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Peter Davies Interview

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Peter Davies, Installation view,

courtesy of, Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY

By GREGORY DE LA HABA, JULY 2014

"Throughout the Pacific, and also in Nantucket... and Sag Harbor, you will come across lively sketches of whales and whaling-scenes, graven by the fishermen themselves or Whale-teeth, and other like skrimshander articles, as the whalemens call the numerous little ingenious contrivances they elaborately carve out of the rough material, in their h ocean leisure....and it has cost steady years of steady application.

With the same marvelous patience, and with the same single shark's tooth, of his one poor jack-knife, he will carve you a bit of bone sculpture, not quite as workmanlike, but packed in its mazingness of design, as the Greek savage, Achilles's shield; and full of barbaric spirit and suggestiveness, as the prints of that fine Dutch savage, Albert Durer".

-Ishmael, Moby Dick

The art of scrimshaw came to mind upon confronting, up close, Peter Davies' new paintings for the first time. In fact, the above words from Herman Melville's Moby Dick e from the press release for *INVOCATION*, Peter Davies' last show at The Approach Gallery, London: "Geometric arrangements filled with the pleasing irregularities and im rendered by human intervention, the paintings are an appreciation of time, each mark made a tally of hours to completion." To envision the ancient mariner and the London-l working side-by side, passing a smoke, saying very little while both work away at the laborious and taxing task before them, tallying hours in silent unison, is not a far stretc imagination. Yet the end result, after many months journey to getting there, are oceans apart. For the whaler, he'll leave ship with a few intricately carved relics using the wh products - a bone or tooth- as blank canvas to work his handiwork, a souvenir token from his long journey at sea that he could possibly sell for a few extra quid. Peter Davie other hand, ends with by-products that read more like epic tomes than paintings, monuments to time, and crafted by way of a single-haired brush over fine-tooth canvas and hours.

FUNCTION/RITUAL, Peter Davies first solo show in New York, currently on view at [Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld's](#) project space on East 78th, features 11 abstract monochr works clearly made by a dedicated man with no time to spare.

Gregory de la Haba: There's a visual dichotomy going on in your work: upclose they can fool the eyes and recall, vis-à-vis the retinal affect, Takeshi Murata's not-safe-for-rotating, chrome-colored, molten, rippling blob whose movements were synchronized with flashing strobe lights and showcased during Frieze New York last May with Ratio a mind fuck and total trip, indeed. But then, at the same time, stepping back from your work, they take on a relaxing and meditative beauty like a Tibetan Thangka painting Rothko on a spiritually contemplative level. Talk to me about the dualities inside your mind, any Jekyll and Hyde moments in your life?

Peter Davies: It's important for me that art contains contradictions, and inconsistencies. Like life and human nature. I like for something to be both one thing and its opposite time. With these paintings, I think people can initially walk into the room and think that they're just a group of grey monochrome paintings, and then potentially not realize tl were to inspect them close up they would see the surfaces are made of multiple tiny, repeated black marks and shapes. For me it's as if the paintings refuse to co-operate with audience. Which is absurd given the efforts I have taken in making them. I like that they demand something of the viewer on the one hand but also allow for themselves to be on the other. And I like that you need to see them in the flesh, that they don't photograph well, there's something human about that. In terms of the contradictions and contras

them to be modest but intense, meditative yet aggressive, gentle yet angry, dark but optimistic. I think for an artwork to fulfill me as a viewer it needs a range of complexities allow for a wide scope of interpretations.



Peter Davies, Installation view, i

courtesy of Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY

dlH: Yes, I see that's echoed in the contradiction that exists in the show's title Function/Ritual. Tell me about it.

PD: The idea that Function can suggest a reduced idea of an object, like in Modernism, and yet you can never really reduce something in that way, as when it's art it assumes associations through the way we analyze and interrogate it. The notion for me of Function is almost something mathematical, not spiritual, and yet some of the most austere objects hold the greatest poetry for me. And the idea of Ritual suggests something more esoteric, almost something indulged, and yet the reality of a ritual for me is actually mundane or matter-of-fact. With these paintings I don't want to impose meaning on the viewer or proscribe what they're "about", I want these works to be recipients of projected meaning, to have potential in suggesting an array of interpretations and, hopefully, to offer the viewer an experience in which ideas can generate.

