

In his fourth exhibition at Galleria Federico Vavassori, painter Emil Michael Klein is showing works in fabric. Curtains as he calls them. Over the past two years, EMK has shown various curtains as a contribution to group shows (Longtang, Kunsthalle Zürich) as well as providing them for parties and a bar. Now he has mounted his first solo exhibition with this new group of works, which have their origin in one of his first works: it was a 4 x 2,5 m curtain made of untreated cotton cloth – e.g. canvas, the material you stretch on a frame to paint on – and it was used to cover a gallery window in 2008 at Galerie Krupp in Basel. EMK has availed himself of canvas once again for the backs of the curtains displayed in the present exhibition. He uses the fabric like paint, and shows the curtains like tableaux on the wall.

The curtains are all made of velvet, a material with a wealth of connotations. Velvet evokes the capes of European royalty, luxurious interiors, but also cinemas and theatres – illusion. It is the stuff of superlatives: silk velvet e.g. is still the most expensive fabric in the world. It is a stock element of the iconography of Western art history, serving not only for pictorial purposes in paintings, but also as an important lighting design tool in the studio before the advent of artificial lighting: velvet seals off light well, so it can be used to precisely control the amount of light let in to the studio.

Velvet's characteristic sheen is due to the fibers in the fabric. Velvet is made by weaving two layers of material together, then slicing them apart. Velvet panels never exceed 1.5 m in width, which corresponds to the size of the largest cloth cutting machines. The abundant fibers refract light differently according to which direction they face: this is what gives it its signature iridescent effect. Velvet also seems to swallow up the space around it. Iridescent surfaces look metallic, and Klein has chosen his palette whose dominant colors are gold, silver, blue, red and gray this way. Velvet has a haptic quality, moreover, for the fabric changes as you rub your hand across it.

EMK's 3-meter artworks are installed like curtains in an apartment. They are attached to rods with brackets at either end. But EMK's works differ from conventional curtains by dint of their absence of fastenings and the length of the fabrics. He drapes them over a rod like the materials on display in a drapery. By doubling the fabric, he creates potential hiding places, while alluding to the separation of the two layers involved in making velvet: duplication is intrinsic to the material.

In his practice, EMK examines the timeline of the production of a painting. He zeroes in on the decision-making steps involved in creating a painting. His latest work follows on from a series of large monochrome paintings in which he reversed the painting script by starting with the signature, which is usually added at the very end upon completion of a painting. Every painting starts with the selection of a picture carrier and the impulse to cover a section of a white wall. A painting is always

a material, a piece of canvas covering a wall. EMK foregoes pigments and binders in his new works, confining his focus to the physical medium it- self. And yet, this is not a purist, reductionist project. It does involve questioning the technical and material bases of painting, but EMK's new works have no sacrosanct status. They are hybrids, crosses between tapestries, curtains and paintings, practical items of interior design. EMK affirms the use of painting as wall decoration. His works affirm their "domestic destiny", a destiny shared by pictures in a gallery.

Arthur Fink

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