

Art in America

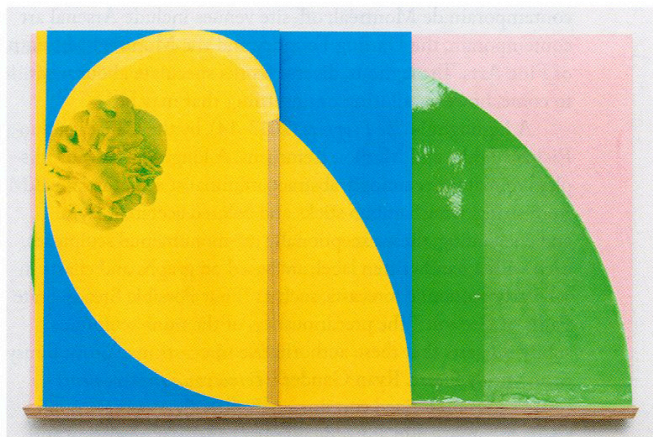
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NEW YORK R.H. QUAYTMAN Gladstone

R.H. Quaytman sticks to the rules, even when she's out of her element. The paintings she has produced since 2001 adhere to certain self-imposed parameters. As she explained in a recent interview with *Mousse*, "Each painting is made in one of seven consistent nesting sizes on plywood panels which are gessoed with the same rabbit skin glue gesso." Quaytman also set for herself a broader dictate: individual paintings are always enfolded within a larger conceptual superstructure evident at the level of the exhibition. "Each new exhibition," she continued, "is a chapter in an ongoing archive that I continue without end."

The newest of these chapters is *O Tópico, Chapter 27*, an installation of dozens of paintings. We have to trust that

View of R.H. Quaytman's installation *O Tópico, Chapter 27*, 2014, showing three works layered, left to right: 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 20 inches, 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches and 32 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 52 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches; at Gladstone.



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Quaytman didn't stray from her formal parameters, that all the requisite rabbits have indeed been skinned. Some of the works on view are consistent with those that comprise earlier chapters, replete as they are with bold geometric patterns occasionally overlaid with blurry silkscreened images or embellished with glittery metal pigments. Additionally, some of the painted wooden panels of various standardized dimensions are arranged in groups on plywood shelves, emphasizing the object quality of the works.

At the same time, striking formal departures were evident here. Viewers were met with a group of panels painted in bright neon colors and adorned with swooping curved lines—both characteristics were new additions to a system that has previously favored muted palettes and rectilinear forms. More striking still were the toxic-looking polyurethane masses that appeared to grow, wartlike, on some of the panels.

It can seem beside the point, however, to focus on the eccentricities of individual objects, since, for Quaytman, painting is commensurate with exhibition-making, and exhibition-making is always grounded in a voracious engagement with specific places. *O Tópico*, which means “the subject” in Portuguese, is a response to a commission for a permanent installation at the Inhotim art center in the rural Brazilian town of Brumadinho. All of the works on view here will be housed in a pavilion designed for the site by architect Solveig Fernlund. The layout of the planned structure is based on the Golden Spiral, a geometric schema echoed in the “nesting” proportions of the paintings. This close link between architecture and painting was approximated at Gladstone Gallery, where white walls subdivided the space into increasingly narrow triangular sections, including one so narrow that viewers had to navigate gingerly to avoid one of the polyurethane bulges.

It's one thing for Quaytman to rifle through a prominent museum's archive for images and inspiration, as she did for her 2010 Whitney Biennial project, or to incorporate the patterns of textiles produced by Belgian nuns in paintings she made for a 2012 exhibition in Brussels. But what does it mean for Quaytman, an established New York artist, to perform such an operation at a site of stunning natural beauty that is home to

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opulent contemporary artworks and yet remains in proximity to punishing rural poverty?

In some ways, the Brazilian context is not so foreign for Quaytman, whose paintings already belonged to a tradition of modernist art that includes the neo-Constructivism of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Still, there is a risk of indulging in a kind of conceptual tourism, dabbling in brighter colors to signify tropical affinities without abandoning the comfortable distance that arbitrary rules can provide. To her credit, Quaytman has cited Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) as a guide to her process. The anthropologist described both the urgent need to engage cultural difference and the intellectual alienation that can result when this process is taken seriously. Perhaps an expression of this difficulty is evident in Quaytman's embrace of the abject. Her archive-without-end now seems more corporeal than ever, with paintings that reach out, seeming to touch us with grotesque protrusions. It is as if the artist feasted heartily on the intellectual and aesthetic offerings of a new environment without denying any of the subsequent indigestion.

—William S. Smith