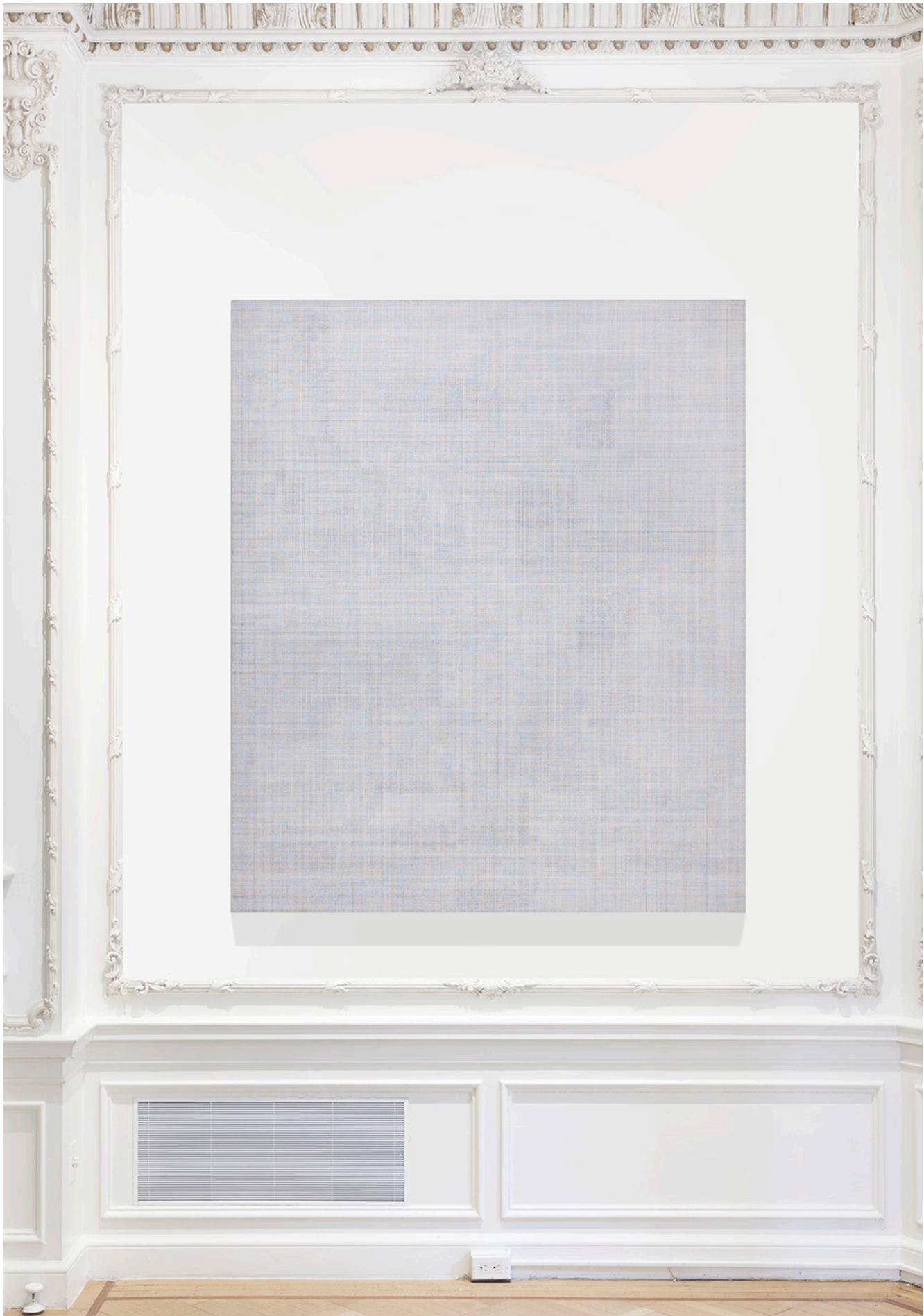
dlH: This wasn't always the case, not with your early 'word' pieces, was it?

