

## Margins of Tolerance

The works of Richard van der Aa address the fundamentals of painting while questioning its boundaries. They involve making a mark and finding an edge. Each work is a mark, a shape, an object and an image focused on the duality of center and edge.

Central to much abstraction, the figure/ground relationship is always in play. The edge of the carefully yet imprecisely cut support hovers close to the wall yet separates each work from its environment. It initiates our understanding of the work's identity as an object in the world. But the image of the work is then drawn upon itself as an echo lifting it visually and conceptually from the ground of the wall. The width of the outline—in most cases darker than the enclosed center—is fluidly adjusted through the interplay of the hand of the artist and the viscosity of the paint. The overlapping edges of paint separating the darker boundary from the lighter center transform each in a mutual interdependence. The boundary acts as a further delineation of an edge having no particular spatial location. It is neither the wall nor the shape, only a conceptual signifier. But through its physical extent—its thickness—and its ambiguous layering, it becomes a field across which the lighter center spreads itself. Or is it a frame surrounding a space that could be perceived as the wall or, due to its glossy surface, as a reflection of the surrounding environment?

The dichotomy between finding a form from its center—organically growing it from within—and more quickly delineating its edge is an outgrowth of the artist's interest in the works of Franz Kline, Myron Stout and Henri Matisse, but its result moves beyond the aesthetic. The vacillation of one's understanding of the multiple roles of center and edge described herein as well as one's inability to apprehend them simultaneously throws into question the identification of each work as either object or image. Here begins van der Aa's subversive flirting with margins of tolerance.

The works wander at the frontiers of category. *Are they sculpture or painting, art or non-art, image or object?* They push against limits of precision, deviation and definition. Regulated procedures result in irregular appearances.

Due to the chosen materials and processes and the resulting edges, divisions and surfaces, the works play with the intermingling of the hard-edged and the gestural. Though described as gestural, the surfaces are workmanlike, sit comfortably within a geometric format, and are not expressive in the traditional sense. Their lack of a semblance of intended painterly gesture raises questions. *Has the surface been repainted by someone other than the artist?* It has the appearance of having been repainted following years of use, like a road sign never intended for close inspection, meant only to signify. *Or has the surface been hastily cleaned with a soiled rag as though it were a poorly cleaned mirror?* The cause, motivation and intention are unclear and remain unfixed.

Despite such uncertainties, the work is buoyed and complemented by a sense of humor. *Is he pulling my leg with all of this?* If the art of comedy is the well-timed building and release of tension, a teasing sense of humor walks the line between kindness and cruelty with the goal of making the recipients laugh at themselves. There is an elation that comes from floating—no longer being on terra firma—in that moment before the release. Many of van der Aa's titles—*More reasons to be cheerful; The same, but not as this; Soft piece for hard times; Beside myself; Otherwise fine*—reinforce the works' dualities and ambiguities, further enriching the experience.

Richard van der Aa has referred to many of his works as "pictures of paintings"; a metalanguage of painting with which to ponder its own object. Thus, we find ourselves at the margin between the pictorial and the concrete, questioning our comfort with distinctions and categories that enable us to make sense of the world, not with unease but with the pleasure of wonder.

—Daniel G. Hill, October 2016

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