



CONTEMPORARY CURRENTS

## S|2 x SF Presents: Martine Poppe

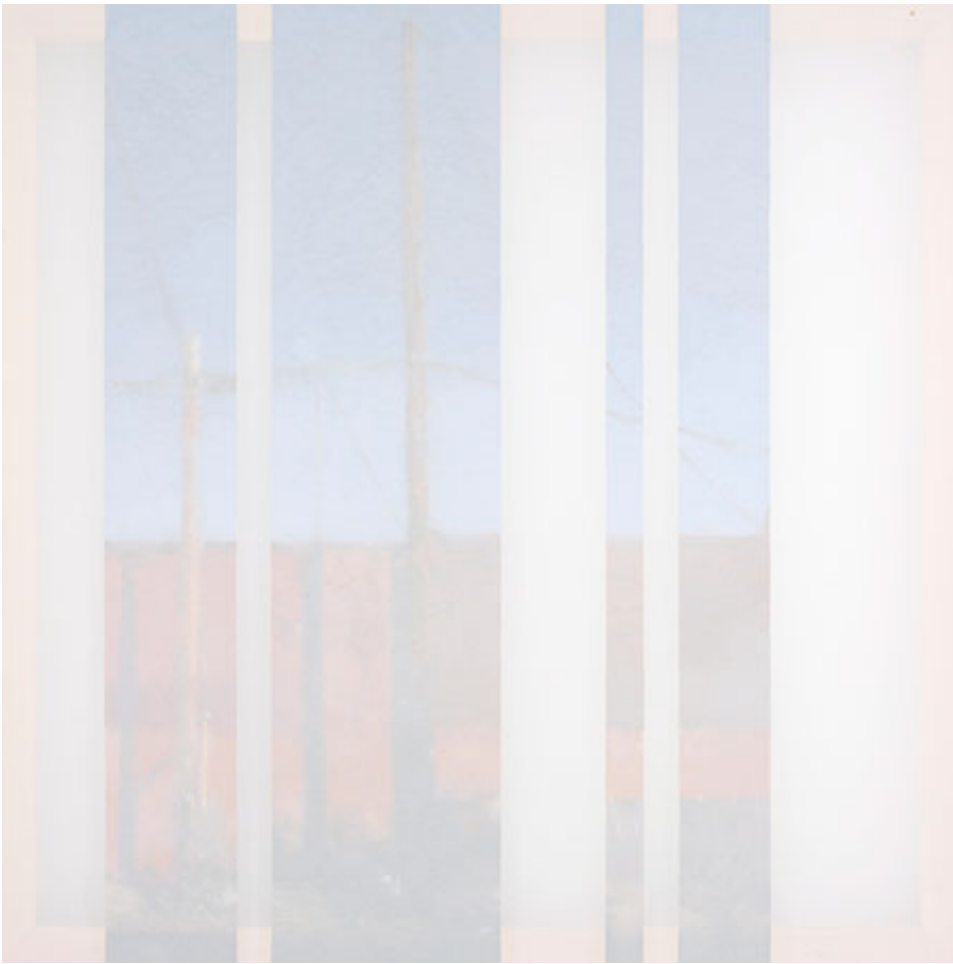
29 OCT 2015

**SAN FRANCISCO** - Martine Poppe was born in 1988 in Oslo, Norway and currently lives and works in London. Poppe's work aims to obscure the inherent relationship between her photography and painting, maintaining a ghostly link between her paintings and their photographic sources. Through a methodical process of creating translucent layers of paint, Poppe develops a visual balance between the simultaneously recognizable and distant content of her paintings.

**These paintings were made while you were living and working in LA, how did the West Coast environment influence these paintings?**

Making a show for Norway was quite straightforward in comparison to working in the US. Like most people with access to entertainment, I have been raised on American cultural export and knew both too much and too little. Growing up with parents who worked and a key to the house, American entertainment was my nanny. In fact, I think it is how most Norwegians learn English.

Since Los Angeles is at the heart of that industry, I have always subconsciously considered its aesthetics to be the language of lens-based entertainment. That made the opportunity to engage with that initial, very peculiar response I had to LA quite fruitful as a starting point for my paintings. I spent several days exploring and identifying the things that prompted the sensation of recognition I felt almost constantly. It was a wonderful experience! Everything excited me, and that feeling is reflected in the work. The resulting paintings are more colourful and have developed a different kind of energy, which I plan to explore further in future.



Martine Poppe, *16.33 07.10.15.*, 2015. Price upon request.

**How do you find your work changes based on the city you're working in?**

It changes a great deal, especially in terms of the photographic subjects and language I engage with. Lately, I've increasingly begun to engage with the narrative possibilities of working within geographically specific frameworks. Unraveling new places with their own peculiarities is a great way to challenge my practice, so I begin each project by travelling.

The first set of works I created entirely with this approach was for *50% Grå* (*50% Grey* in English), my first Norwegian solo show. It opened two days before I left for LA. Since I make a point of watching the Norwegian news every day, I felt it was important to acknowledge the location's history and current political issues. Each exhibition is to me an opportunity to make smaller partial statements and hints that as a whole carries a more nuanced point for debate. The geographically specific iconography places the work within a framework of references that hints at an interpretation, without compromising the viewer's ownership over the discoveries he or she may make.

