

Will Stovall
Kant Crisis
May 18–July 12

Will Stovall's first solo exhibition introduces paintings that developed out of his study of diagrams and visual thinking in the German philosophical tradition. It takes as its reference point a single diagrammatic drawing by the German Romantic writer Heinrich von Kleist for an exploration of a fallen world and the appearance of a new order emerging from this collapse.

Immersing himself in Immanuel Kant's philosophy in the hope of finding encouragement during a period of existential doubt, Heinrich von Kleist sank into even greater despair, concluding that "we on Earth know nothing of the truth—nothing at all." Kleist was shaken by Kant's claims that our thoughts and observations are shaped by the categories of our understanding rather than by the world as it exists independent of us. It is, Kleist wrote to his fiancée, Wilhelmine von Zenge, as if we were running around with green goggles, unable ever to remove them and to find out whether the world really is green.

This exhibition contrasts the negative thought of Kleist's so-called Kant Crisis with a much more hopeful idea that Kleist expressed at the beginning of his study. Returning from a walk through a stone-built archway, Kleist marveled at the fact that the only thing that supported the archway was that the stones were falling all at once, thus holding each other in place. He wrote of this observation as a refreshing comfort that he too would hold on even if everything around him made him sink, and he recorded it in a drawing of gravitational forces, underscored with the inscription: "30 December 1800, on the second to last day of the old century."

Stovall's paintings, produced in the cultural and political watershed years of 2020 and 2021, improvise on Kleist's figure of the archway as a demarcation between spaces, attitudes, eras, and dimensions. They are paintings of entanglement and clarity, generation and decay, reflecting back the upending character of those two years of our recent past and the startling horizon that remains open before us: where the specter of green goggles has been reified into a contemporary world of personalized realities, individually informed and conditioned. Stovall's paintings alternate between perspectival and notational modes of representation, variously re-entering this distinction to construct a more open field of experience, albeit one held together by nothing else perhaps than the sensation of persistent collapse.

-Martin Wagner

Will Stovall (Ph.D. Yale University, 2018; M.F.A. Bard College, 2025) is an artist based in Washington, DC. He completed a dissertation on the institutional imagination of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.