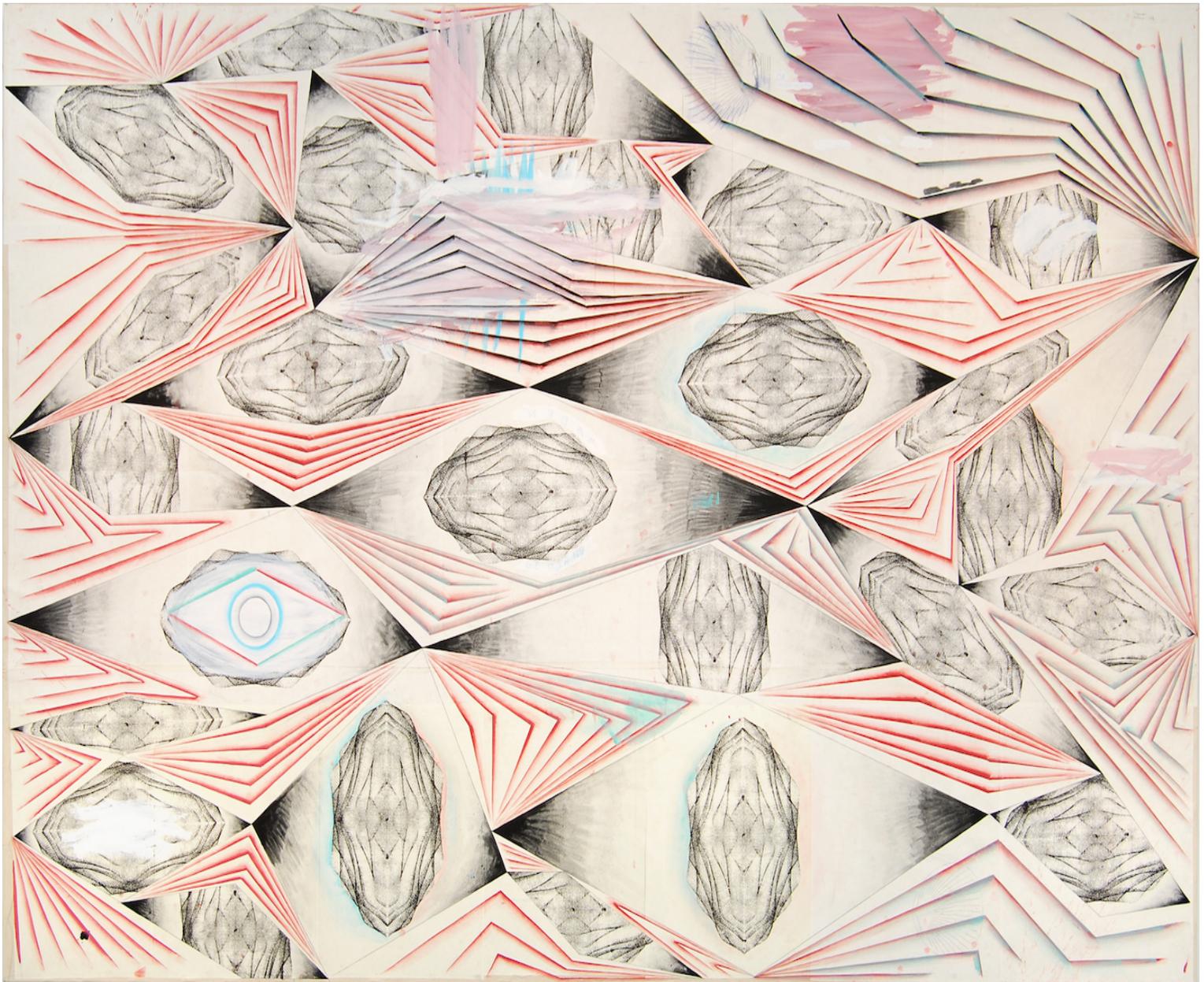


Light Shining through Sharp Edges

by [John Yau](#) on September 25, 2016



Tillman Kaiser, “Maden Gehirne” (2010), oil, egg tempera and screenprint on canvas, 200 x 300 cm (all images courtesy Mitchell Albus Gallery) (click to enlarge)