**Can you speak about the source imagery for these paintings?**

I gathered images of guns, the American flag, cars, lifeguard huts, police, and of course palm trees. A lot of it is commonplace in LA, but to me they had an indefinable quality of somehow being both familiar and alien. I think 'iconic' was the word I was working from. Collecting them was like holding up a mirror of not just LA, but also to myself.

**Cacti appear in these paintings, what is the story behind them?**

After a while in LA, I began to adopt local concerns. I spoke to and photographed people who slept on the beach and I worried about using too much water – and this is how I eventually gravitated toward images of cacti. Iconographically they work well, but they didn't really capture my attention until I travelled to Baltimore for a friend's wedding and met a fellow bridesmaid, an actress from LA. During a drive through the bride's neighborhood, I noticed her concern whilst she stared at the foliage. Everything in that area of Baltimore was extremely green! Having seen enough luscious lawns being watered in LA, I asked her if the greenery made her think of the California drought too. She told me that her family in LA are tearing down their non-indigenous plants and replacing them with cacti, so that they wouldn't need to water their garden as much. After that, I found them wonderfully symbolic.



Martine Poppe, *14.08 05.23.2015, 2015*. Price upon request.

**How are the paintings in this exhibition made, can you explain your process? How do you achieve the sort of ghostly affect in these paintings?**

My current work derives from a series that I began in 2013 called *Analogical Change*. The title refers to a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when new words or linguistic elements are invented, based on the use or misuse of existing systems – for instance, if one were to start saying 'gooses' rather than 'geese'. As a title, *Analogical Change* references my approach to painting from photographs.

This approach came about after I had visited the film set *A Thousand Times Goodnight*, where they needed some simple sketches of the cast to use as a prop. One of the photographs I took in order to make those was of Juliette Binoche playing dead. When I returned to London and an imminent exhibition deadline, I was very excited about that image. Photography allowed me a certain amount of distance from the pressure and frustration I felt towards making painterly gestures and inventions. However, unlike painting, in the medium of photography one does not necessarily have complete copyright over one's own work.

With that in mind, I needed a way to bridge the gap between the two. The first time I reproduced a photograph I didn't think it would work, because each brush mark concealed the information I was working from. Every 'mistake' had to be kept and I was terrified. That's always a good sign! In the end, it helped me remove everything I discovered to be inessential in my process. The work that resulted was the beginning of the series I made in LA.

I take a selection of my photographs and, before I decide which 50% of the image to paint, cover them with translucent sailcloth. Sitting in front of a large field of colour, subdued by the sailcloth, I energetically cobble together the most accurate renditions of what I see. The result is a quilt that resolves itself as an image from a distance. Not seeing what I am representing, and not stepping back to look, is wonderfully illicit. I am not outside looking in. I was before I started and I will be again, but during the painting process I set up a situation that allows me to just engage with the activity and the medium. Because I can't make judgments on the shapes within the image, there is no pressure to distort or over-emphasize my presence. I have to trust what I see. In return the process records each gesture, naturally revealing the subjectivity, or the technique, which is necessary to it. The result is a surface that can never be as pristine as it was. Instead it is revealingly mottled with marks tempered by the speed and inherent movement of my hand. The works play on that – they are encounters with a logic that is entirely human and entirely visible because it is possible to judge where the end result differs from the mechanical photographic process they reference.



Martine Poppe, *21.54 05.08.2015*, 2015. Price upon request.

### **What is the relationship between your photography and painting?**

The image is a sparring partner. It challenges me with the allure of the narrative; the painting challenges me with its need to be recognized as an object. The pull of the image is so strong, that from the start I wanted to interrupt it from dominating the painting utterly. In the beginning, that involved making the image smaller than the painting. Now I split its surface into equal halves, beginning with a rectangle that is divided until I have stowed each piece away between the narrative highlights of the photograph. It is a game of balancing the information in the image without rendering it unable to communicate, made possible by the inherent invisibility of the support materials. Like a Rubin's Vase, the painting becomes a representation of an image and an abstract composition, enabling it to encompass several potential ways of viewing it simultaneously.

One of the exciting discoveries about this process was the way the emerging pattern between the photographic and blank stripes, reveal not just aesthetic, rhythmic relationships, but also mathematical correlations that fuse them together. It might have been the first time I enjoyed doing measurements and playing with numbers. The stripes add a three-dimensional element to the work, shifting the focus

between the transparent, pristine quality of the canvas and the sculptural feel of the brush marks, whilst making the void left after the photograph more poignant. It reveals the painting in the so-called failure to achieve full mastery of the mechanical, or digital technique I reference by painting photographs. It is not seamless and impenetrable, but obviously made.

In terms of using representation in my work, I'm intrigued by the narrative possibilities each group of images can create. It is also where I find the work to be most vulnerable, making it a great point of entry for the viewer. The ambiguity, that ghostly effect that results from the process, then draws focus on the material presence of the work, turning the paintings into encounters that cannot be reproduced or mass distributed.

**What is your next (project or) exhibition? What are you currently working on?**

I just finished the START Art Fair at Saatchi Gallery, and am planning to be at the London Art Fair in the new year. These are both with my gallery, Kristin Hjellegjerde, where my next solo show will be in March 2016. Recently, I've also been offered a church for next summer – surprises like that are what make London a great place to work. But I will need to do a lot of thinking before then. Right now I'm planning where to begin and hoping to start by going back to the US for a while!