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MEYER VAISMAN: 'IN THE VICINITY OF HISTORY, 5774'

By Roberta Smith



A Meyer Vaisman painting based on Cy Twombly's signature at his show at Eleven Rivington. Courtesy of the artist and Eleven Rivington

In his first solo show in New York in over a dozen years, Meyer Vaisman's paintings home in on the issues of appropriation, authorship and self-reference that he pursued in New York in the early 1980s. Then he was fresh from Caracas, his birthplace, and in his early 20s but already quite prominent as a partner in International With Monument, the hot East Village gallery that gave Jeff Koons his breakthrough exhibition, and as a member of the short-lived Neo-Geo trend, showing at galleries like Sonnabend and Jay Gorney Modern Art.

Mr. Vaisman, who now lives in Barcelona, always favored mechanical reproduction and existing imagery. His early canvases were printed with blown-up canvas-weave patterns in black and white and sometimes topped with additional canvases printed with his portrait drawn by a boardwalk caricaturist.

In his latest efforts, he hews more closely to these works than ever, which turns out to be a good idea. His surface of choice is now plywood panel printed with plywood grain, with stretchers attached to the front, not the back. But in keeping with the Orthodox version of Judaism that he began to follow after leaving New York in 2000, he avoids images. His main motifs are signatures, his and those of other artists.

The best are Op Art-like black-and-white works, printed either positive or negative, that feature a zigzag froth of his repeating signature, which evokes Abstract Expressionist bravura brushwork, seismographic scratchings and crazed bar codes. These are punchier than their 1980s predecessors and more physically assured and elegant. Everything else here is either obvious or undeveloped, most notably several paintings in color that render the signatures of other artists (Cézanne, Twombly, Joan Mitchell, Eva Hesse) in terms of their painting styles. They, too, are illegible, but Mitchell's has the cursive kineticism of the black-and-white works.

Mr. Vaisman's early art was lean and clever. This work is more personal, but still too much on the surface.