

Ad Astra

by Andrew Berardini

DAVID VON SCHLEGELL

David von Schlegell

China Art Objects Gallery

6086 Comey Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90034

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I'm not sure that anything ever looks like the thing you're supposed to be looking at.

Looking at the paintings of David von Schlegell (1920-1992) I know I can't be seeing what he saw, though there is no way truly to be sure. Monochromes that fade from corner to corner along a diagonal crest with ragged edges of picture plane pooled with paint, sometimes edged with warm grain of smooth wood, the paintings look nothing like paintings to me, but other much stranger sights.

They are sci-fi windows, the cosmic vista outside a space module plunging through Venusian clouds or skimming the surface of a twilight Jupiter. They appear as lost film leaders cut from strange movies seething with occult intentions, finally exposed to chemical processes that bring out their secret colors even though their true story remains arcane. They are topographies for unknown deserts, the colored sands smoothed by a steady wind. Though one could say von Schlegell fingers the segue from Modernism to Minimalism, I prefer these paintings stripped of context, strange colors from a strange place, not process or form or material but grey over violet, red over blue, blue over red, each with its own unknown story. I prefer the freedom to guess at what this soft but impenetrable color could mean.

These works bear facile resemblance to a rash of paintings coming out of New York by young men in their twenties, and a rash of photographs coming out of everywhere by youngish men and women of numerous ages, but they are neither. They are monochromes from the early 90s by a sculptor in his early 70s, though the surface similarities give them an imprimatur of contemporaneity, of looking prescient rather than retro.

Known primarily for his abstract sculptures in his lifetime (as well as having served a long career as the director of sculpture at the Yale art school), the artist has a few maquettes in the gallery from his numerous public art commissions as a nod to the primary sculptural thrust of his career. The maquette's simple materials possess a simple charm, which makes one wish they'd never become big public art works, where their absence of adornment and clean lines could make them feel oppressive or worse render them unseen in busy landscapes.

But even they, these simple maquettes, hint at the possibilities of new materials, a vision for what could be, and with a pilot's memorial and a series of simple, graceful aluminum birds hung over the gallery, a reverence for the unlikely and beautiful act of flight.

—Andrew Berardini

David von Schlegell, *Grey Towards Violet (sic)*, 1991, Oil, Polyur on Wood Panel, 48 x 48 inches (121.9 x 121.9 cm). Courtesy China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles.

Posted by Andrew Berardini on 1/31

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