

GLADSTONE GALLERY

ARTFORUM

R. H. Quaytman

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View of "R. H. Quaytman: O Tópico, Chapter 27," 2014.

R. H. Quaytman's chapter-based works draw upon geometry and grammar to examine how paintings can function structurally. O Tópico, Chapter 27, her latest installation, is on view at Gladstone Gallery in New York until December 20, 2014, before it permanently moves to a pavilion—which, like the architecture in the show, is designed by Solveig Fernlund—at the contemporary art museum and botanical garden Inhotim in Minas Gerais, Brazil.

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AS THE CHAPTERS progress and the paintings accumulate, I am compelled to locate the direction they might lead. What are they adding up to—or, to put it bluntly, what is the “book” about? Until now, the content of the chapters has been historically and contextually based in Europe and the US. In accepting Inhotim’s invitation in 2012 to produce a permanent installation, I had to reexamine my own authority in relation to the site and the audience. Even though I believe that my work would not be possible without the advances and insights of peripheral modernisms that came out of Poland and Brazil (Kobro, Strzeminski, Clark, bo Bardi, Lispector, Oiticica, Artigas), I also felt acutely aware in Brazil of my role as an outsider. To address this site, as I have with previous chapters, seemed somehow illegitimate and false. In the position of foreigner/tourist/guest, how could I authorize the paintings with any hope of resonance there and also have them make sense with the work that preceded it?

I made two research trips to Brazil and just looked, listened, and read. I became overwhelmed by the vigor of Brazil’s nature and realized that maybe the only way to begin to think about this group of paintings would be through the idea of matter itself: matter as in earth, the thing itself, the subject. That’s how I settled on the title *O Tópico*, which means “matter” or “subject” in Portuguese. Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Triste Tropicque* was important to these paintings, and I felt my title echoed that.

I began by gessoing in black and yellow hues a full set of eight panels in the pattern of a Fibonacci spiral. The sizes of my panels are based on the golden section—they all use the ratio 1:1.618—and they nest. For Brazil, I decided to paint the pattern of the spiral generated from this ratio as the base for nearly all of the paintings. The pavilion is also based on this well-known shape that’s found everywhere in nature. It turned out that this “ground” had a spinning or spiraling effect that I could not have predicted. When hung on the walls of the pavilion, which have been designed with the same proportion, the paintings seem to spiral and point outward into the landscape of the botanical garden. Since one of my main concerns has always been to find a way out of the monocular pull of the single painting and into a hieroglyphic or lateral legibility and movement, this was a great discovery for me.

I also ended up trying two new media—encaustic and polyurethane—which in turn forced me to paint in ways that I have avoided most of my life, namely gestural abstraction. In fact, I made the first painting by pouring a puddle of polyurethane onto the floor and then nailing the dried form it created to one of the black and yellow gessoed square panels. It looked like a pile of shit, basically, but as I looked at it on the wall of my studio I began to see a frightening Janus head. This is how I found my subject—in the pouring, the painting, the making. But this is perhaps too complicated to get into in this short space. The point is that the making was the route that enabled me to begin to feel more authorized.

— *As told to Frank Expósito*