

Art in America

Published September 9, 2014 | Reviews

MEYER VAISMAN
New York, at Eleven Rivington

By Gillian Young



Meyer Vaisman: *Artist's Signature: ylbmowT yC, 5773 A, 2014*, ink on plywood, 70½ by 118 inches; at Eleven Rivington.

An artist of Lithuanian Jewish descent born in Caracas, Meyer Vaisman has made a habit of exploring his own complex sense of identity. By imposing elaborate conceptual constraints on his working processes, Vaisman avoids navel-gazing insularity, producing paintings and sculptures that address viewers with a sharply intelligent comedic sensibility. As with many of his contemporaries in downtown New York in the 1980s, Vaisman was averse to the romantic notions of authorship proffered

by then-fashionable Neo-Expressionist painters. In 1984, he teamed up with two other artists to found International with Monument, an East Village gallery that gave Jeff Koons his first exhibition and showed work by artists including Sarah Charlesworth, Peter Halley and Richard Prince. Like them, Vaisman eschewed traditional avenues of self-expression, in part by reproducing imagery he had appropriated from popular sources.

Still, Vaisman's primary subject remained himself. For *The Look Alike* (1988) he played with the conventions of painting and self-portraiture by hiring cartoonists to render his likeness. Vaisman then printed the caricatures on canvases that had been printed with reproductions of multicolored commercial fabric patterns. As part of a solo exhibition in 2000, Vaisman installed a massive plaster cast of his psychoanalyst posing as the Virgin Mary of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. The quintessential Renaissance image of material devotion was transformed into a sardonic tableau in which the artist's personality was referenced obliquely by the figure of a grandiose shrink.

Vaisman's latest body of work marks his return to New York after a 14-year absence. For this sprawling selection of paintings, on view at both Eleven Rivington venues, Vaisman performed under a new—but also very old—representational restriction: the religious interdiction against graven images.

Art in America

Following a move to Barcelona in 2000, Vaisman converted to an orthodox strain of Judaism. (The title of his latest solo exhibition, "In the Vicinity of History, 5774," refers to the Hebrew calendar.) In lieu of figurative imagery, Vaisman's signature proliferated across the surfaces of most of the paintings.

The curves of Vaisman's signature were fastidiously spit out by inkjet printers on fresh slabs of poplar plywood. From a distance, the works resembled a variety of New York School paintings, from Robert Motherwell's monumental black-and-white canvases to Willem de Kooning's gestural abstractions. But, upon closer inspection, the Vaisman signature—stretched, compressed, elongated or squashed, sometimes to the point of being unrecognizable—revealed itself as the quantum unit of nearly every picture, eroding the unique painterly flourish through swarms of standardized marks.

Vaisman sometimes cannibalizes compositions by other artists directly, including Paul Cézanne and Eva Hesse. In *Artist's Signature: ylbmowT yC 5773 A* (2014), a mirror image of one of Cy Twombly's paintings is figured through a small army of Vaisman's signatures. The work is especially significant since Twombly also debased the gestures of his Abstract-Expressionist predecessors by scribbling on his canvases from the 1950s and '60s like a graffitiist at a bathroom wall.

The colorful graffiti flourishes written across New York in the 1980s may also be a point of reference for Vaisman, though his "tags" are devoid of both Twombly's crudeness and the urban grit of street art. Instead, Vaisman's paintings called to mind the clean-cut calligraphic logos for apparel companies like Stüssy.

Most of the paintings are bisected or quartered by what appear to be wooden stretcher bars. Vaisman has said that showing the back of a painting is a humble act with roots in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. This sense of humility, however, sits uneasily alongside the work's evident bravado; the obsessively repeated signature seems to foster rather than smother an effusion of ego. This equivocation impedes the cleverness and relevance of Vaisman's former explorations of self, generating a visual and conceptual stasis amplified in seismographic detail.