

Merlin Carpenter *Midcareer Paintings*  
*Kunsthalle Bern 19 September – 1 November*

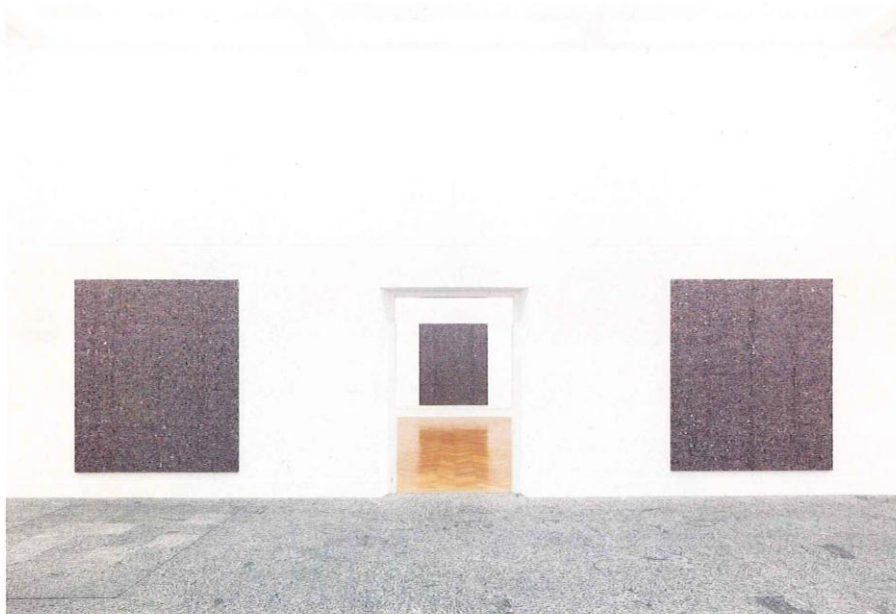
Merlin Carpenter's *Midcareer Paintings* tests how much bunkum an art institution can sustain. Twenty-two of these 'paintings' are displayed in the Kunsthalle Bern's seven galleries; each one is 234 by 198.5 centimetres, each a brownish packing blanket made from recycled fibres mounted on a stretcher. They are named after the seven commercial galleries that the British artist works with, each gallery of the Kunsthalle occupied by one dealer. Thus the entrance features three iterations of *Courtesy Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York* (all works post-dated 2016), the central gallery contains five repetitions of *Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London* and two *Courtesy Formalist Sidewalk Poetry Club, Miami* are relegated to the basement. There's just one more element to the show – according to the work list, the works are not for sale.

Carpenter joins the rear of a century's worth of artists trying to divine what art amounts to and why we look at it; this makes the presentation more than the sum of its meagre parts. The artist has long been illuminating corners that could hide artistic aura to see if the art

establishment and the art market can cope with demystified objects. What makes art art, how is it valued and for whom? In the past Carpenter's Marxist investigation of creative industries has laid bare the networks of influence in the artworld. In this exhibition the focus seems to be price: he has avoided almost any kind of skilled production and used materials with scant intrinsic value, yet by stating that the works are not available, he articulates the possibility of sales – generally invisible in institutional settings – and future value based on external, contextual factors, such as prestige. In truth we know that the art market can cope very well with both demystified and dematerialised art, so Carpenter's is a safe bet; a whiff of the unattainable is likely to make any further works in the series even more liable to speculation.

But what if buying is not on the agenda, and we overlook how the exchange of information – taking place by virtue of this exhibition – is ultimately serving the market? If we imagine the Kunsthalle could be a place apart from

commerce, what does Carpenter offer the visitor? There is the artist's striptease, as one by one he removes the elements of quality or skill that might justify his occupation of this space, then brazens it out when bereft of anything but a concept. The funny thing is that the viewer still plays a part in the exercise. We actualise the naked emperor's parade as we walk through the galleries, looking from afar, from close up, considering the building and the idea. We want to see something and we find it. From a distance, brightly coloured threads make impressionistic strokes on the blanket canvases; close at hand, the dense tumult of woven materials has the look of compressed Abstract Expressionism. Art's durable history of the visible and the invisible is edifice enough to withstand Carpenter's interrogation, and indeed he reaffirms the freedom offered by this method of presenting and looking at pictures. Whether Carpenter can challenge how art is exchanged – and whether an artist who works with seven galleries really wants to – is another question. *Aoife Rosenmeyer*



*Midcareer Paintings*, 2015 (installation view).  
Photo: Gunnar Meier. Courtesy the artist