PD: True. With my early works I had become very cynical as to where you locate meaning in an artwork, and felt my work had to be "about" something, even if the viewer disagreed that- but I don't think that anymore!

dlH: Well that's good. People don't like being told anything, let alone what to think. But I do feel people are hungrier than ever for ways to enrich their spiritual side; 'to all feel' closer to a spiritual side that paintings like Thangkas are intended: a guide for contemplative experience and as meditation tool to help bring one further down the path enlightenment. Do you wish people be meditative in front your works?

PD: I don't want to impose a type of experience on the viewer. I want to offer something that they can interpret to suit themselves. But I would be very happy if these paintings people an experience that was meditative or contemplative. When I make the paintings the experience is all consuming and I would like them to contain some of that energy, a modest, muted way.





Peter Davies, *Install*

images courtesy of Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY

dlH: Duchamp is quoted as saying: "I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products." Share with us your thoughts on ideas verse the visual product. the end result

subjective versus the objective in idea?

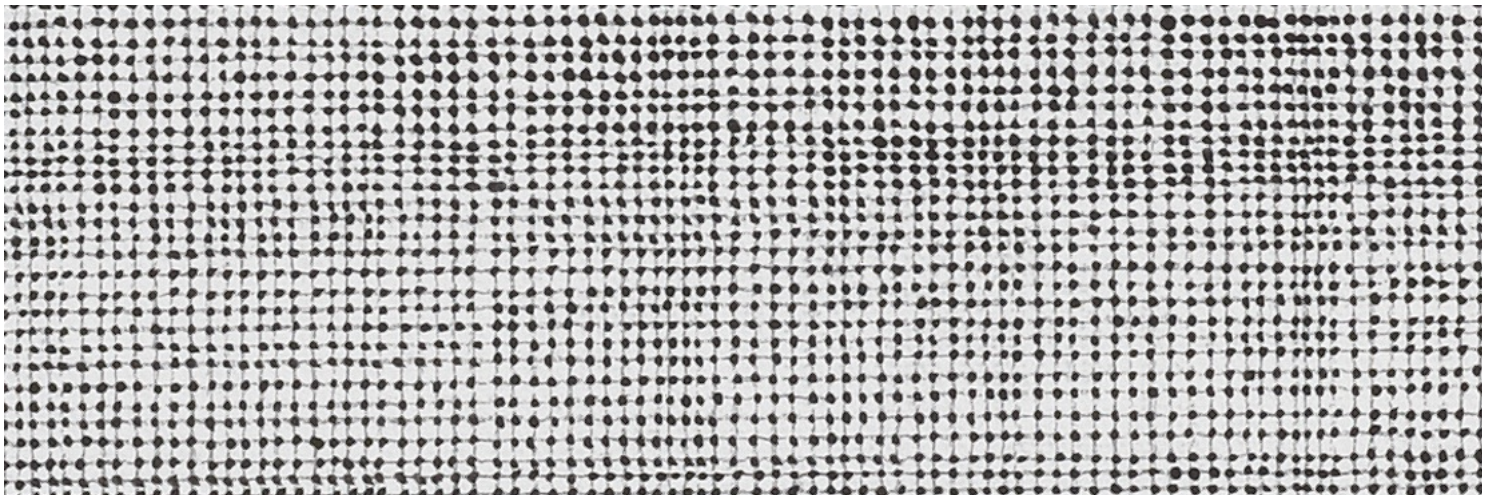
PD: Art is primarily about ideas for me, but it is also something that is often (although not always) a visual thing. I'm interested in the appearance of my work and how when the work is shown the paintings can be a receptacle for ideas. I see myself as a conceptual artist and not as a painter. At the moment, I use paint as a vehicle to facilitate an activity: I enjoy the activity of making art and the challenges art making offers in this contemporary moment. Art is an never-ending debate and I wish to participate fully in it by being an artist. I'm curious as to what being an artist is and attempt via a ritualistic and daily modus operandi to exploit my own shortcomings. That's the subjectivity in the work. I'm something at odds with its intention. Whilst using painting as a medium I make things which are almost anti-paintings; a reduced idea, a reduction if you will, of what paint can do. These are effectively "stand-ins" for paintings.

