

Paul Fägerskiöld *Pale Blue Dot*

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What is it with artists and flags? Art history of the last century is spiked with them: from Jasper Johns's first *Flag* (1954–5) to Nam June Paik's *Video Flag* series (1985–96) and Robert Longo's *Black Flags* (1989–91), to list just a few. In Paul Fägerskiöld's latest exhibition, flags figure prominently. Perhaps surprisingly at first, considering these ensigns' earthly connotations, the title of the show is taken from a space photograph captured by *Voyager 1* in 1990 at the request of astronomer and author Carl Sagan. The image, shot from a distance of six billion kilometres, shows earth as a tiny pixel amidst the vastness of space. From this perspective, any territorial quarrels and claims, of which the nation-state symbols are indicators, seem particularly bizarre.

Fägerskiöld's flag paintings are held in thick layers of white oil on virgin taupe canvas, and depict banners of countries that no longer exist. Among them is a picture of a hammer and sickle within a sunlike circle, pointing to the Soviet past of the former semiotic icon. All these flags, in fact, feature suns of the same diameter – which, in turn, determines the size of the paintings. They are hung so that the circles form an imagined horizon. The sun has been a central motif in cultural practices, from the archaic Mayan civilisation to the ancient Egyptian Ra cult and antique Greek philosophy. It has been the first reference for time measurement,

and a constant reminder of our relative tininess on a universal scale. Fägerskiöld asks whether flags that are symbolically charged with solar and other references can be emptied of their former meaning, and become free to be claimed again for different purposes. Well, can they?

Aside from the flags, the exhibition includes paintings from the artist's *Landscapes* series (all works 2016). *Terra Incognita* is a large-scale, mostly empty canvas with a curved rectangle in dark maroon filling the lower sixth of the picture plane, reminiscent of the earth's curvature. As flags are intended to foster a sense of belonging for one group at the expense of excluding others, the empty negative of the canvas is as much a constituent part of the work as its positive painted equivalent, with which it shares a clear-cut borderline.

The painting *Final Frontier* resembles a black version of the star-spangled blue rectangle of the us flag. The stars in Fägerskiöld's version are smaller and not painted, but made from sections of raw canvas. The work connects the symbol-laden *White Flags* and *Landscapes* series – nevertheless, it could just as well be interpreted as a night sky, or simply an abstract pattern. In its ambiguity, it points to the core query of Fägerskiöld's exhibit: to show how meaning is always a construct and an interpretative choice.

An untitled spray painting, then, highlights the viewer's role in making sense of such

undecided meaning. From afar the work looks like a monochrome image, yet when moving in we discern the billions of tiny paint squirts of which it is composed. Hence, the viewer's movement is pivotal to deciphering the spatiotemporal actions at play in its making. Fägerskiöld uses a spray can to slowly let paint drip onto the canvas from different angles, resulting in an oscillation between chaos and repetition. Compared to the artist's earlier tiny pointillist drippings, this work is made up of longer, decompressed squirts. It appears more related to digits and letters, and accordingly semiotics, and less of a perception-oriented cloud as in the earlier works.

Fägerskiöld condenses diverse ways of viewing different painterly genres, from formerly symbolic flags and historical references, to landscape compositions, to tools dissecting the idea of a whole – which Sagan said we can never fully perceive while we are inside it. The show is about shifting perspective, and how we constantly shuffle new combinations of things to create meaning. Yet, considering our insignificant size in relation to the universe – visualised by the photograph *Pale Blue Dot* – and our limitation by symbols whose allocated meaning we can hardly dispose of, yet which we rely on to make sense of the world – see Fägerskiöld's solar flags – we may want to question the value of the meaning thus construed. *Stefanie Hessler*



Terra Incognita, 2016, oil on canvas with walnut frame, 238 × 331 cm.

Photo: Carl Henrik Tillberg, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm & Berlin