



Artforum, May 2016

(author: Jan Tumlir)

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ARTFORUM

Calvin Marcus's first major solo show in Los Angeles was titled "Malvin Carcus," suggesting, somewhat perversely for this painter just embarking on his professional career, that the works on view were traceable to an alter ego, and, moreover, to one that might be deceased—a carcass. The transposition of letters in Marcus's name could be interpreted as a revealing slip of the tongue, a spoonerism, but one performed consciously, to both acknowledge the morbid specters that haunt all talk of painting and to get them out of the way. Or it could be read as perfectly meaningless but nonetheless tactical. Let's remember that this is a ploy sometimes used on Facebook, for instance, when a person wants to remain hidden from all but a select group of friends. In some sense, Marcus slyly proclaimed that this show is for you!

To align Marcus's practice with social media might seem odd, considering the resolutely aged vintage of the works on offer, all of which invoke the aesthetic atmosphere, at once jaunty and existentially fraught, of postwar America—but then, isn't anachronism today's reigning mode? Our various avatars are always nostalgic constructs, bittersweet compendiums of historical data. Interactive space, both real and virtual, is something that Marcus understands well, having been uniquely successful at mobilizing a social network around a range of events and projects—notably a themed bar, hosted in his East LA studio, that summoned up the aura of the great bohemian watering holes of the New York School for the posthistorical set. For this enterprise, while tending the counter, the artist wore a custom-made linen shirt screen-printed with a vaguely ironic period motif of martini glasses and suspended olives. When his tenure as barkeep came to an end, Marcus printed the pattern onto additional shirts that he subsequently wore on a daily basis as a kind of artist's uniform. The first section of the Kordansky show was devoted to these artifacts, which lined the narrow walkway that one had to traverse to get to a larger space densely hung with a series of paintings, all composed of sketchy doodles in black oil crayon and Flashe paint on cream-white primed linen. The shirts and the paintings, two very different bodies of work, nevertheless evoked a coherent persona, at once historically dated and utterly up-to-date.

The freshly pressed shirts, still wrapped in dry-cleaner's plastic, were affixed to the gallery walls on wire hangers. One might have been reminded, on the one hand, of such figures as René Magritte, whose closet boasted rows of identically officious, anti-bohemian suits, and on the other, of those Madison Avenue "creatives" featured on shows like *Mad Men*, who felt compelled to disrupt the corporate dress code with arty touches. A back-and-forth play of magazine illustration and fine art informs Marcus's paintings, which rehearse some of the off-handed brut elegance of Saul Steinberg's *New Yorker* frames. With one exception, all of the paintings are a standardized four by eight feet, and bear the same title, *Automatic Drawing* (all works 2015), fol-

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Calvin Marcus,
Automatic Drawing
#18, 2015, oil crayon
and Flashe paint on
linen, 48 × 96". From
the series "Automatic
Drawings," 2014–.

lowed by a number indicating each painting's order in the series, begun in 2014. As we know, Surrealist automatism was seized on by the "irascible" AbEx generation as a kind of palate cleanser, allowing artists to bypass the overplowed furrows of aesthetic intention and proceed straight to an ostensibly acultural, ahistorical Absolute. On the whole, however, Marcus's paintings would seem to be following the opposite course.

His canvases feature a broad range of imagery, which seems at first glance almost arbitrary: A skillet (alternately empty or loaded with small fish or frying eggs) reappears frequently, interspersed among various other domestic items such as an electric fan and some stylishly delineated shoes reminiscent of early Warhol illustration. Included as well were two more technically rendered depictions of an airplane descending dangerously close to an unsuspecting cityscape and an oil tanker about to collide with a sea kayaker. At once banal and extraordinary, cheery and morose, these evidenced the disjecta of everyday life in a plugged-in-to-the-point-of-distraction studio, where the act of painting can be inspired by questions as disparate as "What's for dinner?" and "Were there any survivors?" Technically, these paintings achieve seemingly effortless yet always surprising resolutions. There is a sly humor at work in Marcus's painterly practice, and, as with all the best jokes, nothing really to "get" other than the perception that there is more in there than anyone could possibly manage.

—Jan Tumlir