

Vincent Vulmsa
ARS NOVA E5305-B

June 27th - August 22nd, 2009
Opening Friday, June 26th, 2009
7 p.m. - 9 p.m.

In contemporary art theory, combining the use of the readymade and that of painting has led to inspiring insights. The one is explicitly arbitrary and the other traditionally understood as explicitly unique, yet both share surprising similarities. For some, the specific choices of selecting everyday objects as works of art correspond with the color strokes that a painter applies to a bare canvas. For others, painting is inevitably a readymade. Especially during its ongoing reduction to the flat surface (coined by Modernist Painting in the 1950s) the declaration of an unpainted canvas as a finished painting seemed an inevitable consequence.

In reality, these insights remain postulates and within the artistic practices of recent decades, are confined to incidental examples. Even though artists in the 1960s challenged painting's assumed mandate with the threat of the bare canvas, presenting a bare canvas as a finished work of art did not necessarily lead to a successful painting. Accordingly, the examples of readymade artworks that explore paintings' materiality, production and history can be counted on one hand.

At Galerie Cinzia Friedlaender, the Dutch conceptual artist Vincent Vulmsa rises to the challenge. The selection of readymades that Vulmsa has provided for this occasion, entitled ARS NOVA E5305-B, tells a story about their unique object-hood - their material, production and socio-economic resonance - displaying a surprising pictorial understanding.

The title of the exhibition refers to the product number of pre-fabricated canvases that one can buy in specialist stores. Vulmsa used this particular product as the main protagonist for his Berlin debut exhibition. ARS NOVA E5305-B features 8 of these canvases (100 x 80 cm each) that were treated in order to tell a unique story while remaining inherently bound to their industrial production. Instead of using the actual canvas, Vulmsa treated the protective seal in which the canvases were purchased. He sprayed the plastic industrial wrapping of these canvases with black high gloss paint. When reacting to the paint, the plastic material expanded, resulting in a relief surface of large folds. Subsequently, Vulmsa traced these folds from one angle with white spray paint, leaving an outline of the folds after the surface regained its original flatness and tension after drying.

Are these paintings in a traditional sense? Hypothetically the canvas remains untouched: one can still rip off the plastic and start painting. Vulmsa shows, in concrete terms, the process that occurs when two industrial materials respond to each other and to their surroundings, i.e., in this case a readymade painting combined with a readymade industrial wrapping procedure. Yet none of these readymades respond in the same way. The end result is surprisingly pictorial and visually captivating, comparable to the luscious backdrops of draped fabric in 17th-century Baroque paintings.

In the process Vulmsa shows a vital awareness of the way readymades have been used within art production ever since Duchamp first introduced them in 1913, an understanding that does not necessarily correspond with art history. In art history, the painting and the readymade are kept at a safe distance from each other. However, with the rise of the readymade in artistic production, demand increased so that people started to find ways of displaying these artifacts as works in their own right. When operating in their original context, the canvases in ARS NOVA E5305-B have no special quality other than their commodity status and their size. Thus, in order to judge them as a work of art they need to be shown as art.

This is where the pictorial element comes in, to establish a process of visualizing arbitrary objects (their composition, material and surface) and displaying their unique attitude. But what we see in ARS NOVA E5305-B is the element of display itself. Nothing can be more arbitrary than display - made by unnamed carpenters and designed to support the visibility of objects other than itself. But without the display element a work of art cannot be judged as such. A canvas is as such a display screen, establishing the visibility of painting. But in ARS NOVA E5305-B, it is not the canvas that supports the painting, but painting that supports the canvas.

Bart van der Heide