

CARL OSTENDARP

MY SCULPTURES ARE MORE DROPPED THAN CAST, MORE DUMB THAN ORGANIC

DAVID CLARKSON

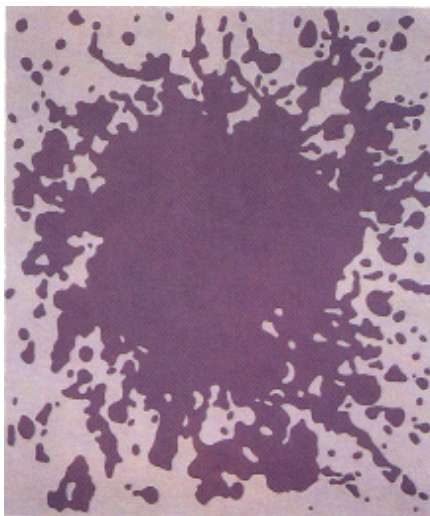
David Clarkson: *Your new paintings seem simultaneously Pop and minimal. The imagery is quite schematic.*

Carl Ostendarp: Abstraction has always been a bit like cartooning, like a dumb show. It's essentializing information in order to make it more readable as opposed to more believable.

DC: *I've heard that the size of your largest paintings is based on Barnett Newman's "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue" series.*

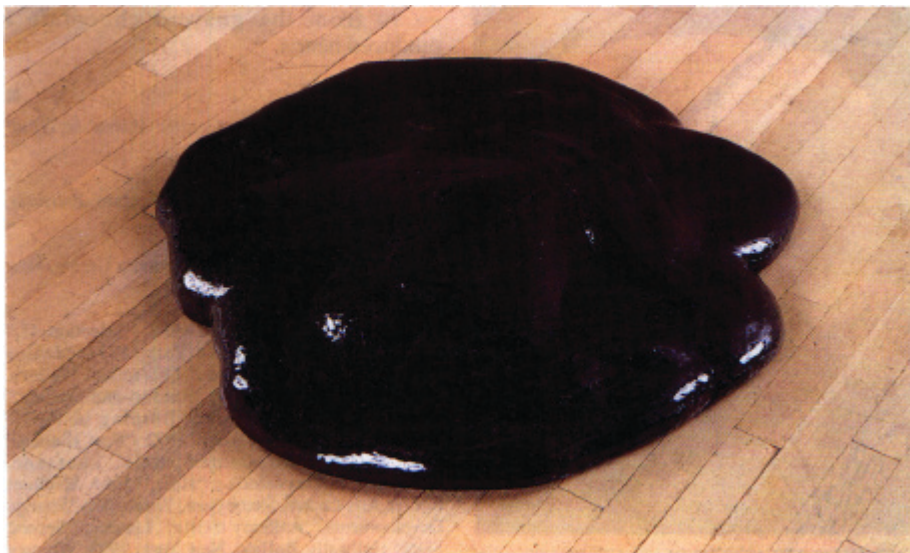
CO: Yeah, I thought they had a peculiar relationship to both Pop and minimalism. They're so blank and flat, I wanted to see what I could do with that. I think what has gotten lost in the painting since then is this issue of scale. I'm interested in this "life size" quality, where the image edge and the object edge are the same, where you're dealing with a real thing in the world. It increases the chances of turning a painting into a site - a place someone might want to go. There's a conflicted sort of empathy that can happen when you sense something has been made in the scale of your experience with it.

DC: *Conflicted empathy?*



FLOOB, 1992. FLASHE ON LINEN. 120 X 120". COURTESY JAY GORNEY MODERN ART, NEW YORK.

CO: It's like the immutable law of the junior high-school lunchroom that says: no joke is funnier than the milk that comes out of somebody's nose when they are laughing at that joke. You're sitting there and your friend becomes this human fountain - becomes an object. It's also why everyone laughs at a horror film when somebody's head gets chopped off. You allow yourself to establish an empathy and then suddenly you're just seeing material and means. That disjunctive experience is why scale is so interesting.



