

# BERGGRUEN

GALLERY

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## Matt Kleberg @ Berggruen Gallery

September 25, 2023 | Mark Van Proyen



*Mausoleum Disco*, 2023, oilstick on canvas, 96 x 80 inches

Usually, when we think of comedy in contemporary painting, the examples that come to mind are forthrightly satirical and figurative. But can we imagine visual comedy grounded in abstraction? In this exhibition of 13 brightly colored paintings supported by an array of 20 drawings, Matt Kleberg does exactly that terms both bold subtle. Granted, the humor of these works is understated, seeming more so because their stunning and imaginative color combinations come across with such ebullient force. But the implications and ramifications of these paintings live in the realm of understatement. If today's figurative painters working in a comic mode can be compared to the buffoonish farces of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus, then Kleberg's *Pigeon Holes* find their Latinate counterparts in the tonier plays of the Carthaginian-born Terence, earmarked by ingenious uses of irony and double entendre.

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After almost three decades of “disarmingly forthright” post-irony leading to an omnipresent esthetic and literary banality, irony seems to finally be making a tentative comeback from its exile on the island of overdone pretension. No doubt, this shift has something to do with the fact that the social and economic reasons necessitating irony are also making a frightening comeback, but that is a story for another telling. Prior to its banishment, irony had devolved into a self-perpetuating intellectual fetish throughout the 1980s. Before that, it had the noble purpose of using double meanings to camouflage latent connotations behind overt declarations to create paradoxical contradictions that could evade censorious scrutiny while communicating with an informed elite (or subculture) who knew a comedy of manners when it saw one.

This rumination came to me while visiting Kleberg’s paintings, all featuring one or more Roman arches in symmetrical compositions. They are the pigeonholes suggested by the exhibition’s title, leading one to ask who the pigeons might be. The viewer? Maybe, but something else might lead us also to consider that language might be the subject under investigation. That is because language works as a labyrinthine game of categories and subcategories that implicitly seeks to contain, separate and regulate experience. Kleberg’s paintings use this aspect of language against itself by suggesting that the proverbial pigeons of category-dependent consciousness have flown the coop, bringing our attention back to the coop’s architecture and the combination of sensate materials from which it is formed.

These combinations (all 2023) tip their hat to Joseph Albers’ work in several ways while satirizing it with wit and subtlety. Five of the 13 works in this presentation feature quartets of arch shapes, each circumscribed with banded successions of bright, highly contrasted color, sometimes sweet and sometimes tart. For example, in *Dovecoat Loneboat*, the interiors of the arched pigeonholes are articulated in a soothing cerulean blue tricked out with a purple side shadow, all framed by multiple bands of alternating warm and cool colors. *Mausoleum Disco* is one of two works in the exhibition that manages to use a stunning fluorescent orange as part of its chromatic palate, while the smaller *Piggy Back Double Stack* from the same year configures around two arched pigeon holes, one atop the other. Four freestanding works executed on shaped canvases mounted on metal stands (with versos unpainted) deviate from the Roman arch motif. The artist calls them busts because their centrally placed shapes approximate the contoured silhouettes of an androgynous figure minus identifiable facial features. Alternating bands of color wrapped around these silhouettes could be interpreted as energy auras.

All of paintings in this exhibition are executed in oilstick carefully applied in layers to reveal chromatic undertones, creating a sparking effect. Each appears to be separated by a transparent layer that adds textural tooth to the surfaces. Or not, because, like many other aspects of Kleberg’s paintings, such distinctions are too subtle to discern with any degree of certainty.

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*Dovecote Loveboat*, 2023, oilstick on canvas, 84 x 70 inches

*Matt Kleberg: "Pigeon Holes" @ [Berggruen Gallery](#) through October 13, 2023.*

**About the author:** Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries emphasize the tragic consequences of blind faith in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for *Art in America*. His recent publications include *Facing Innocence: The Art of Gottfried Helnwein* (2011) and *Cirian Logic and the Painting of Preconstruction* (2010). To learn more about Mark Van Proyen, read [Alex Mak's interview](#) on Broke-Ass Stuart's website.

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