Stephanie Buhmann, "Magnus Plessen," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2013.

MAGNUS PLESSEN

by Stephanie Buhmann

GLADSTONE GALLERY | FEBRUARY 15 – MARCH 15, 2012

Born in 1967, Magnus (von) Plessen is approaching mid-career status. Though he did make his name in Germany with an innovative take on figurative painting in the 2000s, a time when the resurgence of this genre became über-publicized, he was never a protagonist in Neo Rauch's Leipzig school. In fact, to be geographically precise, Plessen originally heralds from Hamburg, but lives and works in Berlin.

Magnus Plessen, "Listening to colors," 2011. Oil on canvas. 37 7/8" × 55 1/8". © Magnus Plessen. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels.

If Plessen has followed any particular artist in the past, it must have been Gerhard Richter; Plessen's early works, at least, read as somewhat of a brew of both the master's realist and abstract styles. But then, what German painter of Plessen's generation could escape the influence of Richter's legacy? Despite occasional references, Plessen has worked hard to define his own voice. He has found it in the intermingled forms of abstract gesture, geometric structure, and figurative subject matter. As his work has matured, his expression has become increasingly more natural and fluent.

Plessen's fourth solo exhibition at Gladstone Gallery reveals a sense of continuity. He still adds paint and subtracts it with the help of palette knives and rubber tools, navigating swiftly between positive and negative space. He also continues to contrast clusters of dense information with areas that are spare and at times empty. There is the artist's signature handling of push and pull effects, yet in this exhibition of work, applied with more inherent tension.

Stephanie Buhmann, "Magnus Plessen," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2013.

In the past, Plessen's subjects have ranged from portraits to still lifes and interior spaces. Collage and folk art are frequent references. His palette meanwhile has been equally eclectic, occasionally embracing saturated hues or appearing strictly muted. In the face of this diversity, it is his structural organization of paint that has remained a constant. By now, this grounding force has become the artist's trademark and here, Plessen again does not stray.

His brushwork is tactile and made of several rhythmic, lateral strokes. The resulting patterns provide each composition with an overt architectural quality. Plessen's approach is reminiscent to that of a sculptor, who carves a stone or piece of wood in parallel movements to slowly feel out its forms. His strict adherence to technique is certainly due to aesthetics, but it might also be explained by the fact that Plessen is largely self-taught; he relies on it as his skeleton, his alphabet.

In this installation, Plessen's imagery is largely suggestive. He hints at rather than renders specifics, preferring a touch of mysticism to precise narrative. At Gladstone, he presents two new series of large-scale paintings: one explores the abstracted image of a pregnant woman in a Matisse-inspired manner, the other, sparked by the structural concept of rotary movement. In the case of the latter, Plessen positions the form of a head, for example, at the center of each canvas. As the compositional core, it becomes a metaphor for a human nucleus, shiftless and steady in the midst of cosmic confusion. Both series embody contemplations of life and its various aspects such as fertility, birth, growth, beginnings, and endings; areas where the subtraction of paint has left faint ghost images become metaphoric for loss and renewal, while denser sections allude to growth. Such appear to be existential ponderences and they are expressed well through Plessen's signature style.

Stephanie Buhmann, "Magnus Plessen," *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2013.

Technically and in terms of content, Plessen is evenly interested in what was there, what is, and what has vanished from view. His focus is time and his ambition is to find a solution for how to capture the passage of this temporal quality in paint. He succeeds in those compositions that are less complex. It is when his paintings become too cluttered that they begin to lack immediacy and impact. Plessen's style demands clarity of thought. When at his best—and we do find ample evidence of this at Gladstone—he delivers this idea well: direct, poetically abstracted, and in a visual form that is all his own.

Lisa Turvey, "Magnus Plessen," *Artforum*, November 2009, p. 228.

NEW YORK

Magnus Plessen
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Almost all of the nine canvases in Magnus Plessen's recent show include the form of a hand, frequently in multiple: a squat, glovelike shape, often truncated at the knuckles or just before the wrist, usually out of proportion to and floating free from the paintings' human figures. As symbols go, it's an obvious one, represented in accordingly clumsy fashion as a simplified glyph of unmodulated color or in white silhouette. *Spiel* (Game), 2009, pictures two people seated at a small table on which are stacked three such palms, proposing the body part as food, game, or currency.

Magnus Plessen, ***Station 3*****, 2009,** oil on canvas, 45⅝ x 39¼".

The press release ties the motif to the artist's tactile sensibilities, but more tempting is to read the palms as self-surrogates, notches of presence that intimate just what, to put it baldly, he can accomplish with his hands—an allegory that, in its very unsophistication, throws his considerable skill into relief. Now midcareer, Plessen has talent to burn. His undertaking is unremarkable in summary: easel-size oils depicting, to varying degrees of legibility, the genre's time-honored standards (reclining females, riders on horses, domestic interiors). Even his variations on this project seem establishment. The relatively recent annexing of nods to the consumer world, such as a washily rendered Coke can or a collaged cigarette-pack label, is Rauschenberg vintage. And Plessen has a signature *brushstroke*—of how many contemporary painters can this be said? Regular and rectangular, it appears either as a chunky bar, built up and scraped down with a palette knife and applied in horizontal or vertical rows that backdrop form, or as a series of smaller, tapelike dashes, more opaque and generally used for outlines.

