

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

this is tomorrow
Contemporary Art Magazine

Sprayed

Kathrine Jackson



Title : David Batchelor, Untitled, 2013

Material : Spray paint, gouache and ink on graph paper

Website : <http://www.gagosian.com/>

Credit : Copyright David Batchelor. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photo Mike Bruce

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Gagosian Gallery

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Review by Katherine Jackson

In 1954, John Latham was invited by a group of scientists to produce a mural using spray paint. This engagement led to a lifetime fascination with the physics of space and time, an exploration that sought to create a new visual language through the spray can and canvas. Roughly twenty years later, Andy Warhol invited friends to urinate on a canvas covered in paint that contained copper. He noticed that the oxidation caused by the uric acid created an abstracting effect, an effect he would utilise to both pay homage to and subvert the abstract modernist tradition. In 2015, Anish Kapoor spray-painted a red shaded sphere, the shading so subtle it created the illusion of a real object. The result was a career-long engagement with sculpture, painting and spatial dimension.

Latham's 'Painting not out of a book' (1963), Warhol's 'Oxidation' (1978) and Kapoor's 'As yet untitled' (2015) occupy one corner of the Gagosian Gallery's exhibition 'Sprayed'. Curated by Jona Lueddeckens and Greg Bergner, 'Sprayed' features a superstar cast of over fifty artists. In

addition to Latham, Warhol and Kapoor, the exhibition includes Paul Klee, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jeff Koons and Ed Ruscha, to name a few. 'Sprayed' aims to explore historical and contemporary avant-garde uses of spray paint as a medium. At first glance, it is tempting to see this show as a byproduct of the explosive popularity and corporatisation of recent graffiti art. However, the strength and quality of the works demand more than the mere legitimisation of spray paint as a medium, asking the viewer to take a closer look.

Although 'Sprayed' is marketed as an exploration of the history of the medium, it is not hung chronologically. The mixing of contemporary with older works allows for formal cues to take precedent over historical context. Interestingly, these juxtapositions allow for new comparisons to be made. What do Warhol and Latham hold in common? What does Kapoor's piece suggest about the current status of the medium? As one's eye wanders from Latham's black dot to Warhol's splatters of oxidation to Kapoor's sphere, a contingency of formal associations fill one's head: the canvas as surface, the illusion of space and time, and the body as abject.

However, while formal comparisons are clearly the curatorial initiative of 'Sprayed', the medium itself brings political baggage that the exhibition can't quite seem to shake. The spray paint can was invented in 1949 and popularised by the art avant-garde during a political climate that was recovering from the horrors of the second world war and in the wake of the radical sixties. The immediacy, temporality and energy that infused the act of spraying, blowing or splattering are thus unavoidably laced with an attitude of defiance, protest and the quest to view the world differently, returning to the words of John Latham, artists sought to 'develop a new visual language'.

As one leaves the gallery, we are reminded by the exhibition of two friends of Warhol: Haring's 'Untitled (FDR NY) #25 & #26' (1984) hangs facing Basquiat's 'Untitled' (1981). Both artists emphasise austere figures depicted in black and white outline. Basquiat's white canvas is seemingly hastily scrolled with letter As accompanied by a cartoonish canon and a scribbled face bearing its teeth. Haring's tableaux reads like a deranged comic book. Energetic bodies are depicted across the metal canvas, punching and flying. The action and energy of the figures are heightened through short red lines.

Unlike the tongue and cheek rebellion of Warhol, Haring and Basquiat bring a sinister mood to an otherwise exploratory exhibition. As we watch Basquiat's grimacing face stare at Haring's crime-scene of floating bodies, we realise we have left the aftermath of the war, the swinging sixties and entered the decade of Reagan/Thatcher, the war on drugs, the AIDS crisis and the birth of identity politics. Haring and Basquiat's figures convey a sense of urgency, frustration and chaos. Warhol's party lights become dim and the artists' figures are cast in shadow by the haunting recollection the deaths of all three within three years of each other.

According to the curators of 'Sprayed', it was the 'freedom' of spray paint that attracted so many artists to adopt it as a medium. However, the question becomes a freedom from what: the confines of Greenberg's modern abstraction and the restriction of artistic media? The devastation of war? The identity crisis of the 1980s? As one wanders through the extensive display of these influential works, the strength of their content suggests that the freedom of spray paint as a medium is as psychologically significant as it is visually exciting.