

GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

PRESS RELEASE

Wyatt Kahn

Signs

August 31 – November 1, 2024

Vernissage on Friday, August 30, 6 – 8 pm

Artist talk with Wyatt Kahn and Elke Buhr, Editor-in-Chief of Monopol Magazin, 6.30 pm

Maag Areal, Zahnradstr. 21, CH-8005 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Signs*, a group of important new paintings by New York-based artist Wyatt Kahn, the gallery's seventh exhibition of his work.

Kahn's new body of work glows with restrained color. After more than a decade working in a severely reduced, largely all-white palette, the artist here presents a suite of shaped, deconstructed canvases in an etiolated spectrum of greens, oranges, yellows, and blues. Made by adding paint to a mixture of beeswax and Turpentine – a procedure borrowed from Brice Marden – and applying it flatly with minimal visible brushwork, the smooth, matte surfaces absorb ambient light with stately, quiet authority.

From the beginning of his career, Kahn has experimented with a shifting pictorial glossary of quasi-universal sign-clip art-like symbols whose meaning is at once objective and intensely personal. In the past, these icons have represented everyday objects such as light bulbs, eyeglasses, and human feet. Here, Kahn whittles his vocabulary down to typographic units—individual letters and numbers—that allude at once to the history of the printing press, that quintessential modern invention, and, more narrowly, to Pop Art's disruptive assimilation of mass-produced commercial imagery into the realm of fine art. But here, meaning has broken down. In lieu of the logo, ambiguity prevails. Alongside the letters and numbers are episodes of abstraction, that other invention of modernity. Glyphs, icons, and visual detritus thwart the legibility promised by the graphic mien of the paintings, dissipating meaning into an affective blur.

To that end, Kahn's work also tests the viewer: It leads us to a particular way of looking and engaging. Just as in child's play, an object's purpose succumbs to the unrestrained mutability of childhood imagination, Kahn unmoors meaning, separating object and image, sign and signifier. For the viewer, the identity of his pictorial components is always in flux, in play. In *kOOLL red*, is the circle a circle, a toy hoop, or the letter O? It's unclear. In *The Green Studio*, are the rectangles just rectangles, or are they frames struggling to frame a painting that cannot be framed? What exactly is that tweaked star with serifs? A herald? An old dingbat? An X marking the spot? What do we want it to be? And what does it say about us? Humor, visual puns, and quiet jokes abound. In other words, Kahn initiates a "circulation of the sign" – the hallmark of early Cubist *papier collé* – in which a single form is shown to contain different meanings depending on its context and position. In this respect, the sideways 3 in *Untitled* or the similar sideways B in *Fall* might be read as a nod to Picasso's painting *Guitar and Wine Glass* (1912) where a near-identical scalloped and dimpled line acts both as decorative ornament on a baseboard and scalloped edge of a violin.

Finally, Kahn's work is intensely, if obliquely, autobiographical, cataloging his own memories, past experiences, artistic lodestars, and the history of his own practice. The distinct abstract forms that underlie each painting are cannibalized from earlier bodies of work dating back nearly a decade. Meanwhile, the invocation of child's play is as much a semiotic play as it is a reference to the daily routines of fatherhood. Viewed from a certain angle, the paintings do indeed evoke flickers of domestic life: a jumble of magnets scattered on the kitchen floor, discarded scraps of construction paper, a pile of broken toy parts. And the palette – muted and atmospheric – only reinforces this hermetic interiority.

When considering Kahn's new paintings – which together form a major leap forward for the artist – we would do well to remember the lessons imparted by that master-disruptor of literalism, Jasper Johns. While a 1 in a painting is always just a 1, it also is never only a 1; the *actual* meaning of any sign is as personal to the artist as it is inaccessible to us.

MAAG AREAL
ZAHNRADSTR.21, CH-8005 ZURICH
TEL: +41 43 444 70 50
WWW.PRESENHUBER.COM

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Wyatt Kahn was born in 1983 in New York, NY, US, and lives and works in New York, NY, US. Recent institutional solo exhibitions include *Fantasmas* at Museo Anahuacalli, Mexico City, MX (2024); *Wyatt Kahn: Life in the Abstract* at City Hall Park in New York, NY, US (2022 – 2023); *Variations on an Object* at Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto (Mart), Trento, IT (2016); and *Object Paintings* at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, US (2015). His work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, US; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, US; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, FR; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, US; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ, US; CCS Bard, Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, US; and Buffalo AKG Art Museum (formerly Albright-Knox Art Gallery), Buffalo, NY, US.

For more information, please contact the sales team (onlinesales@presenhuber.com).

For press images and information, please contact David Ulrichs PR (press@presenhuber.com, +49 176 5033 0135).