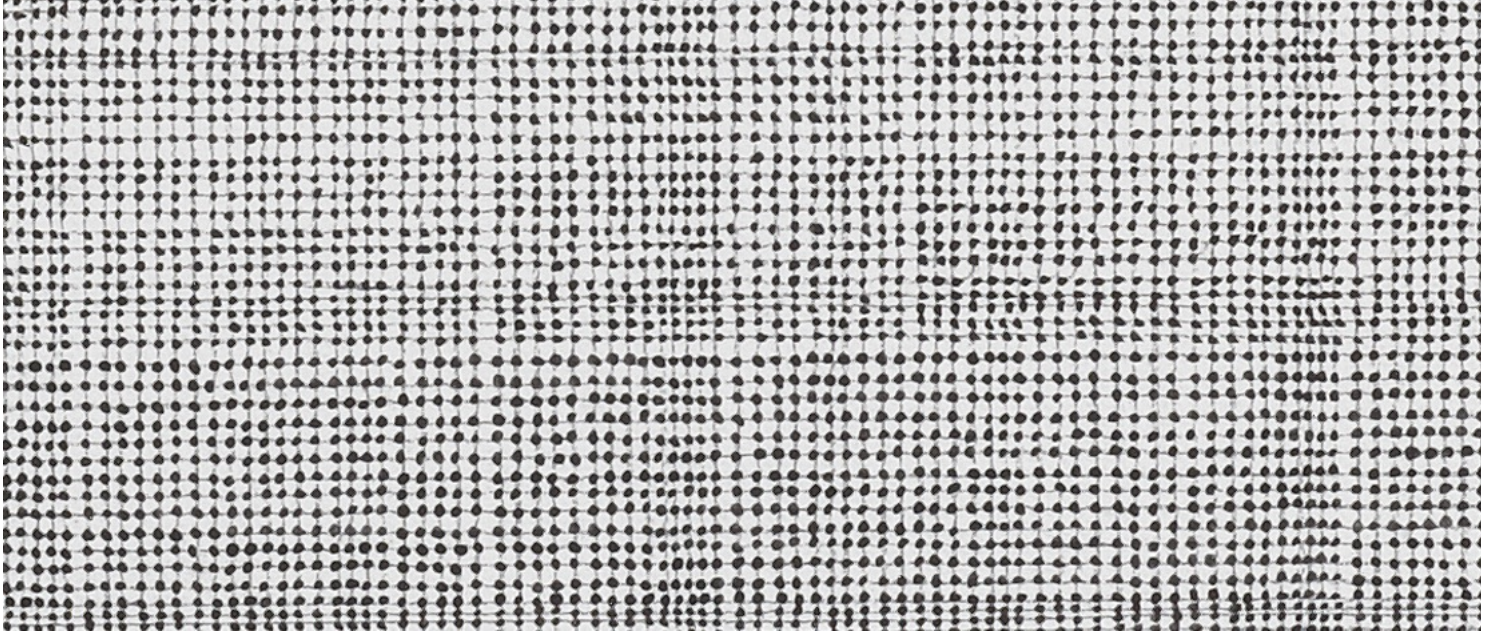
dlH: Almost a critique of, or an attack on, painting?

PD: Yes, precisely. And with this show, the group of paintings acted more as an installation than segmented picture show. All these paintings were made especially for the occasion which acts more as special project space than art gallery. Each painting becomes a panel, a slab or a sculptural object inlaid within the ornate mouldings. Yet each one offers a different surface, or optically suggested surface, for the viewer to contemplate.

dlH: These are no Duchampian readymades piled together with bonding agent, but steady-as-you-go-mades, amassed one simple stroke at a time. The mariner used a shark's fine skrimshandering lines. Tell us about your tools and the time required to make one of your conceptual works.

PD: For me, the experience of making the work is the most exciting thing. The process is very slow and laborious, but I like that. I always have something to do, an activity both mentally and physically. With my work the process of making art is a long, slow, private, drawn-out performance, and the paintings are a by-product of that. The time taken is not significant to me intellectually, but I understand that the labour is something that viewers respond to. A few years ago I realised that they would be conceptually stronger if I made them, that it wasn't just my hand. And that the labour involved should be an "idea" of work rather than just my work. At that point, I started to employ assistants. I enjoy making the work so much that I'm not sure if I could ever entirely hand it over to be fabricated. I also found that making only 2 to 3 paintings a year by my own hand was very practical and inhibited me from being able to build a body of work and therefore making it very difficult to create a show. I like the idea that my paintings could be made by others; it's not about skill or virtuosity or tricks, that they are matter-of-fact. I also thought that I savoured the experience of being very solitary in my studio, but I found that I'm much more comfortable when there are other people working there too, which surprised me. But I do think that the finished paintings are ready-mades, whether made by me, a fabricator or an assistant. When completed, they just exist as pointers or as a gesture towards the contemporary art debate.





