



GAYLEN GERBER
IN CONVERSATION WITH
ATTILIA FATTORI FRANCHINI

Emanuel Layr, Rome

Attilia Fattori Franchini: You describe the experience of your early monochromatic paintings as “walking into a dark theater.” I found this description quite poetic, returning us to the idea of the surface slowly revealing itself. Your work seems to be constantly flirting with various forms of veiling and unveiling and it leaves the agency of interpreting the work to the perceiving subject.

Gaylen Gerber: The “darkened theater” metaphor is close to the literal experience of the work. Initially you see what seems like an undifferentiated monochrome, and then, as your eyes adjust, you are able to differentiate the image, which in my case is painted in close values of the same color. In the process, you lose the unified field of the monochrome. My intention was to emphasize the reception of the work and our changing perception in relationship to it.

AFF: These pieces also introduce ideas around repetition. The paintings are all the same size, color, etc., and so our understanding of them resides as much in the space between paintings as it does in any one painting. The paintings have often been sited in-line, sometimes contiguously, and a similar image or motif is repeated, but each painting exists in its own right.

GG: The work consistently focuses on the moment of perception. The undifferentiated

unseen order to things, a connection, something that transcends difference, that we often feel compelled to bring ourselves into harmony with. I'm reluctant to accept particular narratives or orthodoxies governing this, and the monochrome helps to address this aversion.

AFF: Your work offers foresight while being extremely present. Its immanence is manifest in the material world and requires the attentiveness of an active viewer. Your work can also be understood as ambivalent; it can support opposite interpretations simultaneously. This seems like one of the reasons why the Backdrops and Supports are able to host other artworks, or appropriate other artworks, as part of their realization.

GG: It makes apparent a more semiotic relationship between a normative context, a gray or white monochrome, and an expression that deviates from it. The Backdrops and Supports foreground the way we attribute significance to an image.

AFF: The Backdrops have the power to showcase the duality and complexity present in everything, forming a ground for other artists' positions. They create a "stage" for performativity, a space where things can exist and move freely.

GG: The work offers the opportunity to see in other ways, to understand ourselves in ways that may not be readily apparent in other contexts. My practice benefits from the diversity of existing representations. It celebrates their efficacy as original expressions at the same time that it acknowledges the dominant culture's gaze and inclination towards homogeneity.

AFF: Do you think institutional critique can still bring forward "change"? Can it have a transformative impact on norms, society, systems – or is that not possible anymore?

GG: Norms always change. Whether the narrative surrounding them is understood as critical, effective, ironic, humorous, or benign, what we think of as institutional critique tends to provide a lucid reflection of its situation. What we do with that, how you and I traffic in that information, inevitably changes things.

AFF: How do you select the works that accompany the Backdrops?

GG: The criteria vary. The unifying factor seems to be the possibility of seeing something in another way. In pursuing that I've tried to take advantage of many different relationships.

AFF: The arrangements and the diversity of objects that you choose as Supports allow viewers with varied backgrounds and frames of reference to engage with the work, which I find generous.

GG: That's funny, I hear a range of responses to my work, ranging from generous to parasitic and everything in between. That is part of the interest for me – the way that viewers' responses are not far from my own.



AFF: I read your painted monochromatic objects as inverted images of themselves. By bringing the contextual background into the foreground you are changing the visual characteristics of the original objects, suddenly presenting them in a way that's inexorably linked to context.

GG: A critic described the effect of inverting figure and ground in my work to a form of dimensional photography that reveals details of the original object in a different form. I thought this was a beautiful description – that as my practice broadens it may be increasingly perceived as a surface.

AFF: It's fascinating that so much is left to viewers in relating to these objects. I was thinking about your show in Rome and specifically considering the titling of the Supports. None of the works are dated, all are indicated as "n.d." Once the original artifacts are painted and become Supports, they seem more "present." Is this a conscious attempt to site the work in the present?

GG: Yes.

AFF: I read the gesture as an invitation to set aside the cultural information we might know or associate these objects with.

GG: I'm not asking for that, just the opposite. The work operates on the level of feeling, but our response to feeling is usually to approach or avoid it depending on how agreeable we perceive it to be. When the work is first encountered, it's often difficult to determine what it is and how to feel about it. It's normal to run through a gamut of feelings and associations, and I've used this pause or moment of uncertainty to open the possibility of approaching feeling and association in another way. The work encourages feeling – I AFF: Is this intended to question what we know?

GG: Yes. Understanding my methodology may come down to historical and cultural awareness, but it also employs a dark humor, a humor involving observation that may be seen as offensive, but contextualized in a way that reveals it as poignant and appropriate to what is being considered. And so I've complicated the question.

AFF: I find it interesting that among the artworks in Rome, one Support is painted on top of an impossible bottle. An impossible bottle is already a paradoxical object, so concealing its contents is a powerful gesture.

GG: The bottle is a type of mechanical puzzle. It's a bottle containing an object that appears too large to fit through its mouth. Because the bottle is painted in an opaque gray, the question the bottle originally proposed shifts towards something closer to one of trust, or faith that what is being presented is true.

AFF: I am interested in the diversity of the other supporting objects, of high or low value and often originating from very different cultures and time periods. They compel or press a sense of everything being represented without singling out any one Support. The exhibition in Rome is a maze. It challenges viewers to navigate a difficult labyrinth of artworks and pedestals. Space plays an important role in your work and I'm interested in the specific choices you made in Rome.

GG: The exhibition in Rome is something of a reprise of my exhibition last year at Galerie Emanuel Layr in Vienna. That schema was more of a promenade, with the experience organized in a linear fashion as viewers walked the space. The current exhibition is less linear. It's organized as a field, or as you've described it, "a maze." While each exhibition feels different, both have an open character.

AFF: How autonomous are the objects? Is the association between them and their placement on particular pedestals important or they can be infinitely recombined?

GG: The Supports' situation in the exhibition is very intentional, but it is advantageous for the display of the Supports and Backdrops to shift. It's why I often rotate artworks during an exhibition or reprise an exhibition in another way. Though the Supports benefit from being seen together, they are discrete objects and can be re-contextualized much like a mirror can be repositioned – its reflection shifts but it consistently presents a clear image of its situation.