

Andrew Kreps
Gallery

22 Cortlandt Alley,
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Fredrik Vørslev

World Paintings

November 13 - December 19

Opening Reception:

Friday, November 13

THEY ARE THE WORLD, PART II

Dieter Roelstraete

Although the seed for *World Paintings*, a series of more than forty paintings of flags representing countries from around the globe, was first planted in Fredrik Vørslev's mind back in the mid-2000s – the partial occasion, back then, was a chance encounter with the hard-edge flag paintings of the Swedish artist Olle Baertling, billowing in the breeze outside the Moderna Museet in Stockholm – and although Vørslev first started working on his “flag paintings” more than two years ago, it is hard to think of a suite of works that, in their deadpan minimalist demeanor, more painfully and poignantly capture the singular trauma of 2020, this most horribilis of all anni – especially in terms of the impact its seismic shifts have had upon the arch-global, quintessentially cosmopolitan business of contemporary art, the basic social contract of which is so deeply dependent on a widely shared disregard for both national borders (nuisances!) and the national identities (irrelevances!) invoked in these paintings. [Can paintings denoting national territories be considered “realist”? Are they landscapes at all? Whatever the answer to these questions may be, these paintings are certainly of their times, both literally and literarily so. They are also, in their labor of denotation and signification, exercises in contemplating what it means for a work of art to “mean” something: to denote, signify, symbolize. Does choosing to paint the symbolizing object par excellence help turn these works into symbols of symbols then?] Assembled here are seventeen paintings “depicting” various countries of the world, from all five continents: Austria, Canada, Cyprus, Djibouti, Egypt, Faroe Islands, France, Greece, Honduras, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nigeria, Palestine (sic), and the USA – a picture of the world in a peaceful moment of brotherly completeness, one might argue, that is tragically hard, indeed well-nigh impossible, to imagine in this time of nation-wide lockdowns, reinforced national borders, and the attendant resurgence of nationalist sentiment in populist-led countries around the world. “We” are no longer a “world” (or the World) – they are. [And they are paintings of their time, as we already observed – though they might also be thought of as paintings of the future as much as the past: there exists an interesting tension between the definite modernity of the notion of nationhood and the antiquity of the tribal sentiments

it inspires. The Austrian flag, for instance, that minimalist masterpiece to which we will be returning shortly, is many centuries older than present-day Austria.] Yet for all its obvious relevance as a sustained meditation on the vagaries of globalization in these challenging times of worldwide anti-globalist backlash, World Paintings is above all a reflection on the act, and art, of painting. Indeed, if the problem of so much “flag art” (think of every US flag masquerading as a work of art or showing up inside a work of art since Jasper Johns’ Flag) resides in the fact that most of the time we only ever see the flag, and rarely the painting – that the flag inevitably always ends up obscuring (“trumping”) the painting – then Fredrik Værsløv’s “solution” to this problem has been to look for the painterly possibilities inside the flags of his choice, so to speak: to see the paintings, for once, and not just the flags – which is one reason why the aforementioned selection of countries, nation-states and territories may seem disorientingly random at first, until we realize that they are all paintings of flags that have white in them – the white of painting’s most basic condition and fundamental substrate, namely untreated canvas. [Whiteness functions here as a metaphor for painting’s unending dedication to the mirage of a tabula rasa, a ground zero from which to begin anew – but there is no escaping the political reading of Værsløv’s use of white in the current climate of course: “white suprematism” is among the first puns to come to mind here. Fredrik Værsløv is keenly aware of the crude contention of his gambit – a Northern European artist, hailing from a country that has its own fair share of problems with “whiteness”, painting the flags of countries like Djibouti, Nigeria and Palestine, and showing these inside a proverbial white cube in downtown New York at a time like this. Asking for trouble, you say?

Only so much – the most politically charged gesture of all, apart perhaps from flying the Palestinian flag, may well be the simple, straight-faced inclusion of the US flag in this exhibition, “at a time like this” – quite likely the most widely defaced and desecrated flag, it is worth remembering, in history.] Seen from the perspective of pure form, flags are minimalist Ur-forms, possibly the oldest extant examples of minimalist art in the broadest sense – and certainly the single most economic species of “monument”. Such a marvel of minimalist design as the Japanese flag, for instance, dates back centuries – the official adoption of the so-called Sun Disc in February 1870 was the mere culmination of a process of hundreds of years of abstraction and reduction. The French Tricolore, the global symbol for the struggle to achieve the *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* of all men, was taken into official use in February 1794, the revolutionary appeal of its Spartan design nowhere more palpable than in Eugène Delacroix’ *Liberty Leading the People* from 1830. And then there is the masterpiece of graphic understatement that is the Austrian flag, dating back to the early years of the thirteenth century, with one legend concerning its origin citing the crusader Battle of Ptolemais (part of the Siege of Acre) in 1191 as its source. (One leading vexillologist’s version of its genesis suggests that “Duke Leopold V was supposedly granted these arms by King Henry VI, based on the battle-bloodied tunic of the duke, which had remained white only where covered by his wide belt. Losing his standard during the fray, Leopold supposedly raised his tunic as a rallying point, and the design was subsequently made official.” See: Whitney Smith, *Flags Through the Ages and Across the World*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975.) Finally, closer to the actual flowering of the minimalist aesthetic in modern art in the late fifties and sixties, and closer to its geographical epicenter in downtown New York: consider the bold visual language of Africa’s newly emancipated former colonies, conjuring memories of contemporaneous

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works by the likes of Josef Albers, Elsworth Kelly, Barnett Newman, Kenneth Noland or Frank Stella (or Olle Baertling, for that matter) – to wit, the flag adopted by Nigeria in 1960, the highwater mark of postwar emancipatory optimism. If the crucial discord here is that between the universalist, proto-globalist claims of minimalism’s visual language and the seemingly parochial business of nation-building, Værsløv’s World Paintings probe the uncomfortable issue of minimalism’s own provincialism, its parochial roots and inclinations: is the Japanese flag, to name but one example, a global icon, an appropriately “eastern” image – or just another “western” picture after all? Are hoisting the flag and spray-painting the world a uniform blue-red-white different sides of the same coin – that of “white suprematism”?

This text was conceived as a post scriptum to an essay dedicated solely to Fredrik Værsløv’s World Paintings, written over the course of the summer of 2020, and soon to be published in the artist’s monograph by Mousse Publishing. It is a companion piece to a similar text written for the artist’s concurrent exhibition at Gio Marconi in Milan.