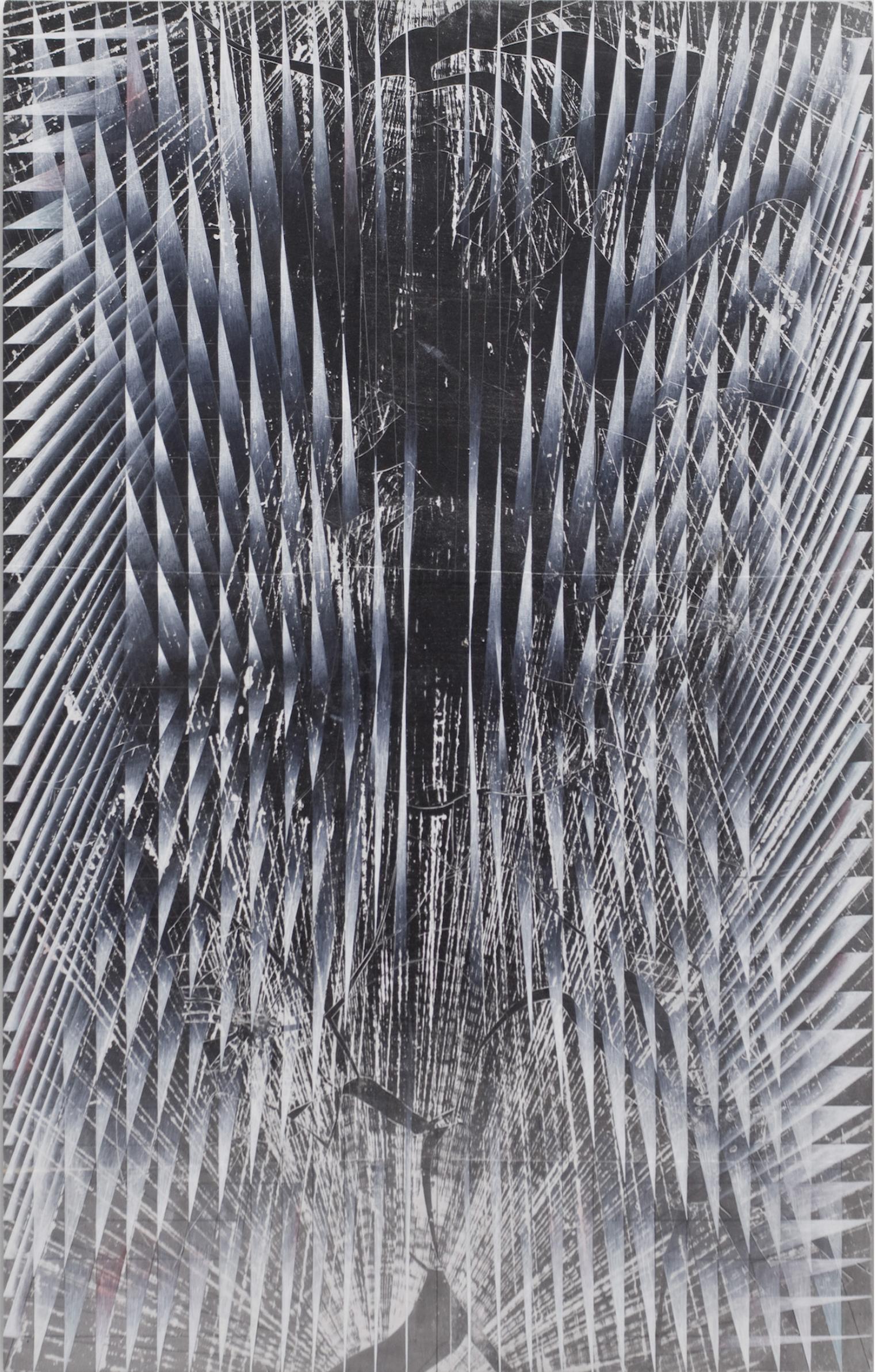
The Austrian painter Tillman Kaiser does something unexpected and frankly welcome. Rather than accept that painting is used up or on life support, Kaiser opens up the discourse through the use of egg tempera (a medium dating back to Egyptian mummy portraits) on photograms (a 20th-century invention) mounted on wood. One thing I appreciate about his approach, which also makes it unforeseen, is that the work is not ironic, nostalgic, or an example of institutional critique — all well-known, over-celebrated moves. If anything, Kaiser does something unfashionable but very much needed in this era of bloated rhetoric and claims of meta-criticality: he comes across as sincere.