Peter Davies, Dot Grid, images courtesy of Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY

dlH: Do you need to make art?

PD: Yes, but I don't think I will ever entirely know why I need to make art. When I was at art school I was obsessed with that question and finding the answer. But by the end I couldn't answer it. Art and art making continue to fascinate and intrigue me, through its complexities and surprises. It's like a compulsion, and I feel driven to engage with it. Art is the greatest representative of the sophistication of a civilization. On the one hand it seems absurd, and indulgent and luxurious, but on the other, it feels totally vital and necessary. Life would be meaningless to me without it.

dlH: What influences you?

PD: I like seeing new art, or art which I'd overlooked or never appreciated in the past. Recently I've been particularly informed by 60's and 70's minimal and conceptual art of Carl Andre, Sol Le Witt, Eva Hesse, Robert Ryman, Ellsworth Kelly and On Kawara. But more specifically John McCracken and Agnes Martin. With John McCracken I'm fascinated by the contradiction between the perfect machine like finish, with the handmade laborious process. And with Agnes Martin, I'm fascinated in learning more about her personality and how everyone associates her with Minimalism but she identified with Abstract Expressionism. I've always been interested in Bridget Riley, and I'm intrigued by the people slowly being reappreciated, who perhaps weren't the big names in the history books, like Lygia Clark, Charlotte Posenenske and Dorothea Rockburne. There was a mini movement in the UK in the 1970's called Systems Art which has been very important in relation to my recent work. And David Hammons is a big influence on me.

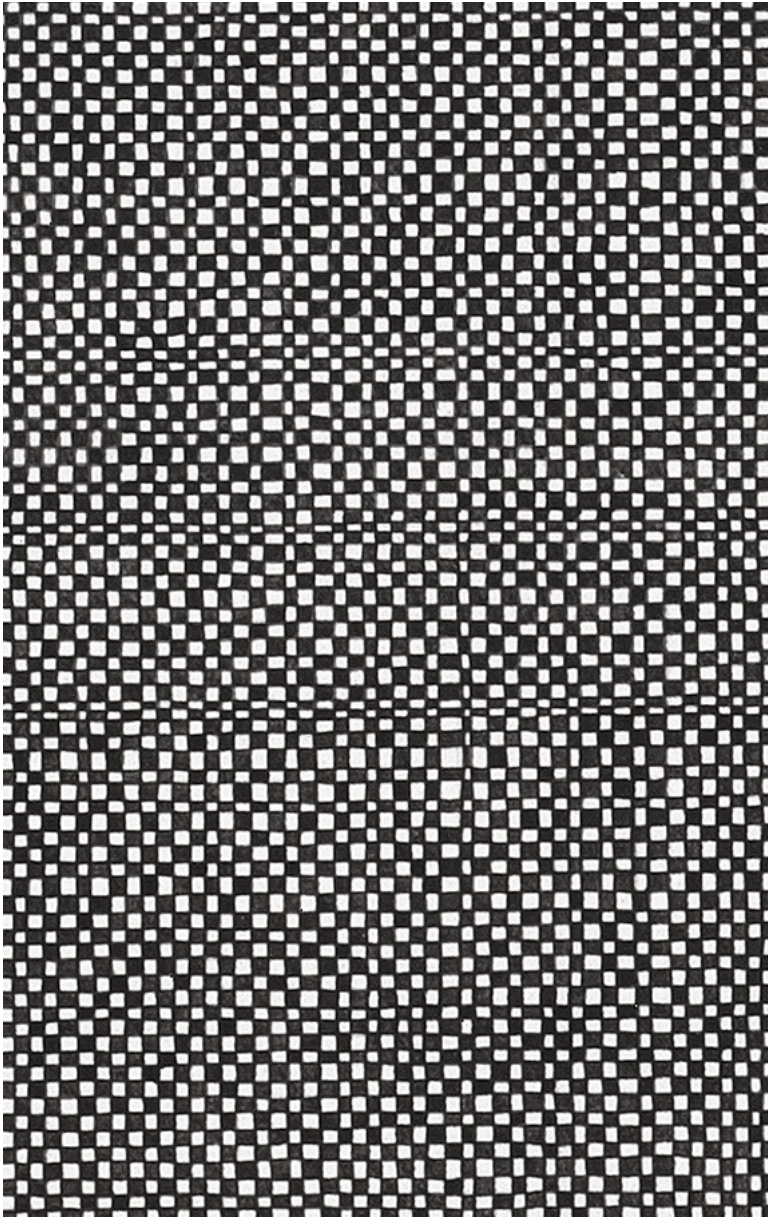
dlH: These new works were specifically made for VRR's project space, yes? Tell me how you met him and something else about the show?

