

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

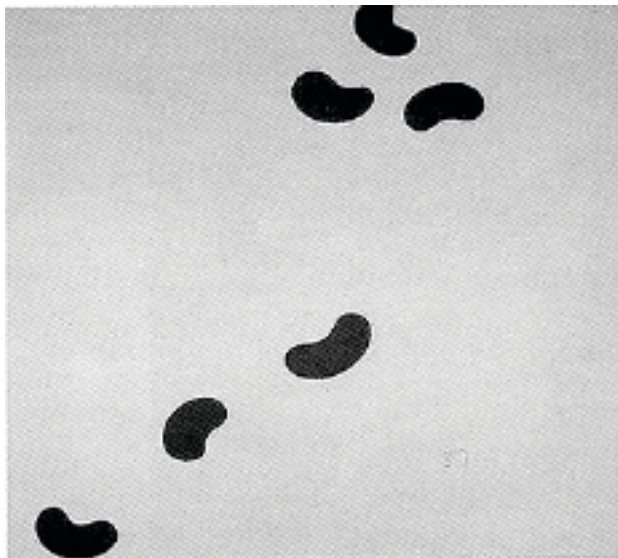
CARL OSTENDARP DEE / GLASOE

More than a decade ago, Carl Ostendarp emerged as a deadpan formalist, with bulging foam reliefs and sculptures that read as mockeries - of the monochrome tradition, of Jules Olitski, of Expressionism. In the mid-'90s, just as he was shifting to a new, cartoony idiom, his career got sidetracked, partly because of a few prominent negative reviews. As his former Yale classmates and drinking buddies (Sean Landers, John Currin, Richard Phillips, Lisa Yuskavage) became marquee names, Ostendarp virtually dropped out of sight.

So this, his first major New York show in seven years, had the feeling of a re-introduction. Though picking up where the cartoon imagery left off, the six paintings on the walls underscored the idea of a new start. Each presented a big, crisp, kid-friendly icon: a pretzel, eggs, juice drops, a scattering of peanuts and beans, and - the sole inedible motif - a pair of scissors (all works 2001). They could fairly be described as neo-Pop still lifes, but the style, with its off-pitch palette and slightly pneumatic contours, owes more to Dr. Seuss or Matt Groening than Ed Ruscha or John Wesley. A pair of fried eggs floating (or cooking?) on a hot puce ground might almost have been lifted straight off a page from *Green Eggs and Ham*.

Ostendarp does have two small children, so presumably there's an autobiographical element at work here. And yet, despite the momoirist, cheery, pre-K spirit of the new paintings, it wasn't clear that they represented a genuine break. In many ways he is up to his old tricks. The pictures are dauntingly lean, stubbornly undernourishing. Their ultraflat surfaces are the tactile equivalent of gouache or silkscreen. Their iconography opens up slowly, if at all (I confess I don't understand the scissors painting). For both better and worse, Ostendarp remains a serenely uningratiating, Barnett Newman-like artist. One of the finest paintings here, *Juicy Juice*, might even be a Newman homage: a trickle of four crimson drops forming a sort of vertical "zip" down the center of the horizontal canvas.

This is exactly the sort of sly, winking art reference that Ostendarp's critics were objecting to years ago. And it points up the way he, like his friend Currin, is a consummate insider artist. At the time when so



Carl Ostendarp, *Beans*, 2001,
acrylic on linen, 68 1/2 x 75 1/4"

many painters are trying to stake a claim to "outsider" status, Currin's and Ostendarp's work does exactly the opposite - it flaunts its art-historical knowingness. Ostendarp's aesthetic is probably more extreme, more mandarin even than Currin's. He's a nuance maven, a humorist who leaves his jokes unspoken. In the peanut and bean images, for instance, one has to ignore a lurking bad pun (they're "field paintings," get it?) to savor the pictures' austere, Zen garden-like, artfully tweaked shape arrangements.

Those arrangements, with their insinuated slow-release pleasures, can be strangely satisfying. At the same time, though, one can't help but feel that something is missing. Currin seems to keep two impulses in play: an ironic, editorial temperament and a libidinous facility. In Ostendarp, the critical intelligence is unchecked, without any raw pictorial appetite to rub up against. It would be a mistake to underestimate his achievement: Compared to fellow Pop Minimalists like Takashi Murakami and Gary Hume, Ostendarp is both sillier and less coy. Still, one looks for his art to warm and complicate itself somehow, to grow more impulsive, to show a hint of recklessness. In that respect, the comic, childlike ambience of this show seemed promising. But it's too early to tell if it represents another Ostendarpian tactical gambit, or the stirrings of real change.

--Alexi Worth