based spray paint on wood panels

8 x 8" and 12 x 12" (two panels)



Red and Yellow 2013, **Blue and White** 2013

Studio installation view



MAX ESTENGER was born in Los Angeles in 1963 and received his MFA in 1988 from the University of California, San Diego. He has been living and working in New York City since 1989. For many years, he was represented by the Steffany Martz Gallery in Chelsea where he had three one-person exhibitions. His work has been featured in *Artforum*, *FlashArt*, *Tema Celeste*, *Art Net*, *Review*, and *TimeOut New York* among others, as well as the book, *La Couleur Importee* (Readymade Color). This is his first one-person exhibition for the John Molloy Gallery.

For Further information

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