

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Beau Rutland, "Kerstin Brätsch," *Artforum*, January, 2016

ARTFORUM

Kerstin Brätsch

ARTS CLUB OF CHICAGO

Beau Rutland



View of "Kerstin Brätsch: PELE'S CURSE," 2015. From left: *Unstable Talismanic Rendering_ Pele's Curse Nr. 34*, 2014; *Unstable Talismanic Rendering_27*, 2014. Photo: Michael Tropea.

IS KERSTIN BRÄTSCH a skeptic or a believer? Throughout her practice, the artist subverts individual aesthetic gestures, technical skill, and objecthood, but it's often difficult to tell whether Brätsch wants to critique the "institution"—or warmly embrace it. On one hand, her work can be overburdened with a proliferation of voices, so that any individual output is subsumed under other monikers and makers. On the other, her paintings are elegant, considered—ready to be wistfully contemplated and quickly acquired. Like Martin Kippenberger before her, Brätsch surrounds her work with advertising strategies through DAS INSTITUT, her two-person collective with artist Adele Röder; she also collaborates with Debo Eilers as KAYA. Posing as a fictitious import/export agency, DAS INSTITUT has, over nine years, provided Brätsch with a "strategic form of insurance," in the words of curator Beatrix Ruf. With this liability policy in place, Brätsch has been free to indulge in making deliciously formalist paintings while taking a wary stance against the capital-/ institution of art. A series of works on multiple sheets of Mylar, for instance, are deliberately fractured: One must see through all of their transparent surfaces to receive the whole image. Interestingly, even when Brätsch is operating under a pseudonymous collaborative, the credit is clear: "Kerstin Brätsch for DAS INSTITUT."

Stepping outside of the shadow of these entities, Brätsch's first monographic institutional show in the US offered a summation of her recent solo efforts. And it was in this capacity that Brätsch most lucidly clarified her interests, in a dense installation of new works that exude a hint of mysticism, evolution, and—lest we think we are not dealing with the Brätsch we've come to expect—more than a hint of other artists, too.

The show's most awe-inspiring works came from a recent series of large-scale paintings, "Unstable Talismanic Renderings," 2013–, which demonstrate Brätsch's interest in continually pushing the medium's boundaries. By taking up the traditional craft of marbling—an incredibly delicate and unstable process involving the dripping of various inks into a basin of water, the resulting granular forms in vivid colors determined by the chemical makeup of each pigment as well as wave patterns in the liquid—Brätsch has managed to expand her arsenal of mark-making by more thoroughly engaging with notions of instability and indeterminacy.

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Also on view were versions of Brätsch's trademark brushstroke—a scalloped, multihued gradient—transmogrified into panels of stained glass with the assistance of artisans, in works such as *Single Brushstroke in Lead (Bl. Wurm)*, 2012. This artistic logo of sorts serves as a talisman in itself, recycled and remixed throughout her practice. If the brushstroke is one sign of the traditional notion of an artist—an individual who makes marks to produce meaning—then Brätsch's analysis and dissection of the stroke can be seen in dialectic flux: She is the believer, pledging faith in the individual aesthetic gesture; she is the skeptic, mocking passé notions of artistic production.

In lieu of her usual collaborative strategies, Brätsch altered the standard affair of the solo presentation by including the work of two other artists. In the video *Clouded in Veins: Possible Readings of Kerstin Brätsch's Unstable Talismanic Renderings*, 2014–15, the artist-cum-shaman Mariechen Danz channels a weather forecaster, predicting what the undulating rivulets of Brätsch's marblings might do next. Dressed in garments Danz designed featuring images pulled from Brätsch's paintings, she reads Brätsch's tea leaves, offering up interpretations and divinations from the pooling ink: colliding plates, lungs, anxiety.

Though officially an artwork, Gaylen Gerber's *Exhibition scheme [PELE'S CURSE]*, 2015, functioned more as a guidebook for Brätsch than as an intervention. Gerber, a longtime Chicago resident and friend of Brätsch, is widely known for his amorphous practice that entwines collaboration, curatorial maneuvers, and exhibition design with wry sophistication. Conveniently, Gerber offered to be Brätsch's man on the ground, devising the initial hanging while Brätsch was in Europe working on another exhibition. In addition to altering the gallery space with pink light, pink paint, and a shocking chartreuse wall (all maneuvers from his repertoire), Gerber eased Brätsch through the unnerving process.

In the past, Brätsch has appeared hesitant to fully let go of her work and allow it to exist in the world on its own. This reticence might easily be misread as a symptom of ambivalence. With this show, Brätsch seemed to more readily acknowledge her dependence on other artists, realizing the benefits of calling on friends to assuage some of the skepticism around a monographic presentation. In the process, her work itself has transitioned away from the protection offered by the company-as-artistic-brand to something less obfuscated and more human.

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