From within these confines unfolds an exploration of pictorial space, actual and illusionistic, that feels startlingly fresh in its ambition. *Station 3*, 2009, offers up an almost bewildering technical compendium. A young man's head, his hollow features evoking *Saltimbanques*-era Picasso, emerges from a block of brown louvers whose bottom edge describes one contour of his torso, otherwise delimited by a chain of hands and a stretch of filmy underpainting; elsewhere are sprays of staccato dots, a pileup of pastel ticks, and spectral stretcher-bar traces. Such encyclopedic mark-making could come across as didacticism or ostentation if it weren't assiduously in the service of an inquiry into the disposition of mass on a flat surface. The bands in *Front/Side/Back*, 2009, disavow depth even as the staggered hang of its two component canvases establishes a horizon line, while the progression from *Ohne Titel* (Untitled), 2008, to *Leiter* (Ladder), 2009, in which a similar supine female acquires heft via a wider swath of surrounding brushstrokes and the addition of a ladder to the arrangement, evidences a procedural working-through that is almost poignant in its diligence.

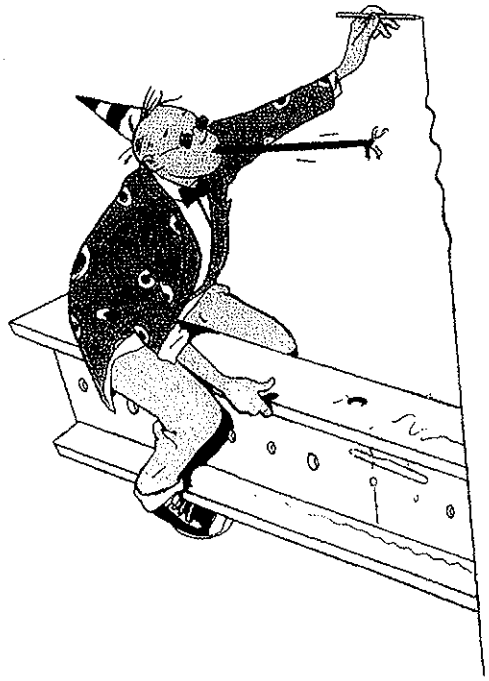
Plessen's scrutiny of the operations of seeing is as self-conscious as his dissection of representational procedures. He seems to be moving away from choked, striated backgrounds in favor of aired-out compositions on expansive white grounds whose outlined forms give themselves up to deciphering less readily; whole areas of *Kondensmilch* (Condensed Milk), 2009, and *Konversation* (Conversation), 2009, for example, are abstract. The painter once noted, in discussing an earlier series of self-portraits, how "empty spaces form at the edge of my field of vision." Indeed, many of his new paintings conjure the blind spot, located at the point where the optic nerve meets the back of the retina, that all humans possess. It is a gap for which our brains compensate naturally, but Plessen's best works incarnate the filling-in process, deftly replicating the complexity of the mechanisms of sight.

—*Lisa Turvey*

"Magnus Plessen: Galleries—Chelsea", *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2008, p. 14

THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 7, 2008



MAGNUS PLESSEN
The scraped brushstrokes in Plessen's paintings leave you grasping for similes: like Picasso's trompe-l'œil wood grain, like the planks in a picket fence, like strips of packing tape. Plessen uses these rough, chunky elements to render blocky figures—men, women, and children who struggle to distinguish themselves from their bland white backgrounds. There's an endearing wackiness to the work, tempered by a Teutonic, formalist rigor. Plessen's work looks right at home in Gladstone, which also shows Carroll Dunham, an American painter similarly obsessed with absence and presence, and with making paintings that are at once slapstick and high-stakes. Through Jan. 12. (515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300.)

Neil, Jonathan T.D., "Reviews Marathon: Chelsea," *ARTreview*, February 2008, p. 75

Art Review:

Special Focus:
REVIEWS MARATHON, NEW YORK

Recently *ArtReview* has been staring at its growing pile of press releases and wondering: 'Is it possible to see (almost) everything?' So this month it forced four NYC reviewers to each review 26 shows in the space of a week in order to see if they would be reduced to gibbering wrecks or provide us with a coherent account of the artworld in all its varied glory. Shooting from the hip (because they were too tired to do anything else), and staring face-to-face with the good, the bad and the ugly, our writers tell you what it's like to be reviews-marathon-men. (PS: The answer's probably no.)

Perhaps it's time to return to painting. As the Louis/Steir pairing I hope made clear, contemporary painting must take very seriously how paint actually makes it onto canvas. (10) MAGNUS PLESSEN possesses one of the more individual methods of doing just this, while at the same time finding the kind of mundane subject matter and imagery that seems to fit his wide, scraping strokes. (Somewhere along the way to this show at Barbara Gladstone, Plessen also lost the 'von' that used to precede his last name; perhaps the process of refining his stroke required some nominal honing as well.) Somewhere, perhaps in reference to Francis Bacon, Gilles Deleuze notes how, for the painter, the canvas is never blank, but is rather always already full of the images and history that accrue to that privileged two-dimensional space. It is the painter's task to scrape away, to 'excavate', all of this sedimentation in order to get at the 'painting' that may be the artist's own. Plessen's work is about as near to a literal translation of this Deleuzian prescription as one might find today. The clotheslined shirts of *Execution* (2006) appear as if they have been peeled apart from the thin, internal layers of the canvas; *Portrait* (2007) looks like a rubbing; *Stage* (2006) reveals its figure through the simple application of a nine-stroke ground.

There must be something about the photographic image that demands this kind of mark. Plessen also works from photographs, and his scraping style was developed, at least in part, as a means of distancing his painting from what we should call the tyranny of the mimetic. (11) KIRA WAGER, Plessen's contemporary from Norway, showing at Rare, has developed a remarkably similar strategy, though the panels that Wager works on are more sympathetic to the scrape of the palette knife than are Plessen's canvases. Wager works much harder to conjure the photographic images from which the paintings get their start, while Plessen's work has swung closer to the pole of illustration (again, the shirts of *Execution* are exemplary here).

