

Galerie Daniel Templon
Brussels

CLAUDE VIALLAT

ART IN AMERICA, novembre 2014



MONTPELLIER, FRANCE

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Musée Fabre

Of the artists who have questioned traditional forms of painting over the past century, Claude Viallat is one of the most radical. Since 1966, he has applied an ovoid shape, variously described as a palette, lima bean or bone, to a wide range of textile surfaces, often in a gridded pattern. The results are bold, funky paintings, not dissimilar from slightly later efforts of Pattern and Decoration painters like Kim MacConnel, Robert Kushner and Cynthia Carlson.

Like those artists, Viallat has been a relentless explorer of fresh formal ideas over the last four decades, as evident in this survey of nearly 200 paintings, drawings and sculptures, curated by Michel Hilaire and Marie Lozón de Cantelmi of the Musée Fabre and beautifully installed under the supervision of the Nîmes-born artist. The show began with early, rather murky figurative paintings, leading to a breakthrough piece on unstretched canvas (untitled, 1966), which featured what would become his trademark shapes in blue and pink. Following this, several galleries were filled with works employing inventive gambits like borders, trims and faux frames, as well as innovative supports such as bed sheets, awnings, tablecloths, lace, rugs, quilts, commercial prints, sail-boat tarps, cane seat covers and circus and military tents. For *Fenêtre à Tahiti* (1976), loosely inspired by Matisse's painting of a view through a window frame, Viallat painted a gold grid of his shapes onto a found Victorian window shade with a scalloped border edged in decorator fringe. An untitled work from 1978 is painted on a circle of scalloped fabric intended for a beach parasol. It is divided, like a pie, into eight sections, each a different combination of colors. More juxtapositions

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of hues and shapes appeared in quiltlike experiments. Viallat exposed some works to the elements to obtain weathered and distressed surfaces; in one untitled piece (1972) he burnt the surface in the style of Klein and Burri.

Perhaps most exciting from a contemporary perspective are Viallat's sculptures. In 1970, when he was a member of the Supports/Surfaces movement, he made objects by deconstructing textiles. Floor installations of coiled and braided rope-nets tipped with dye and ladderlike pieces made with strips of dyed fabric evoke work from the same era by Alan Saret, Eva Hesse and Ree Morton. Colored hoops of various sizes are used as frames for painted or dyed fabric squares and triangles, augmented by ropes and fabric. Shown in clusters across large walls, these works have the breezy appeal of wall reliefs by Richard Tuttle.

Viallat's insistent use of a signature shape seems forced only in a recent group of paintings on what he calls "kitsch" materials: glittered and lamé fabrics, printed Pop art designs and tie-dye velvet. Also a bit jarring was the installation of Viallat works in the period rooms of the museum's 19th-century decorative art collection at the adjacent Hôtel de Cabrières-Sabatier d'Espeyran. The tarps didn't mesh with the gilt furniture.

At the Musée Fabre, a final gallery of four monumental pieces demonstrated the undeniable impact of this artist's ritualistic urge to make his mark. A huge section of weathered canvas from a circus tent and a triangular tarp intended for a large sailboat are ornamented all over with the Viallat bone (1989 and 2012, respectively); he has stamped these gargantuan surfaces with the repeated multicolored sign of art. Viallat's one-note semaphore speaks volumes.

—Michael Duncan

Claude Viallat:
Untitled (parasol),
1978, acrylic on
parasol, approx. 6 feet
in diameter; at the
Musée Fabre. Photo
courtesy Galerie
Daniel Templon.