MAKE, 1992. EPOXY ON FOAM URETHANE, 3 X 30 X 30".

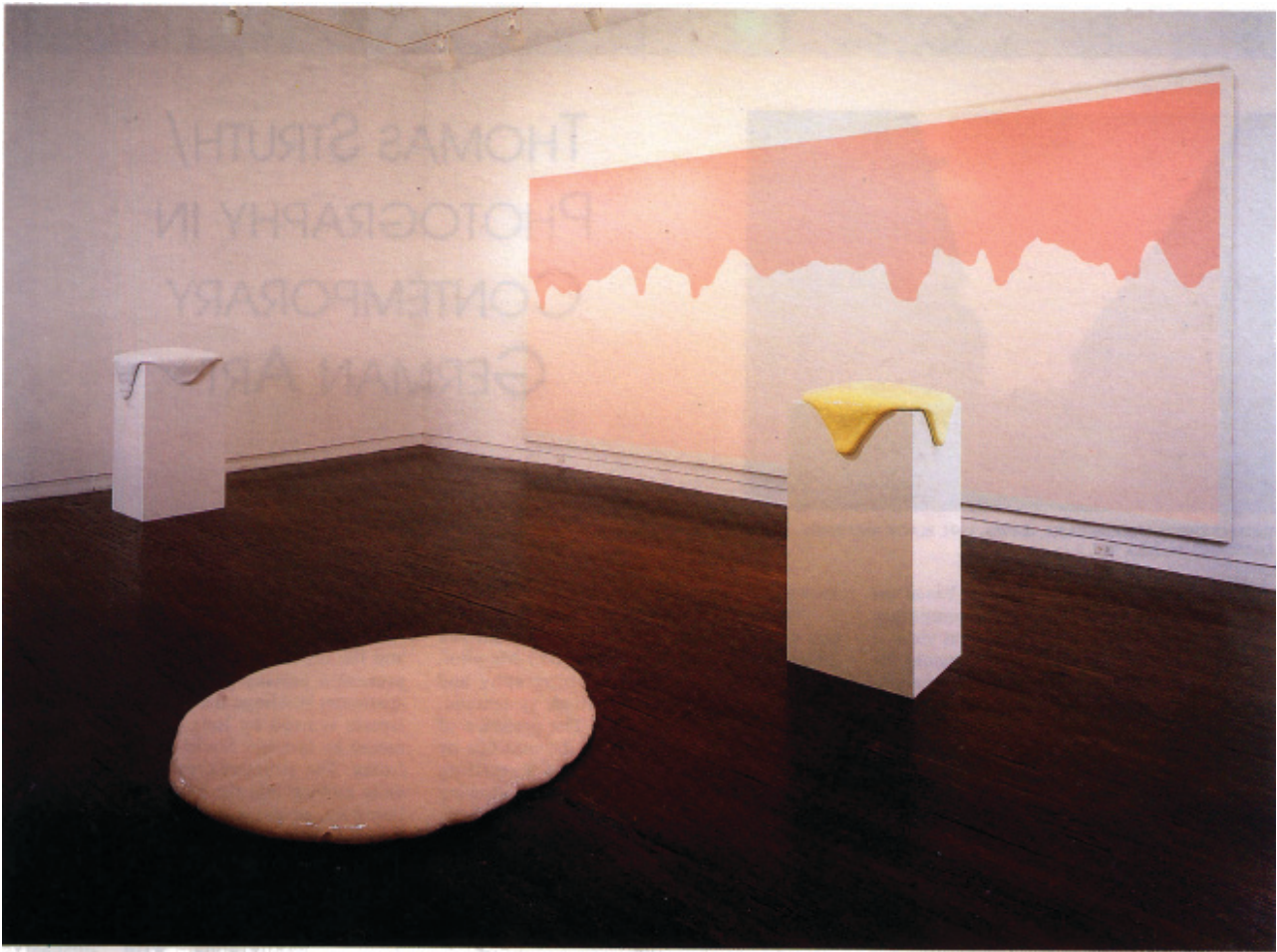
DC: *That sounds like your earlier work. You used form urethane to emphasize the materiality of the representation.*

CO: The foam shapes of those pieces were not exactly representational. They were non-images in a way - more like the evidence of accidents that demonstrated the influence of gravity in their making. The foam material had no "life-size" quality to it. So I was taking this "un-sized" stuff and domesticating it. In a sense, those paintings were about the "law" part of the "laws of chance." The law was to make them heel.