Tillman Kaiser, “Spinne” (2010), oil, egg tempera and screenprint on canvas, 135 x 100 cm (click to enlarge)

In [Screaming Swifts: Paintings and a Construction](#), at the Mitchell Algus Gallery (September 7 – October 23, 2016), his first one-person exhibition in New York, Kaiser employs a straightforward approach, a muted palette of pale magenta, black, and white, and an efficient directness of paint application, fitting a symmetrical form made of sharp-edged planes and triangles tightly within the painting’s physical borders. The form — which ranges from transparent planes in “Amerika” to a severely angled, relief-like structure in “Shrinking Corners” (both 2016) — defines a compressed space or overlays one that is depthless and dusty. Kaiser’s forms are evocative of shapes found in the paintings of František Kupka and Arthur Dove; the designs and architecture of Peter Behrens; and the gothic futurist sets of Fritz Lang’s film, *Metropolis* (1927). They feel neither utopian nor optimistic, nor do they recall a heroic past.

By freeing these forms from their history, at least enough so they don’t come across as ironic or nostalgic, Kaiser is able to infuse them with a contemporary reticence and even mystery. By compressing spiky forms into the veined skin of decalomania, the technique of transferring wet paint onto a surface from a sheet of paper, or sharp-edged transparent planes into a granular black ground, Kaiser is able to bring order and violence, symmetry and dissolution, semi-transparent edges and depthlessness into the same visual field. The diamond-shaped opening in the center of “Shrinking Corners” seems to be an old-fashioned view of outer space — something from a 1950s science fiction film. And yet, it doesn’t feel like a backward glance, but rather a recognition of an impasse, that there is no clear route to the future as everything seems to be crumbling or decaying around us.



Tillman Kaiser, "Amerika" (2016), egg tempera on photogram on wood, 90 x 70 cm

Kaiser's sharp-edged, transparent planes feel shattered; something powerful and invisible has

struck, and the planes are shooting outward or tumbling down. What do we do if there is no plane left on which to make a mark? By dissolving the boundaries between painting and photography, essentially rendering the distinction moot, Kaiser advances further possibilities for the collective project of painting, which never reached a dead end in the 1960s, as many critics then claimed, superseded by such production line techniques as silkscreen.



Tillman Kaiser, “Screaming Swifts and Broken Glass” (2016), egg tempera on photogram on wood, 90 x 70cm (click to enlarge)

Even so, in “*Maden Gehirne*” (2010), the largest painting in the exhibition, Kaiser used silkscreen to repeat an abstract watermark, the kind employed to discourage counterfeiting. Over this field of watermarks, he has laid various, sharp-edged geometric shapes made of stepped planes, the edges painted a fading red to suggest drop shadows. Kaiser’s shapes are reminiscent of paper airplanes and Futurist faceting. The watermarks, nestled inside the openings made by the interlocking, sharply angled planes, become blind eyes peering out of the painting at the viewer. Kaiser underscores this reading by overlaying one of the watermarks with concentric circles inside a rhombus. It is a distant relative of the Masonic eye we see on American currency.

The inclusion of silkscreen on his oil and tempera canvas results in a visual contradiction that suggests painting is still an open and contested field. By incorporating a mark used to deter counterfeiting, Kaiser refuses to submit to the commonplace view that silkscreen and copying (or counterfeiting) are bonded together, that we live in a simulacrum populated solely by copies and counterfeits, that everything is dead. Kaiser’s resistance reminds us that — in contradiction to such institutional authorities as Hal Foster, who claims that our two choices are 1) try to beat them (i.e., institutions and capitalism) and fail, or 2) join them (as Warhol did) — there is a third option, which is to do neither.



Tillman Kaiser, "Ich kaufe mir nur selten etwas neues" (Late at night, I fall asleep) (2016)

“Ich kaufe mir nur selten etwas neues” (“Late at night, I fall asleep,” 2016), with its accordion folds angling sharply from a symmetrical axis, is a shallow wall sculpture constructed out of cardboard, painted white and mounted on wood. Composed of four sections fitted together, each side mirrors the other, top to bottom and left to right. This mirroring, which is found in nearly all the paintings, speaks to the dissolution of the body through repetition. The symmetrical array of shattered, spiky planes underscores the violence of our past and future — that we live between one devastated condition and another — yet the symmetrical, shattered forms are also emblems of the possibility that all is not lost. There is grimness to the beauty of Kaiser’s forms, and beauty in the grimness.

Screaming Swifts: Paintings and a Construction continues at *Mitchell Albus Gallery* (132 Delancey Street, 2nd floor, entrance on Norfolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 23.

Mitchell Albus Gallery **Tillman Kaiser**