Wager has also figured a way to reflect her method into the larger formal structure of her paintings. For example, in *Oslo 1.2* (2007), the facets of Wager's mark find their echo in the grid divisions of the canvas, the 'collaged' panels that divide and interrupt the scenes, dividing the women's heads as if different quadrants had been 'exposed' with different lenses or were drawn from different images altogether. And herein likely lies the distinction between Plessen and Wager: Plessen's method is deeply involved with the materiality of the individual stroke and its limited ability to generate legibility. The image itself still reigns in Wager's work, and her method appears akin to peeling the skin off the face of the world.

Speers Mears, Emily. "Motion Detector," *V Magazine*, Winter 2007, p 72

image

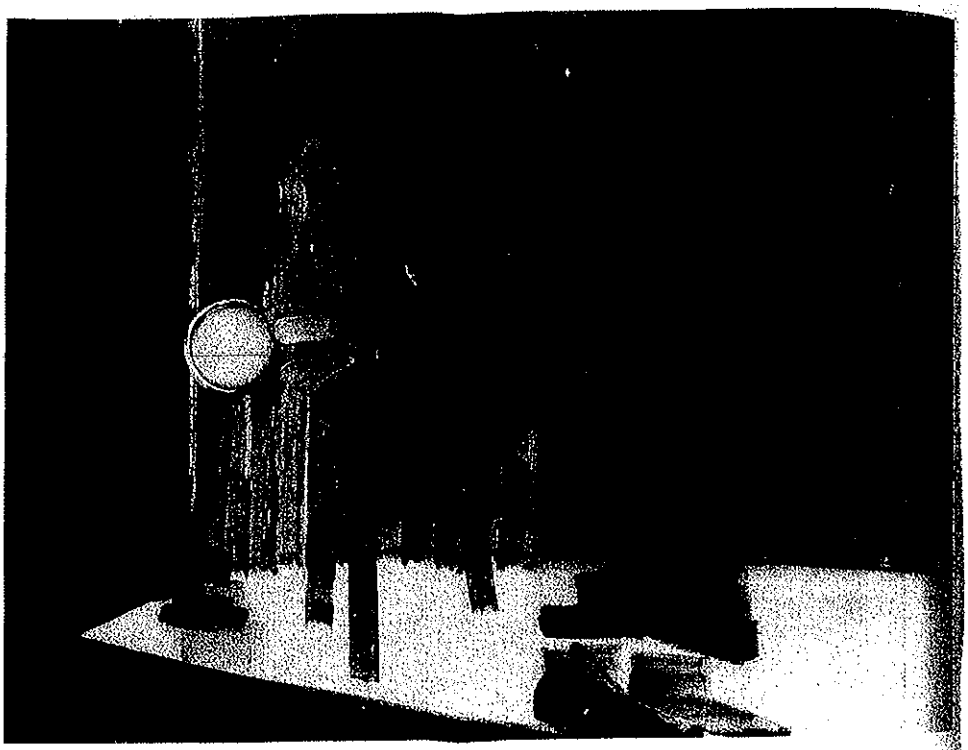
MOTION DETECTOR

GERMAN ARTIST MAGNUS PLESSEN PAINTS AN ESCAPE ROUTE FROM THE DEAD ZONE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Magnus Plessen is on a mission. His aim is to resuscitate the people, places, and things trapped in photographs, which he's going to do with "completely unsentimental" painting. The 40-year-old German artist is actually not a fan of photographs–he sees the "captured" images as imprisoned in time and space, which strips away all life and turns them into nostalgic objects. While the likes of Nick Knight and Elaine Constantine may object to the idea that their photography lacks dynamism, what Plessen is really talking about is the way all photographs refer to a past moment. In order to bring subjects back from the dead, so to speak, Plessen breaks them up into pieces so that they seem almost to become moving images across his canvases.

Plessen often starts with a photograph–although given his de-sentimentalizing urge, he is unsurprisingly cagey about its exact provenance. His subjects are then rendered in striking abstract color schemes in the German artist's trademark blocks, made by simultaneously applying and removing paint with a spatula. Take, for example, the deceptively simple *In and Out of my Shirt* (2007), a painting of a white button-down shirt outlined in red, black, and blue. The shirt's owner appears as a light brown, one-eyed shadow looming around the piece of clothing, which seems to be moving as he writhes either to put it on or to take it off. Whether he is dressing or stripping is entirely unclear. Injecting such a sense of movement into paint recalls the Italian futurists, who welcomed the fast new age of the automobile in their art productions at the beginning of the 20th century.

But, unlike the efforts of the speed-hungry futurists, something slower, lighter, and more elusive lingers in Plessen's paintings–as it does around the artist himself. For one, the futurists never made a painting of a disembodied shirt, or someone reclining in a deck chair (*Garden*, 2007), the thin brown line of the lounger barely discernible among the chunks of green. And they definitely never went in for touches of surrealism: in *Rider* (2004), a jockey in pink silks perches on a wooden horse, which appears to have two heads. The result? "Perhaps," Plessen muses, "an image that leaves the viewer–and also the art object and its creator–much freer." **Emily Speers Mears**



Apartment, 2002. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, NYC

Magnus Plessen's exhibition runs December 1, 2007–January 5, 2008, at Gladstone Gallery, NYC.
For information: www.gladstonegallery.com

Leffingwell, Edward, "Magnus von Plessen," *Art in America*, June/July 2005, pp. 175-6.

