

Mark Grotjahn
Skulls 2016–2023
November 3–December 20, 2023

Karma, New York
188 & 172 East 2nd Street
New York, New York

Karma presents *Skulls 2016–2023*, the first exhibition of Mark Grotjahn’s Skull paintings, open from November 3 to December 20 at 188 and 172 East 2nd Street, New York.

Perhaps it was inevitable that Grotjahn would arrive at the Skulls. After fifteen years of Face paintings and more than one hundred Mask sculptures, Grotjahn has stripped back the disguise and the skin and arrived at the inner layer of the head, the twenty-two bones that structure the human visage and protect the delicate brain. The artist recently noted that he has “to remember that I am a body,” not only a mind. By introducing a symbol of life’s inevitable end into his vocabulary of motifs, Grotjahn sets his sights on his own corporeality. As such, the Skulls are his most intimate paintings to date.

Grotjahn initiated this series of small-scale, intensely tactile works in 2016 as a riposte to his transcendental Capri paintings, developing them further while recovering from a massive blood clot in his leg and clots in both of his lungs at his home in Los Angeles in 2019. A backcountry skier who has spent the last few years widely exploring the mountain ranges of rural Colorado, Grotjahn regularly isolates himself completely in inhospitable terrains. Emerging from these experiences, his Skulls capture in oil on cardboard the feeling of uncontrollable natural forces. In one 2016 work, a burst of energy enters the composition from the right side, blasting white, red, and pink lines over and off of the simian figure’s cheeks and forehead and into the cerulean background.

In contrast with the anonymized, monochromatic skulls of Paul Cézanne’s late period, painted by the Impressionist after the death of his mother and as his own health began to deteriorate, Grotjahn’s takes on the subject infuse the macabre with a colorful vitality that upends their potentially grave associations. A 2019 painting features a wildly grinning visage surging forward with eyes blazing through a field of bubblegum pink. Another 2017 skull is wide-eyed and insistent, its mouth ajar as if arrested mid-sentence, as bursts of yellow and turquoise explode upward from its cranium. Teeming with impasto and made with brushes rather than the palette knife that has defined the artist’s recent output, these paintings affirm the influence of Post-Impressionists like Henri Matisse and Paul Gauguin, whose brilliant colors and clearly defined strokes pushed Impressionism to its breaking point.

While the Skulls all began as figurative drawings, Grotjahn's myriad approaches and techniques yield a multitude of distinct representations. As Alison M. Gingeras writes in the catalogue that will accompany the exhibition, "Grotjahn's pictorial systems allow him the latitude to oscillate between figurative referent and non-objective abstraction. With the Skulls, he establishes a similar framework to pursue permutations and mutations that occasionally drift radically away from his starting image." The earliest works in the series are more clearly figurative—their subjects stand out against colorful grounds—while the more recent Skulls vacillate between dissolving inside of Grotjahn's all-over daubs and re-emerging as image.

Confronted with the *sprawling Untitled (Backcountry 55.46) (2023)*, a work from Grotjahn's Colorado-inspired Backcountry series on view at 172 East Second Street, this cavalcade of crania assert themselves as tiny yet mighty. While the former series deals with nature's boundlessness in sweeping palette-knife strokes that slash from one edge of the support to the other, mimicking the effect of skis cutting through snow, the Skulls are self-contained monads consisting of visible touches of brush to surface. Their buzzy contours describe figures working through the brevity of their time on earth, even as Grotjahn immortalizes them through painting.

188 East 2nd Street



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20⅞ inches; 59.69 x 51.13
cm (framed)
MG-19-008



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
14 x 11 inches; 35.56 x 27.94 cm
27 x 21⅝ inches; 68.58 x 54.93 cm
(framed)
MG-19-003



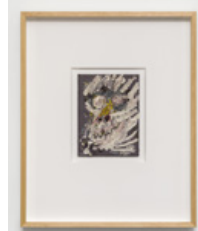
Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull I 47.20), 2016
Oil on cardboard
5 x 4¼ inches; 12.7 x 10.79 cm
18½ x 16¾ inches; 46.99 x 42.55 cm
(framed)
MG-16-017



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23⅝ x 20 inches; 60.02 x 50.80 cm
(framed)
MG-16-009



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull II 47.21), 2016
Oil on cardboard
8¼ x 6 inches; 20.95 x 15.24 cm
21½ x 18¾ inches; 54.61 x 47.63 cm
(framed)
MG-16-012



