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In Search of the Mutable: Peter Soriano at Lennon Weinberg

by David Carrier

Peter Soriano: New Work at Lennon, Weinberg

January 17 to February 23, 2013

514 West 25 Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

New York City, 212-941-0012



installation shot of the exhibition under review, courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

What is a painting? For some time, artists have been answering that question in very diverse ways by taking painting apart into its constituent elements. Frank Stella and Elizabeth Murray focused our attention on the stretcher; Julia Mehretu and Cy Twombly dealt with the painterly gesture; and Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt, the role of drawing. Peter Soriano, who in the 1990s made colored sculptures from polyester resin, now is seeking to make his art more portable by doing improvised wall paintings, schematized landscapes based upon plein air drawings. His original contribution to this ongoing artistic dialogue involves bringing a new visual resource into the discussion. A couple of decades ago, New York City's subway cars were covered with graffiti. This form of wild art, art from outside the regulated gallery world did not long survive. Its presence was generally seen as a political problem: graffiti showed that the authorities had lost control of the public spaces. One marvelous illustration of graffiti appears on the cover of Frank Stella's *Working Space* (1986)—indeed it is the source of his title. But otherwise graffiti, like other forms of wild art, has not been given much attention by art world authorities.

Anyone using a ruler and spray can, so Soriano says, "could learn and re-make my work." Thus *Bagaduce #1* (2012), which is nine feet long consists of brown shapes overlaid and connected with blunt spray paint lines in black, blue and orange. And *Bagaduce #4* is composed of circles, dots and points of paint, linked together by dotted lines and a long stretch of sprayed blue. It is striking to see how varied are these wall paintings, which are composed of a relatively few, relatively simple elements. And, also, how effectively they make use of Lennon, Weinberg's long narrow space, with its natural lighting at the front and back. Soriano means his works to be "mutable," which is to say that when they recreated by another draftsman in another site they will be somewhat different. Just as Martha Argerich's Schumann performances differ from Sviatoslav Richter's; so, if you purchase instructions for one of these Sorianos, the work you then create at home will differ a little from those in the gallery. Only Norman Mailer and a few other visionary aesthetes admired graffiti. But anyone who loves painterly visual art can enjoy Soriano's wall paintings, which are joyous, truly 'gay' in the traditional sense of that word. Seeing his paintings coming from the bitter cold of an overcast winter day, I thought of Henri Matisse's late cutouts, a perhaps strange but not-irrelevant association. Constructing diagram-like markings, which diagram nothing, Soriano shows how far reaching aesthetic effects can be created by using minimal means. In that way, of course he extends a familiar tradition which now is lengthy. To deconstruct painting, he demonstrates, is also simultaneously to reconstruct this medium, extending its reach in ways which are aesthetically challenging because now, as in the past they remain essentially unpredictable.