Magnus von Plessen at Barbara Gladstone

Magnus von Plessen's paintings propose the value of a subtle, subdued palette, keen eye and sure hand. Composed of brushed layers of oil often scraped through to the canvas, they are to some degree informed by a photographic imagery not readily apparent in the final product. In fact, von Plessen's works are as legible as they are challenging.

Discontinued (all works 2004) has the attractive force of an architectural rendering and is sufficiently large, at roughly 6 by 9 feet, to embrace the viewer in its open field. A structure that resembles the framework of a two-part beach pavilion is more or less centered by a mass of blocks or timbers that lead into and fan out across the canvas. The ground consists of regular, vertical passages scraped down across the painting's expanse like a louvered screen filtering incandescent light.

The paint on the somewhat smaller *Allergie* (Allergy) seems to have been applied in both directions, then scraped with a blade to create an almost liquid tartan effect. The image features a guitarist in the foreground bent over his instrument and an accompanying musician just beyond. Three inexplicable blocks of painterly white that modulate to blue seem to bounce across the picture plane. A far darker self-portrait renders the artist in profile, his head tipped as though to study a mass of papers or a book held in his hands. In addition to the vertical, scraped louvers that appear here in deep and somber palette, a fan of evenly applied bars of paint occupies a lower corner with a staccato, repeated gesture that recalls the procession of Duchamp's descending nude.

Among works on paper of real charm is a small untitled oil depicting a handsome woman in a figured, sleeveless dress who appears to be standing at an unseen mirror, applying makeup. The paper is torn the length of the drawing and then refitted, as though to emphasize a dual world: the portrayed subject and the mirror of her self-regard. The even more reductive three parts of *Rue de Venise* have a similar authority. The first offers a chair, table and lamp floating on a field of white; the second, the open door to a room or an armoire; the third, what may be a daybed. Thus focused, the grace of von Plessen's paint-handling comes directly to the fore. Born in Hamburg in 1967, he has had several solo exhibitions in Europe and, in 2002, appeared at New York's P.S.1. This was his first solo appearance in a U.S. gallery. —*Edward Leffingwell*

Magnus von Plessen: *Allergy*, 2004, oil on canvas, 64¾ by 41½ inches; at Gladstone.

Glueck, Grace, "Magnus von Plessen," *New York Times*, Apr 8, 2005, pp. E4.

Magnus von Plessen

Gladstone Gallery
515 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through April 23

The German artist Magnus von Plessen once told a questioner that he felt paintings viewed too often — as in a blockbuster show — wore out in spots, "peered away" by the gazes of thousands of visitors. In effect, the works developed an "allergy" to excessive viewing.

But his own works, whose subjects are made fragmentary by partial omissions or smothering flurries of brushstrokes, seem to suffer — in reverse — from a similar problem. In his eagerness to suggest the fluxional mood and rapid shifting of perceptions, and to avoid the "literalness" that painting can fall into, he puts down fugitive images (often derived initially from photographs) that are done in by paint or the lack of it.

In the very large work "Rider," depicting a jockey on a horse (or maybe two horses), the animal and its pilot are evoked by blunt, plank-like strokes in shades of brown, but there are parts missing. The fragmentary jockey bounces up in the air from a squarish hole in the horse's back; the geometric figure of the horse itself looks as dull and inanimate as the Trojan horse of Greek legend.

Other paintings touch on individuals or groups. An exception is "Discontinued," a suggestion of a large teetery structure that could summarize his ideas of fleeting perception. Paint, or its strategic omission, trumps imagery, the artist seems to say. Well, O.K. It may explain why what he does convey is so utterly devoid of spirit. *GRACE GLUECK*

"Magnus von Plessen," *Modern Painters*, June 2005, pp. 114.

Magnus von Plessen

Barbara Gladstone Gallery

19 MARCH – 23 APRIL

It is without doubt that Magnus von Plessen has found a signature style. Equally doubtless is that the fairly conventional subject matter of his painting – single and group portraits, horse and rider duos, still lives and interior scenes; all in evidence recently at the artist's first show at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery – are mere motivations for the application of that style's distinct painterly device: a regularized, repeatable and thus highly recognizable brushstroke. The term 'brushstroke' may be a bit misleading, however. Less wholly additive, Von Plessen's marks are more like subtractive scrapes made with palette knives of varying widths, something like an uneasy marriage between Frank Stella's stripes and Lucio Fontana's cuts. Those two artists engaged, with certain rigour, the question of how and what it means to make a mark under the guise of 'painting', and it appears that Von Plessen has similar interests.

Recent commentary on Von Plessen's work has pointed to its radical difference from what one critic has described as the 'decorative, even sugary, quality of much current painting'. That difference derives from Von Plessen's sustained dialogue with photography. Though he paints from photographs, since around 1999 his manipulations have led away from any photorealist approximations and towards painting as a means of resistance to the photographic impulse.

Yet when painting is charged with such a resistance, the temptation to return to an idea of it as that practice which mines the inner precincts of the psyche is often too hard to resist. And so it is with little surprise that one now also reads that Von Plessen's work is deeply 'psychological', that it is productive of its 'own reality', or that it is the 'imagination made physical'. These are old arguments, in vogue in the heyday of painting's triumphant moment in the 50s. Though painting surely did not die in the decades that followed, or at any time thereafter, the romanticism that sustained the arguments for painting as a privileged space of private and transcendent experience certainly did.