PD: Yes, they were made especially for No.5A E. 78th Street. Vladimir had included an earlier text based piece in a show he curated with Christine Messineo called Merci. I was all text based work. On the basis of that, he then very kindly invited me to make a show of new work for No.5A. When I first saw the space it had a nostalgic glamour as if I think of a Venetian Palazzo and of Count Giuseppe Panza who acquired the most extraordinary collection of minimal and conceptual work and installed it in his ancestral villa. But I wanted to make something that would insinuate itself within the space without being old fashioned or nostalgic. These paintings, through the process of making them, have a particular visual finish which looks scuzzy, and smudged. I want it to be abject and degraded. And in the work's quiet way, that's in considerable contrast to the grandeur of the space.

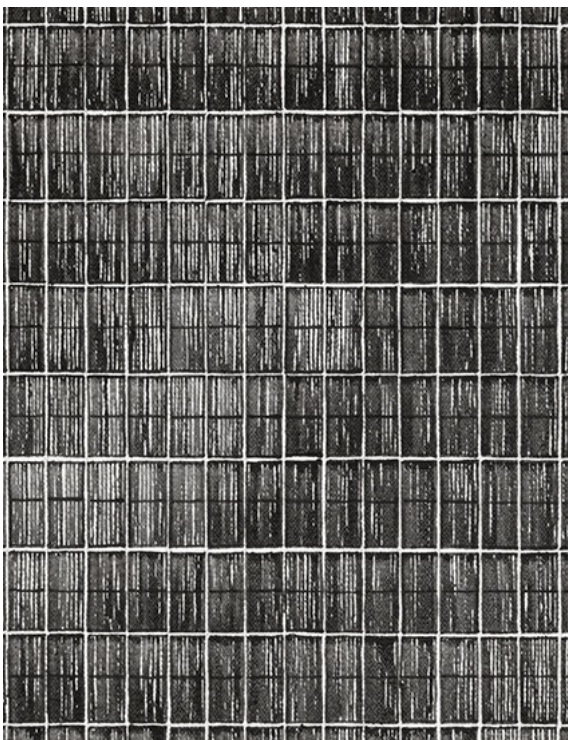
Previously, I had always exhibited in more generic white cube spaces. It felt a real challenge to work out what to make that could exist in a space so ornate and architectural. I wanted to make something that would be in contrast to the architecture but not fight with it, paintings that would "sit" on the walls rather than shout-out to announce themselves. I wanted something that would compliment the architecture and co-exist with it. This process has made me think afresh about how future work might inhabit other spaces. Art, work and space change once united and how the paintings (whilst being paintings) seem, at No.5 anyway, more like sculptures.

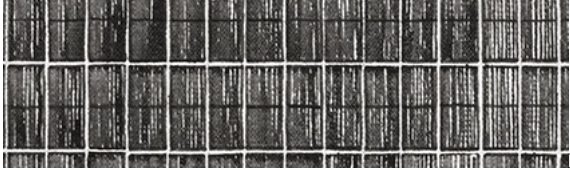
dlH: Thank you, Peter, for your time. I know you're keeping tally.

PD: Thank you so much, I've enjoyed every minute of it.



Peter Davies, square grid (detail), images courtesy of Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY





Peter Davies, Split Grid (detail), *images courtesy of Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld, New York, NY*



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