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ART & DESIGN

Carl Ostendarp: 'Blanks'

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Carl Ostendarp's initials appear on the sofa-size canvases in "Blanks," his exhibition at the Elizabeth Dee gallery. Credit Courtesy the Artist and Elizabeth Dee, New York

Art in Review The painter Carl Ostendarp is a master of comic minimalism, an oxymoronic genre. Minimalism is usually immune to humor, which is just what makes it worth teasing.

By **KEN JOHNSON**

Each of Mr. Ostendarp's paintings in this show is a sofa-size canvas painted a single color: a beautiful bright hue somewhere between watermelon and peach, in the case of the five pieces displayed in the front gallery. If that were all there was to them, they'd be no laughing matter.

But, in each case, Mr. Ostendarp has painted near the lower edge the letters C and O — his initials — in a cartoonish style in a medium-dark mauve. The letters are neatly rendered with curvy contours so they look like cutouts from thin fabric or paper floating on gently undulating water. They optically vibrate against the pinkish-orange background, and flickering afterimages of the letters appear to dance around on the overall field. Four other paintings in different but similarly attractive color combinations are in a smaller rear gallery.

What's funny is the collision between the high-minded seriousness of the modernist monochrome and the goofy signature letters. It's like belching in church. There's a more poignant dimension, too. If you read the field as a metaphysical void, à la Barnett Newman and late Rothko, then the letters stand out as cries of existential identity. Getting more down to earth, you might see the initials as a satire of the artist's narcissistic need for recognition, a common art world neurosis from which Mr. Ostendarp, much to his credit, evidently doesn't exempt himself.

*Elizabeth Dee
545 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Sept. 6*

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