That appeals to this ever-present but mythic world of meaning are now getting recycled in pronouncements on Von Plessen's work is unfortunate, but the phenomenon points to two rather pressing questions. Firstly, has Von Plessen's too-easy adoption of a signature style left admirers scrambling for a way to deflect his device's possible superficiality and thus, in turn, its looming deflation? Or, rather, do Von Plessen's canvases present themselves as highly meditative and apparently self-reflexive investigations into his medium's remaining potentials? If the answer to this second question is to be 'yes', then those canvases demand an equivalent level of criticality and a language of analysis that admirers and detractors alike have yet to apply to his work. JTDN

Magnus von Plessen
***Gruppe (Group)*, 2004,**
oil on canvas, 281 x 173 CM
COURTESY BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK
© MAGNUS VON PLESSEN 2004

Edwards, Natasha. "Swimming Against the Tide," *Art Review*, June 2004, p 26.

Swimming against the tide

Natasha Edwards finds Magnus von Plessen creating his own distinct reality

Although Magnus von Plessen started out as a photographer, the works that have propelled this young Berlin-based artist onto the international scene are his paintings. In fact, it is no longer possible to see his photos as they have supposedly been destroyed, but photography still plays an important part in his work. Von Plessen has produced only 50-odd paintings in the five years since he switched to painting – he works slowly, despite the apparent swiftness of his brushstrokes – and this show at the Centre Pompidou offers the first chance to see his work in France (apart from one work already in the collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne) in a hang that has been conceived by the artist himself for Espace 315, the Centre Pompidou's new 315-square-metre space which is devoted to emerging artists (he is sharing it with the young American painter Kristin Baker).

The earliest works in the exhibition date from 1999 and include the intimate portrait *Augustine*, inspired by a photo of a patient treated by the 19th-century French clinician Jean-Martin Charcot. Most of the works, though, date from the past two years, and six were made especially for this show, including two large canvases, *Innen* ('Inside') and *Aussen* ('Outside'), each 173 by 280cm. This is the first time that von Plessen has made work on this scale.

'He swims against the tide of all the current trends of hyperrealism and neo-Pop in painting,' says Christine Macel, the show's curator, who sees in von Plessen's work a non-aesthetic in marked contrast to the decorative, even sugary, quality of much current painting. As Macel observes, 'his work has a classicism that is quite detached from current trends. It is extremely singular and doesn't follow fashion.' It is somehow not surprising that he should have chosen to base three recent portraits, entitled *PC*, on photographs of a self-portrait of Paul Cézanne that was itself painted from a photo. The first *PC* is closely based on the photograph of the self-portrait, but by the third picture Von Plessen's fascination with the disintegration of conventional structure has taken over to produce a painting with its own distinct reality.

Unlike most painters involved in a dialogue with photography, von Plessen is not searching for a form of realism, but rather exploring what distinguishes painting from photography in an attempt to represent a sense of the interior – the psychological – and its intangibility. His work purposefully avoids narrative; many of the paintings are made up of distinct, seemingly isolated elements. Macel describes them as a strange combination of absence and highly structured presence. Although retaining aspects of architectural structure, his interiors – such as *Innen*, which is a sort of deconstructed Romanesque vault – reject perspectival illusion for an internal logic rather than a photographic one.

Marzona, Daniel. "Spacial Pictures/ pictorial spaces." *Tema Celeste.* July/august 2003, pg 46.

BARBARA GLADSTONE GALLERY

515 West 24th Street
New York, New York 10011
Telephone 212 206 9300

spacial pictures/pictorial spaces

Daniel Marzona

Magnus von Plessen initially developed his painterly project within the narrow intellectual limits of the photographic paradigm. In the past four years, however, he has intensively confronted the phenomenology of space. While his work to date appears too heterogeneous to speak of a central position in the numerous *Raumbilder* ("spatial images") present, a contemplation of the work's various spatial representations offers critical insight into the developments and shifts in von Plessen's painting. The early images' small format and the cropped aspect of the represented motifs reveal the relationship of these paintings to photography. What this work initially approaches in medial transfer, and the simultaneous simulation and departure from the photographic, can be illustrated in the *"Nightroom"* paintings.

