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# BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

## Matt Kleberg: Trespassing

By Gilles Heno-Coe



Matt Kleberg, *Trespass Against Us*, 2019. Oil stick on canvas, three parts, 66 x 192 inches. Courtesy Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston.

*Matt Kleberg: Trespassing* is the artist's first solo exhibition in New York City in over two years and includes hundreds of new drawings, as well as five new

knockout oil-stick paintings on canvas. As Kleberg explains, these new works can be thought of “as facades, sets, stages, gates...at once invitations and barriers to entry.” Much like his prior work, they evoke classical architectural forms like arches, portals, and niches with scalloped flourishes, as well as more austere modern structures like concrete walls and roadside barriers. Yet Kleberg’s most recent inspiration comes from the 19th century architecture near his Brooklyn Navy Yard studio, from the facades of typical Brooklyn brownstones to the elaborate arched windows and cornices found on Neo-Romanesque warehouses, schools, and churches in this part of the city.

While drawing obvious comparison to Post-war Modernists like Frank Stella or Paul Feeley, Kleberg finds equal inspiration in self-taught figures such as Martín Ramírez and those working outside the legacy of the New York School, like Chicago’s Roger Brown. Besides the obvious fine art lineage—from Baroque architecture to Color Field Painting—that informs Kleberg’s practice, his debt to various folk art and craft traditions cannot be overstated, especially colonial-era Mexican *retablos*, with their elaborately carved frames and vibrant color palettes.

The aesthetic of Kleberg’s new works thus stands, as he suggests, “somewhere between the brownstone and the altarpiece.” Kleberg readily admits that while he started as a “figurative painter,” he eventually dispensed with the figures altogether, so that his “altars” now stand empty, having shifted emphasis to the vessel itself: the framing, decorations, and protective covertures. Kleberg intuitively realized that the opposition of form and content is a false binary, as are the supposedly antagonistic relationships between sensation and thought, figuration and abstraction, and perhaps even the sacred and the secular. As the artist stated in 2018, “Through my work, I also try to break down the dichotomy between the Lofty and the Mundane. There is no dualism, they are made of the same stuff.”

The latent religious connotations of Kleberg’s work are made manifest by the title of exhibition’s show-stopper, *Trespass Against Us* (2019), which alludes to the Lord’s Prayer. This work—a three-panel oil-stick painting composed of horizontally-striped rectangular canvases flanking a central archway—elegantly commands an entire wall. Executed in white, gray, and matte-black, *Trespass* is the least chromatic work in the show, but it is nonetheless the most seductive. More than Kleberg’s other offerings, it offers an oddly convincing illusion of space within (or beyond) its central portal. This effect is owed to the simple addition of a light gray band—optically perceived as a “shadow”—hugging the right side of the central arch’s interior.

The show’s other highlight, *Blind Arcade (Pure Compression)* (2019), which evokes a series of arched clerestory windows, is inspired by a building located a mere stone’s throw from Kleberg’s studio. Like *Trespass Against Us*, it is also

composed of multiple panels, in this case hung with a few inches between them and similarly painted with illusionistic shadows suggesting a virtual “interior” space. On closer inspection, however, the painted canvas reveals itself as increasingly obdurate and delicately textured. This materiality is palpably underscored by the thickness of the stretcher-bars, which lends the work a pseudo-sculptural presence, enough to cast actual (as opposed to merely illusionistic) shadows. Kleberg’s deliberate, painstaking application of up to eight layers of gently-compressed oil-stick in various colors produces a scintillating surface effect, resolving into a grayish-mauve when viewed from a distance, while closer up revealing passages of alizarin, yellow, and maroon.

This material practice underscores Kleberg’s dedication to *process*, which is as important to him as any final product. Kleberg’s gauzy veils are, for example, practically the antithesis of Richard Serra’s vigorous scrawls, despite their shared preference for oil-stick. Kleberg’s well-honed sensitivity to color and layering is also manifested in *Out the Wilderness (Scaffold Askew)* (2019), a large cadmium orange and cream-colored canvas evocative of an arched Greek proscenium with parted drapes, which is hemmed in by hundreds of related drawings. This juxtaposition emphasizes the strong overlap between drawing and painting in Kleberg’s practice. Each work thus seems, as Kleberg puts it, “less precious,” neither the origin or culmination of a particular idea or motif, but rather one among many overlapping and intersecting strands.

Kleberg’s new series comes off, paradoxically, as both exuberant and tranquil. It is materially rich and chromatically vibrant, but also contemplative and spare, at times eliciting an aura of something sacred. This body of work, however, is never prescriptive or dogmatic. The new paintings and drawings included here do not seem to “speak” to viewers as much as they “beckon,” inviting a second, perhaps closer, look. Ultimately, the interplay between tenacious materiality and subtle illusion that we find on display demands this kind of sustained attention.