

MORGAN LEHMAN

534 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011

Art in America

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Rubens Ghenov

NEW YORK,
at Morgan Lehman

by Julian Kreimer



Rubens Ghenov: *Manhãic Benção, Hojicha* (Morning Blessing, Hojicha), 2016, acrylic on linen, 20 by 16 inches; at Morgan Lehman.

Rubens Ghenov's paintings employ an abstract visual language of controlled spills, color-gradient shapes, and slender lines to conjure the displays of books, objects d'art, and pictures typically found on bookcases in the offices and homes of intellectuals. Where Carol Bove mined post-hippie Northern California with the books, feathers, and rocks in her early shelf-sculptures, Ghenov invokes the cosmopolitan collection of a fictional twentieth-century Spanish poet, Angelico Moranda, in the recent works (all 2016) he exhibited at Morgan Lehman.

Ghenov pours translucent acrylics and inks onto his canvases, creating opaque geometric forms that recall the abstract hallmarks of Concrete art, the avant-garde movement that originated in Brazil, where he was born. *In Silence Fiction, Orchid 1*, matchstick-thin lines separate and frame various parts of the composition: a silhouette head made of a purple-green spill on a lemon-yellow ground, a stack of books in front of a mirror like panel, and white shapes suspended in a box with yellow and black ribbons crinkled around them. The painting is full of small illusions, the *schwindeln* so beloved by Albers: corners sliced into triangles suggest depth, while gradually changing colors-celadon green to white, red to purple-gray, and so on-seem to shift various forms from positive to negative space and back again.

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The show was titled "Accoutrements in Marwa, an Interlude in Sliver," the latter phrase alluding to Ghenov's use of thin, almost vanishing lines. In *Manhaic Bencao, Hojicha* (Morning Blessing, Hojicha), a gradient appears within a long line no wider than a nickel is thick. There's a Japanese feel to work, which demonstrates compositional restraint and features off-key colors creating a puzzle of portals opening and closing, with a tall, skinny triangle near the right edge evoking the widening cone of light cast from a cracked-open door.

Frequently, multilingual puns and poetic fragments are half-legible on rectangles that suggest book spines, as in *Fe de Vento* (Faith of the Wind), where a single rectangle displays the top half of the word *escondido* (hidden) spliced with the bottom half of the word *amanhece* (dawn). In *Somnambulic Telegraph* the neologism *octanalecta* (eighth analects is legible alongside spare abstract forms floating on the broad expanses of clear gessoed linen.

Ghenov has absorbed the poet's mantra that the fewer elements in a work, the more each of them matters. Tiny moves establish the mood of the whole composition of *Juanita*, where black bars across the top and bottom frame a series of overlapping rectangles bounded by slender lines that pop back and forth in pictorial space. The combination of austerity and balance Ghenov achieves in each work feels like an homage to Italian artists Fra Angelico and Giorgio Morandi, both of whom are evoked in the name of his invented poet.

In his artist's statement, Ghenov mentions Clarice Lispector and Fernando Pessoa, two modernist writers from Portuguese-speaking countries. Like them, he welcomes heterogeneous influences in his work. His compositions, for instance, echo those of Tomma Abts, Gordon Moore, and the many other abstract painters who work with shallow relief and refer to modernist design. The influence of Carrie Moyer, Ghenov's teacher at the Rhode Island School of Design, is also evident. Yet Ghenov's ability to balance a powerful sense of nostalgia with an intensely slippery visual effect lends his paintings a distinctive voice.