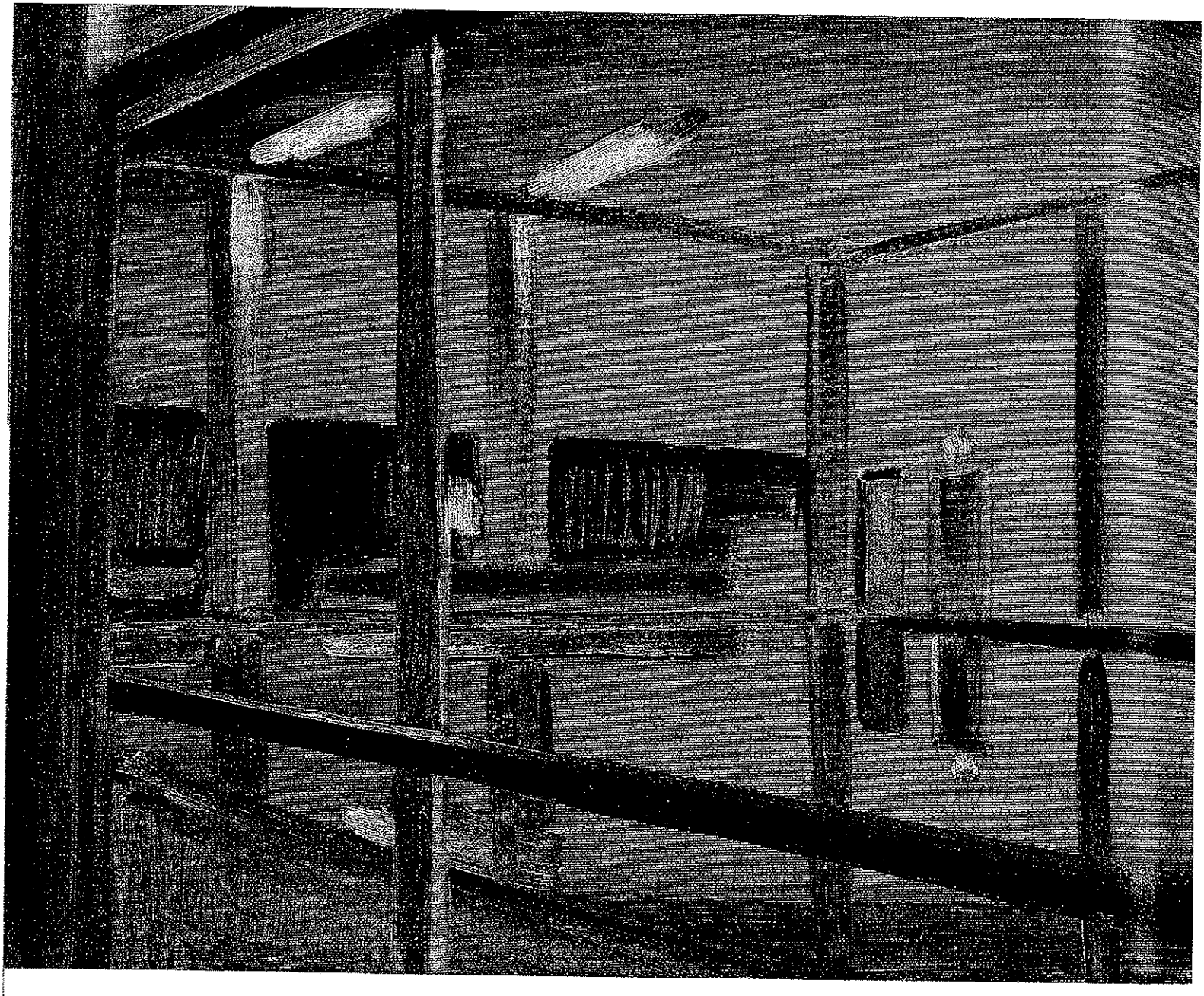
The views of industrial architecture—whether underground garages or warehouses—in these four paintings are formally, thoroughly "photographically" organized. Dimly lit by cold neon lights, the spaces are rendered in a strict central perspective. At first look, *Nightroom I* (1999), for example, appears to be directly recognizable as such. Every brush stroke seems to clearly delineate a spatial element. But a second look at the painting shatters this perception. While the colors defining the pictorial elements are in relational agreement with each other, the tones in themselves are highly unusual—generating an immediately hallucinatory impression of an image that just moments before still seemed plausible. Light extends only in isolated areas in the space, if at all, and acquires material characteristics; it wins a specific weight. Then one recognizes strange reflective effects that oddly blur the boundaries of the depicted space and almost preclude spatial perception. In this way, the representation approaches a measure of uncertainty that suggests the presumption that, here, the painter is less concerned with rendering real space than with visualizing a subjective perception of space.

The painting's appropriation of photographic characteristics proves itself here, as in other images that were created in the same period, as a kind of Trojan horse in which the initial familiarity of the representation is suggested and then deconstructed and estranged through the use of genuinely painterly means. Through this transformative painting process, the photographic motifs are psychologically loaded and revitalized.

A brief look at *Untitled (Attic)* (2003) illustrates how much his work has developed in the past four years in terms of both spatial comprehension and the relationship to photography. *Untitled (Attic)* shows us a space that stretches, turns, and tips into the depths, then finally dissolves into fragments. The painting can no longer be unequivocally associated with the photograph; it defies the conventions of perspective representation too much. The painting also corresponds little to an actual space—even the position of the figure within the pictorial space cannot be clearly determined.

In the *"Nightroom,"* the relationship to photography was established primarily via a kind of "indexical" painting technique and the simultaneous recognition of the classic rules of perspective representation. The paintings become significantly more refined in their surface-color nuances. While brush strokes are generally still visible, they only seldom point to their clearly associative pictorial elements, but rather increasingly form color surfaces. These are, in themselves, astonishingly differentiated; color layers are superimposed, creating an impression of transparency. The tones are consciously contrasted and a game with the most varied possibilities of the medium seems to begin—a game that von Plessen largely avoided in his early works. In a certain respect, the painting here comes into its own as it departs

