

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Frances Richard, "Frances Stark, CRG Gallery," *Artforum*, December, 2001

ARTFORUM

Frances Stark

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Frances Stark's aesthetic might be thought of as eponymous. Her drawings are evocatively austere: white paper, areas of hand-lettered text, the occasional collage. A writer as well as a visual artist, Stark has also taught critical theory and played in lo-fi bands, and if these details are relevant to a discussion of her art, it's not because they compose a scruffily glamorous picture (though they do) but because they suggest the scope and subtlety of her interest in language and the visual patterning of communication. This show—the LA-based artist's third in New York—comprised twelve works on paper, two paintings, and a sculpture. This grouping was not entirely convincing. The paintings and sculpture didn't quite fit with the drawings, and the drawings, while sharing key elements, remained isolated rather than synergistic. Stark relies on strategies of extreme reduction, delicacy, and literary allusion, in which the relationship of drawing to written page is foregrounded. This means that each of her works on paper depends on its companions to generate an intertextual hum, and in this case, that hum never rose to full, mysterious pitch. Nevertheless, the work continues to open a space where the legible and the visible pulsate together. In Stark's art, language is inscribed as both nonsense and homage, and the cognitive circuitry of idea-image-word is made (at least provisionally) explicit.

Stark's primary source here was *The Man Without Qualities*. Fragments of Robert Musil's prose were repeated in columns: "Within a magnetic field of chronic intellectual tension," one excerpt reads, its stuttering letters creating that field before our eyes. Another explains, "It is life that does the thinking all around us, forming with playful ease the connections our reason can only laboriously patch together piecemeal, and never to such kaleidoscopic effect." Eagerly bodying forth its laboriously graphed connections and kaleidoscopic overabundance of letters, the piece exactly illustrates—and simultaneously eviscerates—the quote's self-denigrating point. Such ironic reflexivity is enlivened by small but brightly colored collaged elements, mostly magazine photographs of birds. With their cheerful, quizzical expressions, the finches and parakeets function as mascots or interlocutors counterbalancing the verbiage or commenting on it, like the figures in Renaissance paintings that turn outward to engage the viewer.

These witty and faintly mournful dialogues between writing and drawing took an abrupt detour in two casein paintings and a related series of works on paper, which repeated not high-modernist aphorisms but an icon from a Microsoft calendar program. In one drawing, multiple copies of the icon—a little diary page with the word NOW stamped across it—hover in a stand of tall grass. In the paintings, strings of hand-inked clip art form the legs of abstracted furniture. A sculpture of a broken and mended chair completed this group. The seat and surface of writing? The urgency, of the moment? Connections to the text-based works were vague. A third group of drawings, meanwhile, uses numbers rather than prose as a sequencing device. These apparently derive from Stark's interest in the IBM punch card, a relic from the early days of computer programming when commands were encoded on perforated cards. The hero of Musil's novel is a mathematician and philosopher, and the punch card embodies the idea of systematized and condensed meaning, technology rendered poignant through obsolescence. There are intriguing parallels to be drawn, but here Stark's conceptual reticence, usually an asset, works against her. There is simply too much material for the delicate drawings to digest.

In an odd way, however, this is to Stark's credit. A number of artists currently work with assemblages of deliberately ephemeral substance (Sarah Sze, Diana Cooper, Jane South), and there are others who explore indexical systems (Erica Baum, David Bunn). But Stark is unique in that she does both at once, constructing paper armatures across which semiotic systems are arrayed and exposed. It's a vexed and fascinating task.

—Frances Richard