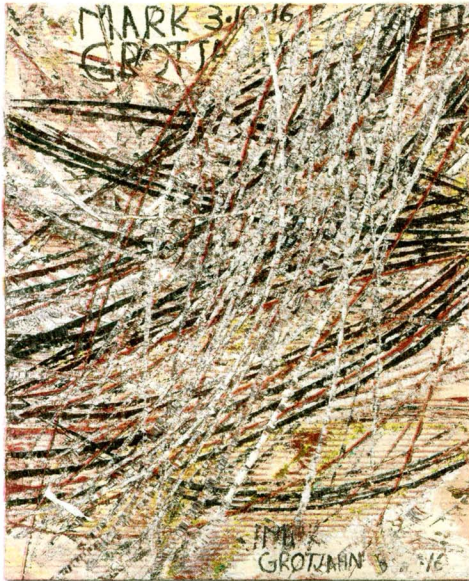


GAGOSIAN

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ART & AUCTIONS

### After a Record Sale, an Artist Changes Course

The Los Angeles painter's new work comes to Gagosian; 'one of the best examples of how much power an artist can wield'

BY KATERINA ANG

WHEN THE GAVEL came down at Christie's contemporary art sale in May 2017, a painting by Mark Grotjahn had sold for \$16.8 million.

The price for "Untitled (S III Released to France Face 43.14)," full of feathery red, black and yellow lines and part of the Los An-

geles artist's "Face" series, was roughly double what his work had ever fetched at auction. By then, however, he had moved on.

"I was sick of relying on the face for composition and wanted to find a way of working where I strictly dealt with colors and textures," says Mr. Grotjahn, who counts David Geffen and the Museum of Modern Art among his collectors. Viewers in New York

will see the results of his creative shift when "New Capri, Capri, Free Capri," opens on Tuesday at Gagosian's West 24th Street gallery.

Billed as the artist's largest-ever display of new work, the show marks the 50-year-old's change in style. A breakthrough came when he started experimenting with scraping leftover paint off a canvas and then spreading chunks back onto the work—a process that felt indulgent at first.

"I did not enjoy the struggle," he says, but "after long enough, there's a different kind of dexterity and muscle memory as the work becomes significantly free."

Mr. Grotjahn's new, earth-toned

works range in size from 23-by-19 inches to a cardboard-on-linen painting nearly 6 feet tall. Several in the series include an almond-shaped motif that appeared in some of his earlier work.

The Broad in Los Angeles is acquiring some of the "Free Capri" pieces. "There's a sense of open-endedness and freedom that seem apparent in these paintings, though they still have the same rigorous sensuality about them," says Joanne Heyler, the museum's founding director.

Mr. Grotjahn has come a long way since an early show where he only sold one \$3,500 painting. His works in the Gagosian show are priced from \$750,000 to \$5 million.

At the same time, he possesses an unusual amount of commercial independence. At a time when blue-chip galleries can make an artist's career and demand exclusivity, he works with four galleries in the U.S. and is known to occasionally cut out dealers by selling directly to collectors.

"He is a very unique case but also one of the best examples of how much power an artist can wield at the highest reaches," says Natasha Degen, who leads the art-market studies department at the Fashion Institute of Technology. "Clearly, enough money is being made that Gagosian is going to overlook the fact that there are multiple parties involved."

"It doesn't bother me," says Larry Gagosian, whose 16 galleries include locations in Paris, London, Geneva and Hong Kong. "We've developed a bit of a shorthand over the years for how he wants

Paintings from Mark Grotjahn's 'Free Capri' series, above, will be on view at Gagosian's West 24th Street gallery in New York. The artist, below right, with gallery owner Larry Gagosian, below left.

things handled."

Sam Orlofsky, a Gagosian director who began working with Mr. Grotjahn over a decade ago, attributes the artist's market ascent to his prowess as a poker player. "He has a super-intense sense of risk-taking and knows how to gauge someone's appetite," Mr. Orlofsky says.

**\$16.8 million**

Sale price for Mark Grotjahn's 'Untitled (S III Released to France Face 43.14)'

Mr. Grotjahn is tight-lipped about the commercial aspect of his career. But he still talks about poker, which he now rarely plays, with the vocabulary of the art dealer he once was.

"There are moments of clarity where you read the table," he says. "One person's pain threshold is very different from another's, and it's really helpful to gather that information to take advantage of a situation."

Ultimately, prices and market strategies aren't what makes Mr. Grotjahn tick, Mr. Gagosian says. "What excites him is what's going on in the studio every day."



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