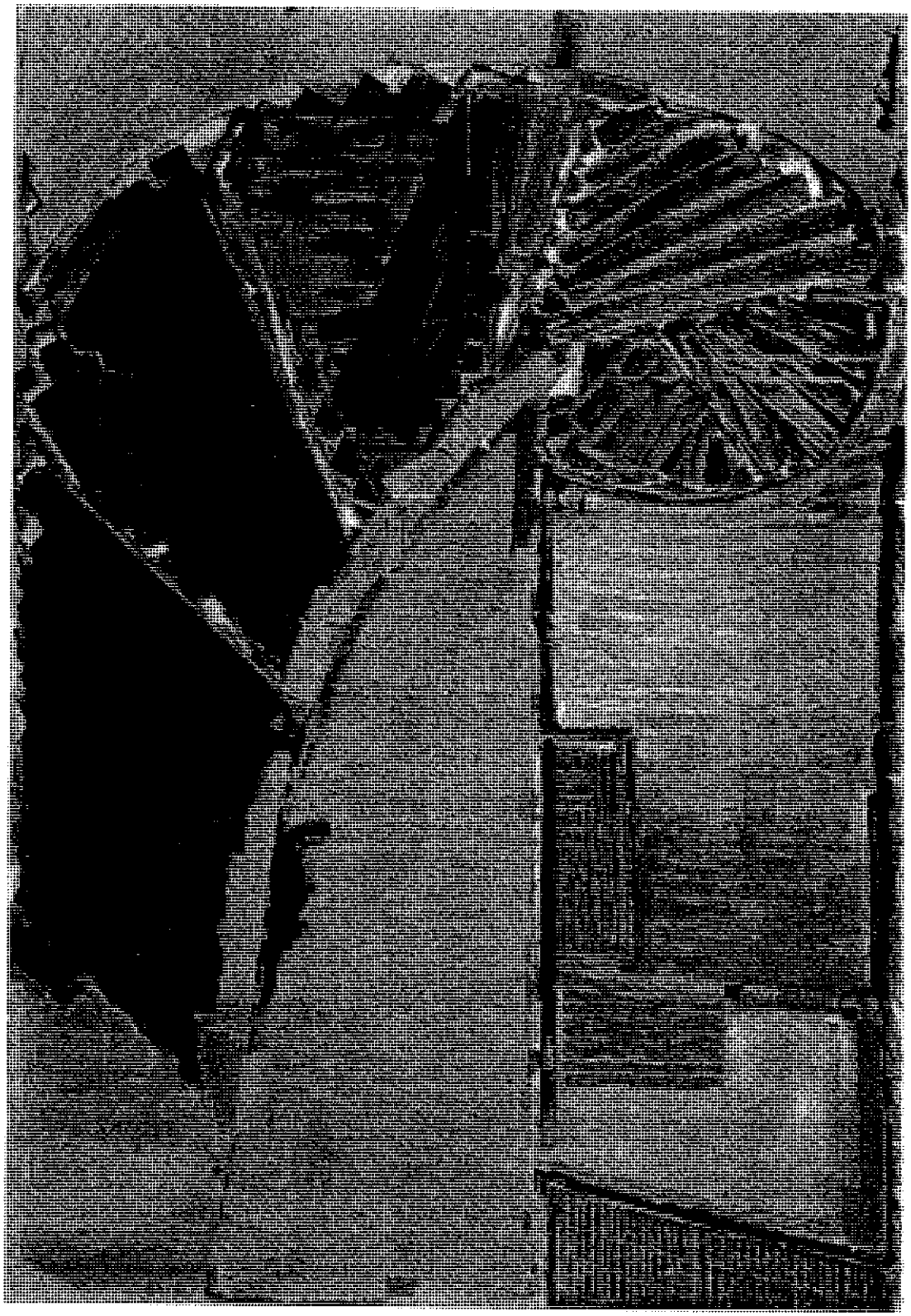
▸ **Magnus von Plessen** *Figure in Space,* 2002, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm. Courtesy Isabella Kacprzak, Berlin.



▲ **Magnus von Plessen** *Nightroom I*, 1999, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm. Courtesy Isabella Kacprzak, Berlin.

▶ **Magnus von Plessen** *Untitled (Staircase)*, 2003, oil on canvas, 280 x 173 cm. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York.

from a discourse that was still generally fruitful in the first two years. This development in no way supersedes an internal logic—even the early works clearly contrast the tradition of photorealistic painting. From the beginning, this painting was less concerned with convergence or even connection to representational modes of photography than with the erosion of the photographic as a symbolic form in the medium of painting. Considered from this petspective, a gradual departure from the photographic matrix hardly seems remarkable. *Figure in Space* (2002) could be considered the key work in this line of development. With a few strokes, the figure and surrounding space are alluded to in a sketch-like way. Here, the iconic paradigm of similarity is no longer overshadowed by photographic indices. The composition appears looser and, therefore, concerned with other problems and references. The relationship between the medial model and painted image are of secondary importance. Here, the relation of spatial tepresentation and the vantage point of the viewer—who is asked to allow the possibility of seeing the pictorial space not from the outside, as usual, but from the inside of the painting—is synthesized. The painting's aesthetic composition forces an initial view starting at the female figure's back and into the pictorial space's undefined depth. But once there, the view jumps unquestioningly back to the painting's surface. The work's fundamental concept is realized in this back-and-fotth movement. For a moment, it seems



as if one has seen the image from the painting's interior—as if the underside of the brush strokes figured a second image that completes the perception of the first.

The format of *Untitled (Staircase)* (2003) signals additional shifts in emphasis. From the outset, the large dimension of the painting physically involves the viewer. Enclosed in an undefined, evidently partially transparent structure, a gigantic spiral staircase plunges into the depths. This downward movement is, however, not universally discernible. The end of the spiral suggests a counterrotating, upward movement of the stairs, whose meaning within the spatial logic of the image does not become readily apparent. In light of the fragmented

▸ **Magnus von Plessen** *7th Between 51st and 52nd Street, 14:30 h*, 2002, oil on canvas, 170 x 260 cm. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York and Isabella Kacprzak, Berlin.

▾ **Magnus von Plessen** *Untitled (Attic)*, 2003, oil on canvas, 125 x 100 cm. Courtesy Mai 36 Gallery, Zurich.

