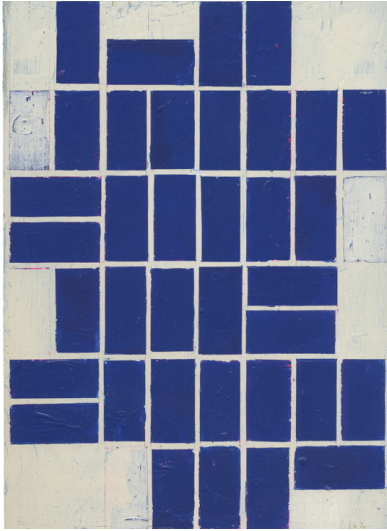


Alain Biltreyst

Jack Hanley Gallery



Alain Biltreyst, *Untitled*, 2014, acylic on plywood, 10.25 x 7.5"

Biltreyst's solo show this past spring was called "Geo Land," as if inviting us into a realm of pure shape and color, a utopia of abstraction along the lines of what the *Bauhaus*ers might have imagined. The exhibition, the Brussels-based artist's first in New York, comprised twenty-seven small vertical paintings on wood, each more or less the size of a hardcover book, hung in single file along the gallery walls. Across the works, the basic building blocks of line and shape, in bright colors and snappy blacks, are deployed in a variety of ways: We find a stack of thick diagonal black stripes with a single horizontal stripe at the bottom; the delicate intersection of a blue parallelogram and a rectangle forming triangles and additional rectangles in the negative space; light-blue lines of varying thickness arranged to form a rectangle. Biltreyst has said that he wants the work to be "as simple and poetic as possible," as indeed they seem.

But even pure abstraction is contaminated by the impurity of the people who encounter it, who cannot help but bring it to the messiness of context, their own preconceptions or associative inclinations. It is possible—perhaps inevitable—that we might understand thick black rectangles as redacted words, a path of rectangles and parallelograms as the rough suggestions of a flow chart or diagram, or white spaces and thick diagonal stripes as holes or banners where text might reside. The liveliness of Biltreyst's work is more Neo-concrete than Concrete, more Lygia Clark than Josef Albers, and the overall sparseness is evocative of a company's brand identity. Biltreyst, a former graphic designer, acknowledges commercial design's influence. On his website and in a book published on the occasion of the exhibition, he presents his own photographs of stripes, lines, shapes, and colors that he has encountered out in the world—on trucks, signs, packaging, fences, etc. These photographs have the air of fieldwork, performed by a botanist seeking out specimens in the wild.

Biltreyst's abstractions are profaned in other ways, too. The sides of his forms are straight but not computer-straight; the background often impinges on what we read as the foreground; and intimations of pentimenti appear throughout, suggesting that he changed his mind in the process of creating a painting. Sometimes a form is painted over with a thin coat of white, as though lazily erased. These imperfections signal distance from computer-generated graphics and industrial fabrications, while they also suggest that such imperfections can also be deemed a style and re-created on demand—that graphic design can feed our human messiness back to us, pretend-

ing to take our side. Alternately invoking dehumanized Modernist design, homespun imperfection, and capitalism's appropriation of the latter, Biltreyst's works explore the question of agency and its subversion. Ultimately, though, as signs that don't seem to want anything from us, these paintings offer small, fierce, cheerful—and poetic and simple—moments of resistance.

-Emily Hall