

Gaylen Gerber

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Wallspace

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From a gray-painted floor that is purely coincidental to a small back room lined with nearly matching gray paper titled “Backdrop,” Gaylen Gerber’s latest gallery show in New York forms a modest, weirdly perfect entity, as well as a meditation on the monochrome. The works on view also succinctly and insouciantly extend other 20th-century artistic concerns, among them the ready-made, appropriation, collaboration and homage as a form of transgression in the vein of Robert Rauschenberg’s “Erased de Kooning Drawing” of 1953.

Mr. Gerber’s preferred form is a kind of fastidious monochrome; the show is anchored by a square white one on which he collaborated with the German painter Heimo Zobernig — who palette-knifed white over Mr. Gerber’s rolled-on gray, effectively erasing it. Around it orbit several other kinds of collaborations, also monochromes; they consist of appropriated artifacts or artworks meticulously painted white or muted shades of brown or gray. They include two small punctured wall reliefs in cast porcelain by the Italian artist Lucio Fontana (from 1968, editions of 75); an ingenious flat-bottomed smoking pipe from 1969 by the Italian designer Joe Colombo and four mid-20th-century African objects: two carved wood masks, a cast bronze three-legged stool and a Yoruba cowrie-shell-covered currency basket.

Conceptual notions about authorship zing around this show, including the artist’s sly reversal of painting’s “support and expression,” since the objects — or supports — are more expressive than the paint. Nonetheless, the work is also extremely perceptual. The carefully applied layers of oil paint, which are more reverential than destructive, bring out details and textures, almost like a form of photography. Together the objects vivify formal contrasts like rough-smooth, open-closed, compressed-attenuated. Four small metal rectangles presenting further shades of gray turn out to be photographs taken by Liz Deschenes of an earlier version of the “Backdrop” piece (which is a great thing, not unlike a poor man’s cork-lined room). Mr. Gerber has evolved into an outstanding artist of the Conceptual-materialist bent. This show offers an exceptionally beautiful immersion in his gentle yet skeptical vision.