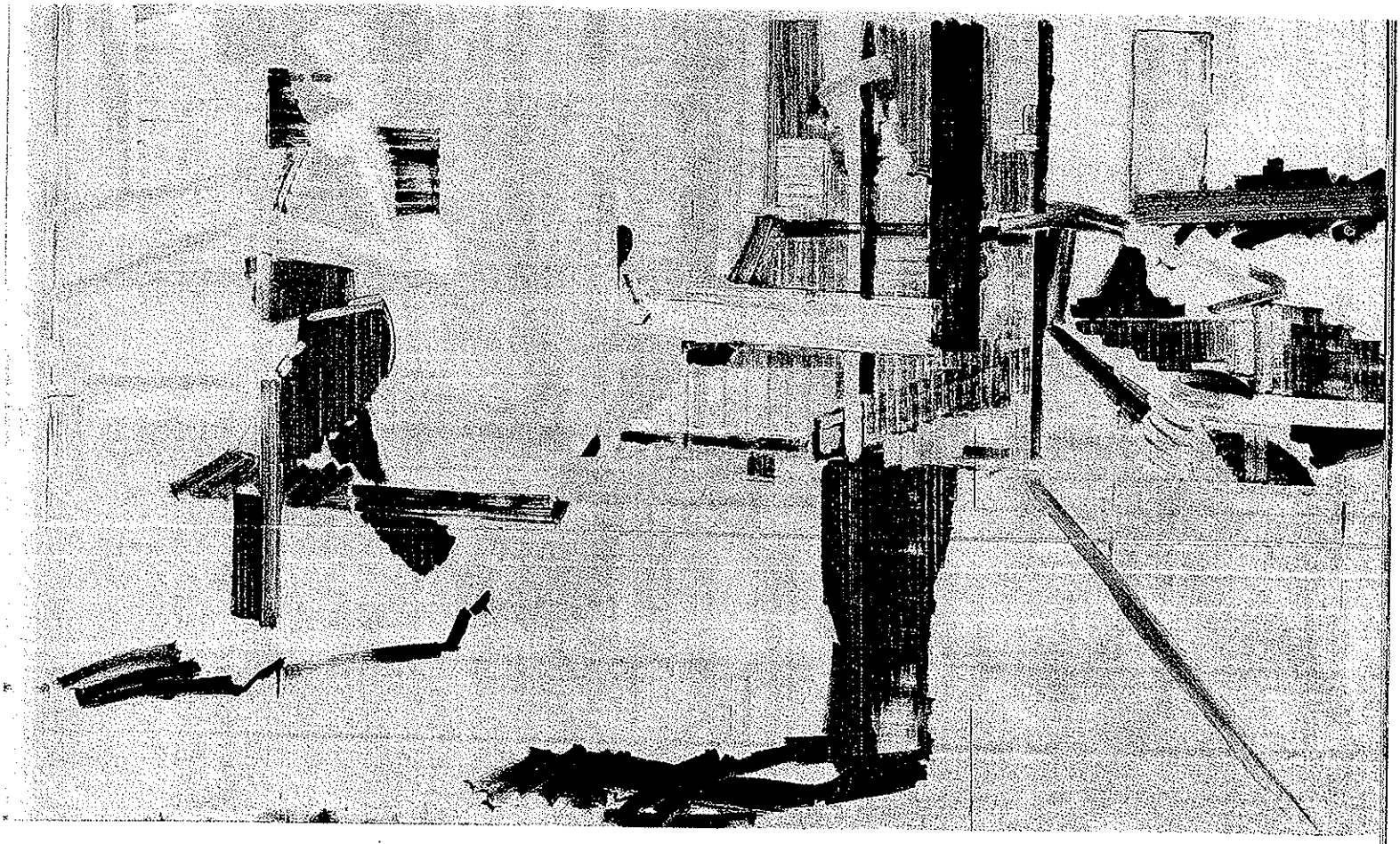


image construction, perhaps it is inappropriate to speak of spatial logic at all. On closer view, the space surrounding the stair—which at first appears to be plausible—begins to dissolve into disconnected surfaces of varying color. Although they are formally very different, the spatial view of *Untitled (Staircase)* is at least conceptually reminiscent of the architectural fantasies of Piranesi. In a similar manner, the observer's eye is refused a clear orientation in the pictorial space. The eye is led to the painting's interior only, once arrived, to jump here and there between various, multiple options. Piranesi's constructions still allowed us a certain aesthetic distance in their feasibility. Von Plessen's stair obeys other principles. The image seems to already contain our view and, like a one-way mirror, does not return it to us.
Subsequently, one must be aware that the consideration of the relationships between pictorial space, figure, and viewpoint proves to be rewarding in understanding von Plessen's painting in the places where we would initially least expect them.
The fascination of the extraordinary portrait *Felicity* (2002), which I have discussed on other occasions, would remain hidden without an analysis of this relationship.
One-hundred-forty-six brush strokes—one painting.
A simple painting—at first. A woman behind glass. Strangely constricted, she looks past us over her shoulder.

Her gaze seems to touch the surface of the painting from within. The figure is perfectly flat, released from any relationship to pictorial depth. Horizontally layered brush strokes reduce her form to a single surface. Three-dimensional volume is only hinted at where her hands, blending into the painting's background, punch a hole through the monochromatic layering of the paint. Yet a kind of dimensionality emerges after more consideration.
Is there, despite the first impression, a pictorial space after all? There is indeed, and it shows that the painting's space is not defined by our view, but rather by the view of the woman represented. A space that can be constructed only from within the canvas. What we perceive is the female figure's own perception of space. The extension of the pictorial space is defined in the distance from the woman's eyes to her shoulder.
Our gaze inevitably penetrates the scene's intimacy.
This aesthetic construction creates a forced proximity to the female figure, who seems robbed of any individuality by the schematic and minimally detailed rendering.
One wants to apologize for coming too close to her, yet is somehow sure that she has already forgiven the intrusion.

Magnus von Plessen was born in 1967 in Hamburg. He lives and works in Berlin.
Translation by Kimberly Bradley.