

EMIL MICHAEL KLEIN

CROSS PAINTINGS

MAY 24 - JUNE 25, 2021

Emil Michael Klein's fifth exhibition at Galleria Federico Vavassori presents ten new pieces from the Cross Paintings series, on which the painter has worked since 2019. The cross is both a religious symbol and, as a geometric element, a formal double of the structure of the stretcher frame/support medium. In its extension, it is a proxy for the human being who stands in front of the painting—working on it or looking at it. The coordinate system, too, is a cross—in some works, the transverse bar becomes a horizon, a vanishing line. The staggered arrangement of the lines that constitute the cross fills the pictorial space with a peculiar shimmer that initially eclipses associations of transcendence.

The pictures are exercises in two senses: One, they are meditations on the essence of the cross. They inquire into the (im)possibility of a transformative adaptation of the cross motif that would turn it into a simple pictorial structure, relieved of its symbolic tenor. And two, the pictures were painted after a model, they all follow the same script. The artist primed Belgian linen canvas, a coarse, even weave, with a coat of a glossy acrylic paint applied across the edges so that it shows on the sides. Then he applied the lines, always from the inside out, in compressed oil paints, with the horizontal brushstroke overlaid on the vertical one where they intersect. The brushwork is visible. The lines reiterate the motif as a verb, crossing the canvas and covering it.

In the past, Emil Michael Klein's paintings reflected a process-based approach informed by countervailing tendencies: most of his line pictures are palimpsests, defined by corrections, expansions, overpaintings. In some instances, he reworked a piece again and again, with the underlying, overpainted pictures generating an echo. In the pictures gathered in this show, such resonance is produced by the history of late-modernist abstraction. The artist works with the kind of off-the-shelf paints that the painters of geometric abstraction used. His pictures lay no claim to aesthetic innovation; they are frankly derivative and, as it were, dumbstruck. It is a condition that Klein appears to affirm—indeed, whose implications he explores.

- Arthur Fink