DC: *Compared to the exaggerated physical depth of that work, your new paintings are extremely flat. What caused the change?*

CO: Part of the luxury of the foam was that it did its own drawing. I started to make the flat pieces when I realized that I had access to a kind of drawing where rendering would replace composing. At the time, I was interested in how Lichtenstein's bendy dots could be used to automatically say "grid" or "field." There are two ways of approaching the field. One is conceptual: you gather peripheral information from the left and right. The other is physical: you place yourself in the center the same way that you do, one-on-one, with people. When you screw with the sense of where the center of a painting is, in a way your awareness of the experience of looking is also screwed up. I like the idea of being constantly aware that you are looking and can't escape into catharsis.

DC: *How do your paintings differ from Lichtenstein's critique of gestural abstraction that his "Brushstroke" paintings provide? You both present the "heroic" effects of expressive gestural paint in a codified, mechanical fashion.*



INSTALLATION VIEW AT JAY GORNEY, NEW YORK. L TO R., THING ONE; ANYTHING TO PLEASE; VOOM; & THING TWO.

CO: I don't think that those "ab ex" guys were all that heroic. In many ways, their personal stories sound quite pathetic. More importantly, the rips and spatters in their paintings are not so much representations of heroically intentioned mark making as much as a sort of residual sign of exhaustion - kind of left over or run-off. So I'm not convinced that those Lichtensteins are really about criticality in reference to "ab-ex." A lot of Pop imagery was nostalgic, more about the past than the present. I think of the "Brushstrokes" as a kind of eulogy. Pop's value is in how accepting it was of the world.

DC: *Your color schemes seem somewhat nostalgic to me - a little grayed out, like institutional decor.*

CO: I started off using pale pastel colors to minimize the automatic sense of sculptural relief one got from the foam, to compensate visually for the "beautiful/ grotesque" thing about them. The color was always somewhere between the chemical and the organic. As the work developed, I

started to think about this idea that there was a new kind of nature - like banana flavored candy or cherry soda. The color is never the color of a banana and the flavor is not the flavor of a cherry. It's obviously not organic, but you have to convince yourself that it is in order to eat it. There's something about flavor and appeal that seems important in relation to painting. It's like literalizing the idea of taste. Nature can be seen as anything you suspect might not have self-consciousness. And in a way, you're only certain about yourself.

DC: *Speaking of nature, there's something peculiarly organic and fecund about your new sculptures.*

CO: They're like tired formalist sculptures, more dumb than organic. They're not cast or carved, just sort of dropped. They're like big accidents that are supposed to evoke "makings" of the most basic kind. In one sense, this whole tradition of being alone in the studio messing around with all this goop made from dirt and oil is pretty infantile. So they're about that,

about "making" the same way you "make" when you were toilet trained. Someone says "make" and eventually you did. Then you're proud. And if you got the chance, you'd smear it on the wall, probably trying to draw a picture of what you just made. That's one of the thrills of painting.

DC: *So you're not emptying painting of its metaphysical effects. You think it's banal already.*

CO: Oh, I don't think that's banal at all. Toilet training is an important event that leaves its mark on your life, so to speak. If it seems funny, it's because I think that humor is so important in terms of making meaning. Embarrassment provides a lot of possibilities for painting at this late date. Painting can be like being at a party with a friend who is not behaving well. I think there's something like a misplaced embarrassment at that juncture, between you and someone that you have empathy for and their alienating behavior. That's a pretty abstract feeling - but abstract feelings are what abstract painting is about.