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull XIII 48.39), 2016
Oil on cardboard
8 x 6 inches; 20.32 x 15.24 cm
21 x 17 inches; 53.34 x 43.18 cm
(framed)
MG-16-013



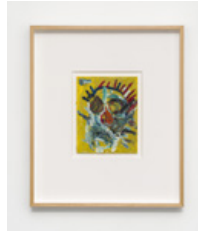
Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull VI 48.32), 2016
Oil on cardboard
6½ x 4⅞ inches; 16.51 x 12.4 cm
20 x 17 inches; 50.8 x 43.18 cm
(framed)
MG-16-016



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2017
Oil on cardboard
12 x 9½ inches; 30.48 x 24.13 cm
25 x 20½ inches; 63.50 x 52.07 cm
(framed)
MG-17-001



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
12 x 9½ inches; 30.48 x 24.13 cm
25 x 20⅞ inches; 63.50 x 52.39 cm
(framed)
MG-19-005



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20½ x 2 inches; 59.69 x
52.07 x 5.08 cm (framed)
MG-16-010



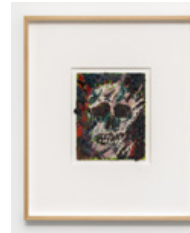
Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
12 x 9½ inches; 30.48 x 24.13 cm
25 x 20½ inches; 63.50 x 52.07 cm
(framed)
MG-19-006



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
14 x 11 inches; 35.56 x 27.94 cm
27 x 21⅝ inches; 68.58 x 54.93 cm
(framed)
MG-19-004



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
6½ x 5 inches; 16.51 x 12.7 cm
20 x 17 inches; 50.8 x 43.18 cm
(framed)
MG-16-015



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20 x 2 inches; 59.69 x 50.80 x
5.08 cm (framed)
MG-16-011



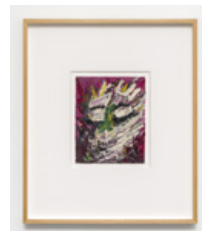
Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2023
Oil on cardboard
14 x 11 inches; 35.56 x 27.94 cm
26⅞ x 21½ inches; 68.20 x 54.61 x 5.41
cm (framed)
MG-23-007



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20 inches; 59.69 x 50.80 cm
(framed)
MG-16-020



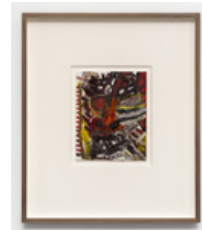
Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23⅝ x 20⅞ inches; 59.99 x 51.13 cm
(framed)
MG-19-007



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20 x 2 inches; 59.69 x 50.80 x 5.08
cm (framed)
MG-16-018



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
6½ x 5 inches; 16.51 x 12.7 cm
20 x 17 x 2 inches; 50.8 x 43.18 x 5.08
cm (framed)
MG-16-014

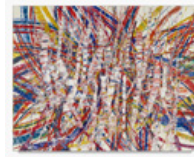


Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull XI 48.37), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23½ x 20 inches; 59.69 x 50.80 cm
(framed)
MG-16-024

172 East 2nd Street



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23³/₄ x 20¹/₄ inches; 60.33 x 51.44
cm (framed)
MG-16-022



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Backcountry 55.46), 2023
Oil on cardboard mounted on linen
74 x 94 x 2¹/₂ inches; 187.96 x 238.76 x
6.35 cm
MG-23-002



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
25¹/₂ x 22 x 1³/₄ inches; 64.77 x
55.88 x 4.45 cm (framed)
MG-16-019



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2019
Oil on cardboard
12 x 9¹/₄ inches; 30.48 x 23.50 cm
25¹/₈ x 20³/₈ inches; 63.83 x 51.77 cm
(framed)
MG-19-009



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull XII 48.38), 2016
Oil on cardboard
10 x 8 inches; 25.4 x 20.32 cm
23⁵/₈ x 20¹/₈ inches (framed); 60.02
x 51.13 cm (framed)
MG-16-021



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2023
Oil on cardboard
16 x 12¹/₄ inches; 40.64 x 31.12 cm
28³/₈ x 22³/₄ inches; 72.09 x 57.78
cm (framed)
MG-23-005



Mark Grotjahn
Untitled (Skull), 2023
Oil on cardboard
16 x 12¹/₄ inches; 40.64 x 31.12 cm
28³/₈ x 22⁵/₈ inches; 72.09 x 57.47
cm (framed)
MG-23-006