

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jeffrey Kastner, "Banks Violette at Gladstone 64," *Artforum*, January 2019

## ARTFORUM

### Banks Violette

GLADSTONE 64

When he effectively withdrew from the art world more than half a decade ago, Banks Violette left behind a pair of entwined legacies: as the prolific creator of persuasively ominous sculptures, paintings, and installations, and as a classic cautionary tale for early success and its excesses. His glamorously dark work of the early 2000s, which gave the then-trending thread of abjection an infusion of black-metal mordancy, was icy and slickly sullen. Meanwhile, his oft-recounted personal history—he was a richly tatted high-school dropout who'd kicked a meth habit, earned a studio-art MFA at Columbia University, and received a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art by the age of thirty-one—lent him a certain street cred, but also made him a target for critical skepticism and premonitions of *schadenfreude*. As it happened, Violette was, by his own admission, living down too soon to the expectations of his detractors. Burned out and facing crises of both health and faith fueled by overwork and a relapse into drugs, he eventually decided to "hit the eject button" and moved back to Ithaca, the upstate New York town where he'd grown up and where he's been working, out of view, ever since.

On the basis of past performance, the artist's recent show at Gladstone 64—Barbara Gladstone's sedately elegant Upper East Side town-house space—promised an almost parodic mismatch of style between the work and its exhibition setting, like Slayer retiring their death's heads and pentagrams in favor of Brooks Brothers and chamber music. But Violette's new work—wistful, melancholic, its forms and interests stripped to the bone—turned out to be comfortably at home in its new surroundings. Gone was the menacingly buckled, ampto-eleven Minimalism; the stoner satanist riffing on Cady Noland; the relational aesthetics for misanthropes. In their place were six small graphite-on-paper drawings and a single sculpture that at first glance appeared as genteel as the gallery's white marble floors and carved moldings. Three of the drawings (all works 2018) featured faithfully rendered logos: for the culture-war-scarred sitcom *Roseanne*, for the late-1970s anarcho-punk zine *International Anthem* (a "nihilist newspaper for the living"), and for the plumbing-supply company American Standard. The last of these might be understood as a kind of motto for the show and its glumly resigned view of this country's current state of social and political affairs, coupled as it was with *No Title/ (45 Grave/American Recordings)*, an inverted US flag whose incomplete field of bars suggested a punch-drunk fighter who'd had a couple of teeth knocked out, and *No Title/ (Stormy Daniels)*, a delicately washed-out portrait of the porn star turned Trump *bête noire*. The last, *No Title/ (Orphan)*, was the formal and affectual outlier of the group: a linear design that first reads as an instance of Violette's long-standing interest in detourning Minimalist procedures, but is in fact a re-creation of an image left on the artist's computer by a former studio assistant who later committed suicide.

View of "Banks Violette, 2018. Foreground: *No Title/ (N.O./powercorruptionandlies)*, 2018. Background: *No Title/ (45 Grave/American Recordings)*, 2018. Photo: David Regen.



JANUARY 2019 185

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The exception to the gesturally attenuated mood of the show was *No Title!* (*N.O./powercorruptionandlies*), a three-dimensional reconceptualization of the 1890 Henri Fantin-Latour floral still life featured on Peter Saville's iconic cover for New Order's 1983 breakout second album *Power, Corruption & Lies*. Violette's fresh-cut white roses—heaped into a cast-aluminum version of the painting's woven reed basket that was set on a half-painted Sheetrock plinth—were etiolated versions of the colorful blooms in the original, pale ghosts of beautiful abundance. Though the album's title obviously provides a tidy summary of the current disastrous state of American political life, the piece felt more inward-looking than the rest of the work on view. New Order's *Power, Corruption & Lies*—a collection of songs that finally managed to step out of the long shadow of Joy Division, the group's predecessor, and its lead singer, Ian Curtis, who took his own life in 1980 on the eve of the band's first US tour—is a work of art that sought to establish a new identity after abrupt loss; a fresh start in the wake of personal calamity that cut short great promise. Like the record, Violette's current work doesn't fully banish the ache of what's come before, but it does channel it in novel and unexpected directions.

—Jeffrey Kastner