

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Joan Waltemath, "RH Quaytman Chapter 12: iamb," *The Brooklyn Rail*, Feb 2009, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2009/02/artseen/r-h-quaytman-chapter-12-iamb>.



ArtSeen

## R H Quaytman Chapter 12: iamb

by Joan Waltemath

**Miguel Abreu Gallery: December 14 - February 1, 2009**

The two characteristics that according to grammarians define the meaning of the pronoun, ostension and relation, deixis and anaphora, have to be completely rethought here. The mode in which these characteristics have been understood has determined the theory of being, that is, first philosophy, since its origins. —Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

Pirouettes in light.

It's been a number of years since a solo exhibition by R H Quaytman has appeared in New York. It has been well worth the wait, however, to have the opportunity to view Quaytman's work at the Miguel Abreu Gallery, a small space on the Lower East Side in an area that has been relatively recently colonized by art galleries. Quaytman's show, *Chapter 12: iamb*, which presents work from an ongoing series, has a fresh and austere edge in sync with these new times that signals a clear path to follow.

Quaytman makes reference in the title to both the seat of seeing (i am), and the classical meter of poetry, among other things. The manifold nature of these works indicates their significance can neither be pinned down nor limited to one approach. They serve rather as a vehicle for many. One could venture to say the works have been installed to follow the rhythm of an iambic pentameter, the "metrical foot of one unaccented followed by one accented syllable," but any attempt to prove the point would become lost in the complexities of all that these works touch upon. The photo-silkscreened image of Dan Graham in "Chapter 12: iamb (blind smile)," (2008), looking ever so much like one of the Ancients in front of a Hermann



Installation view of RH Quaytman's Chapter 12: iamb (from left to right): #6. Chapter 12: iamb, (lateral inhibitions in the perceptual field), 2008. Silkscreen, gesso on wood, 52 3/8 x 32 3/8 inches (133 x 82.2 cm); #7. Chapter 12: iamb, 2008. Silkscreen, gesso on wood, 40 x 24 8/34 inches (101.6 x 63 cm); #8. Chapter 12: iamb, 2008. Silkscreen, gesso on wood, 32 3/8 x 20 inches (82.2 x 51 cm); #9. Chapter 12: iamb (blind smile), 2008. Silkscreen, gesso on wood 20 x 20 inches.

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grid, # 6 of "Chapter 12: iamb," underscores both the classical reference and the tendency to double back.

At the entrance, two panels, a cobalt blue silkscreened image of a light bulb shining on a screened panel of a pixelated field, and an oil painting of what feels like pure, yellow light, set the tone for the exhibition. With the simple metaphor of a light shining on a surface, Quaytman has engaged in an investigation of the grammar of mediation using the syntactic elements of visual apprehension. It's all new ground, albeit a ground that has been constantly shifting since the undermining of painting's supremacy in the last century and the subsequent proliferation of the means of reproduction. Quaytman's shifting, cross-referenced world shows one way to marshal the vastness of the terrain.

In both an acknowledgement and a clarification of the fact that we have stepped beyond Greenbergian questions, Quaytman playfully determines the image in #5 and #10 of "Chapter 12: iamb" (both 2008) by painting a profile of the wooden support structure on the surface of the panel in a quasi-minimalist gesture. Quaytman's project reframes the question and in doing so, also eschews Barthes' declaration in "Is painting a language?" that it is not. In this expanded context, painting is but one language that operates to elucidate the complex relationship between what we see and what we know. Surface takes precedent as a location upon which the imaginings of minds engage in actions, and visual means are relegated to their role as such.

Yet it is the means that Quaytman takes hold of to reveal their extremes. In #7 of "Chapter 12: iamb" (2008), a tilted grid of vertical rectangles (each approximately 1/8" by 3/16") that fill the surface reads pictorially as an allover field even as it references the pixel. Floating in an indeterminate space somewhere in relation to this gridded field, three vertical bands of red, yellow and blue fade into one another; visible at a specific distance as you enter the small back room of Abreu's gallery, they vanish as you approach the panel and the shimmering pixel grid asserts its dominance. At a distance of one foot, the colored bands are completely invisible, but new optical effects, color halos at the edges of the black and white rectangles emerge. Turning to the left to view what at that moment hovers at the edge of your peripheral vision, you can catch the RGB spectrum in the interstice of #4 of the gridded field in "Chapter 12: iamb," an effect that shimmers only momentarily and disappears when one moves laterally in relation to its surface. In #8 the rectangles are pixelated in a way that reveals the surface grain of the plywood support, an image which also mysteriously vanishes as you move towards the panel and realize that a dot matrix has been layered into the pixilation, bringing into the picture yet another reference to the mediation of what is being seen.

The grid and circles in #6 of "Chapter 12: iamb, (lateral inhibitions in the perceptual field)" (2008), provides the most spectacular optical effect, with the white circles at the grid's every

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intersection turning grey and/or black in concert. Some might even get a headache from looking too long at the Hermann grid's dazzling surface. Discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and modified in more recent times, there is nowhere to rest in a Hermann grid, whose explanation is still being debated. Yet seen through a camera lens in #13 of "Chapter 12: iamb," which is oriented horizontally in the gallery's front room, it is devoid of optical effects. Turned on its side also in "(blind smile)" the Herman grid appears in three guises in this exhibition.

Such effects, together with the concentric circles of sparkling diamond dust in "Chapter 12: iamb (Fresnell lens)" (2008) at the gallery's entrance, might indicate that Quaytman's subject is an interest in optics. I would propose rather that it is an interest that touches on the phenomenology of perception, and the investigation remains within the realm of the means, elucidating the conflicting and overlapping body of rules that govern different media and work in concert to determine how we interpret what we see. Light, the vehicle that both enables and determines sight, appears, if anything, to be the subject; painting stands alone in its directness.

Quaytman's sophisticated dissection of the complexities of seeing and the manifold aspects that inform perception is evident not only in individual works, but also in the relationship between specific works installed in the exhibition, and in the cumulative effect of the whole. In a room saturated with investigations into the mysterious nature of seeing and its mediation in our time, the autonomy of the singular is never in doubt. Individual works that can be read wholly within the context of the history of painting are at the same time open to formally interact with pieces like #8 "Chapter 12: iamb," which brings to the fore the relationship between the dot screen and the pixel. On the left side of the gallery, the shift from the oil on wood "Chapter 2: Lødz Poem – Caption b" (2002), to a pixelated double-screened panel, to a yellow field of concentric circles, could be read as a position statement. The movement from painting to a screened computer generated digital image and then across the room to screened photographic imagery is seamless; the intent which connects them supersedes the media that contextualizes them, each slightly differently.

In addressing a transitory period in which the crosspollination of media has rendered the visual a complex field to decode, Quaytman has foregrounded abstraction as a fundamental to the ongoing evolution of visual language. Quaytman's fluency across diverse media is apparent in the mixing of the hand painted with the mechanically reproduced, photographic imagery with the language of non-objective painting. In creating a series of seductive wood panel surfaces that draw attention to the plane as the location to be read, Quaytman has clearly moved beyond questions of the viability of any specific media, yet it is in the ambiguities of her project that the shift has become visible.