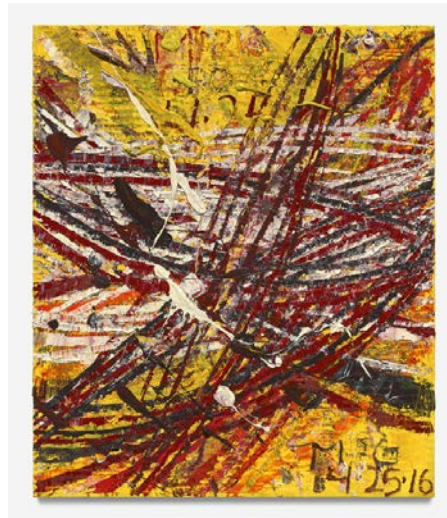


GAGOSIAN



Mark Grotjahn: New Capri, Capri, Free Capri

David Rhodes

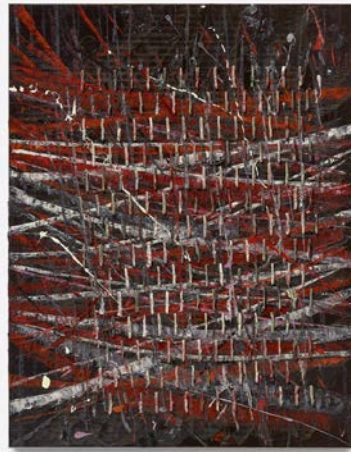


Mark Grotjahn, *Untitled (New Capri XIX 47.19)*, 2016. Oil on cardboard, 20 × 17 inches. © Mark Grotjahn. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio. Courtesy Gagosian.

Casa Malaparte, a house built for, and partially designed by, Italian writer Curzio Malaparte in the late 1930s, is situated on Punta Massullo, a rocky outcrop on the eastern side of Capri, a short ferry ride from the coast of Naples. On the island, Casa Malaparte is visible looking down through dark green pine trees and across pale rock formations, from a clifftop. It is a stunning visual environment full with color and texture, at which American artist Mark Grotjahn was invited to make a private exhibition in 2016. It is the visual splendor of the site rather than the significance of this writer or his house that informs the paintings. The small-scale paintings he made for that occasion, titled “New Capri,” are presented at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, framed and under glass in the largest exhibition of paintings by Grotjahn at the gallery to date. The “New Capri” paintings were the first to be made, and the other two related series, “Capri” and “Free Capri,” were made later from 2016 to 2018. There are twenty-eight paintings altogether, most of them large, the largest 95 by 77 inches.

In the paintings, linear accumulations curve repeatedly across improvised compositions; within are splats of paint launched from a palette knife. Each painting begins with a dominant ground color: yellow, white, black, red, and pink, the oil paint applied onto cardboard before mounting on linen, except in the case of the *New Capri* paintings which are all unmounted. Take *Untitled (New Capri XIX 47.19)* (2016) in which red, orange, black, and white arcs interrupt each other over a vibrant yellow ground. The artist’s initials and a date appear twice, toward both the upper and lower parts of the painting. The horizontal lines of the cardboard’s structure are also visible

due to the pressure of the knife pushing or layering paint this way and that. The splatters of paint add to the impression of speed and movement in constructing the painting through intensely mobile and tactile moves—they are equally the result of process as they are abstract images, the process an experimentation within the confine of a constantly variable leitmotif.



Mark Grotjahn, Untitled (Free Capri 50.43), 2018. Oil on cardboard mounted on linen 75 × 58 1/2 inches. © Mark Grotjahn. Photo: Douglas M. Parker Studio. Courtesy Gagolian.

The “Capri” paintings take the departure seen in the small “New Capri” paintings and, on a much larger scale, recompose the arcs of the “Face” series—for which the artist is well known—into partially elliptical shapes that recall the organic patterning of long grass or overlapping leaves. Grotjahn has made more abstract his earlier works retaining the shapes and lines without using them to form a recognizable face. The works are a development from one of Grotjahn’s signature styles, the “Face” paintings he began in 2003. As the eye-shapes that signaled a face in those paintings are now thoroughly fragmented into oval, biomorphic configurations, we see something now far away from the gestalt of a schematic face. The arced striations of paint build into a thicket that interweaves diagonally to create structure in the compositions. In their changing hue—dark to light and back again—the knifed paint appears refracted. A new element appears in the “Free Capri” group: what could be described as an unlikely pattern, grid, or net depending on the distance or angle that the viewer looks at the painting. Repurposed slug-like deposits of surplus paint are left over from the making of the painting itself. Squeezed out of a tube, finely striped, with pinched ends and a slash laterally half way along their length, the “slugs” are imposed, stuck onto the painting at what must be the last stage.

Untitled (Free Capri 50.43) (2018) is a chromatically dark painting, which stands in contrast to the vibrancy of many of the other paintings. Strands of knife-applied color in uneven variations of grey, dark red, and some white pass horizontally or in shallow diagonals, like streamers hung across a street. They occupy a physical but relatively shallow space, behind which is the ground—also very physical but operating visually as if a void. The affect of the addition, on top of the layers already described, of a field of “slugs” confounds any sense that this is a straightforward abstract painting: lyrical, improvised, balanced through adjustments in the process. Despite all the gestural painting, row after row of tick-marks add up to a field that Grotjahn anticipated and calculated. Unlike the rest of the painting, which could be seen as complete already, these additions do not appear to be from the same order of improvisation. The effect is always different, though, as some marks hover while some are less obvious and almost disappear into the complexity of paint beneath. There is a surreal sense in this juxtaposition of something impossible to describe and yet not without logic, and it is present in all the paintings

here. But what does this mean? The narrative paradox of formal elements that seem so contradictory and yet add up to a cohesive visual whole leaves the question open deliberately. It's not a formalist issue so much as an existential one: how can contradictions exist so successfully without an explanation?