

ArtSeen

Paul Fägerskiöld: *Flatlands*

by [Wen Tao](#) April 20, 2019



Paul Fägerskiöld, *42nd Parallel Symphony*, 2008–2019, Acrylic Flashe on linen, 117 x 275 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

In Edwin Abbott's 1884 novella *Flatland*, Mr. A Square, living in a two-dimensional plane, has an oracular vision when a three-dimensional sphere intercepts his world. To Mr. A Square, this is a celestial sight: a circle "var[ying] every instant with gradations of size and brightness,"¹ something staggeringly inexplicable and possibly divine. (Circles also happen to be the rarest and highest-esteemed members of Flatland society.) Though comic, this is immediately relatable. We all feel like free-roaming animals in the moor of perception, oblivious to our helpless captivity by the limitations of our senses. Abbott understood that spatial dimension is one of those insurmountable blind spots and therefore also a well spring of humor, wonder, politics, and religion. How painting engages in this dialectic of knowing is a central thread of Paul Fägerskiöld's current show *Flatlands* at Peter Blum. This is the 37-year-old Swedish artist's second show with the gallery. On view are four paintings largely composed of circles, rectangles, numbers and handprints of varying sizes, sprayed, stamped or brushed onto raw linen in unassertive manners. These skillfully executed canvases insist equally on facticity and evocation but the

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relation is not casual: the materiality of the paint takes the form of a mechanical blur that's antagonistic to symbolic associations. Consequently, the paintings operate within a speculative space necessitated by looking at something that's half concealed as soon as it's created.

The title painting *Flatland* (98 3/8 × 120 1/8 inches, 2019) features one clearly delineated, deep blue rectangle hovering atop virgin taupe linen. Its compositional simplicity and apparent textural finesse compels scrutiny. But once up close, the viewer realizes the painting does not encourage close reading: the countless individual strokes that make up the dark impasto are crude, methodical and opaque. Someone attuned to reductionist abstraction, where a rejection of lushness or

saturation, is really an austere hypersensitivity to opticality and touch (think Agnes Martin, John Zurier or Suzan Frecon). One might be left cold to discover that in *Flatland* there is no searching repetition stitched to the delicate chant of subtle variances, but rather simply, paint purged of feeling. Fägerskiöld clearly had a plan and then executed it with a dull hum that's more workmanlike than aesthetic, like the tempo of the rain. There is the proficiency of schema but not the poetry of exertion; even the contrast between paint and linen is pared down to avoid the sensuality of electrified edges as in Robert Ryman. To see a color field that does not betray any belief or investment in the physicality of paint is like watching an impassive croupier swiftly dealing cards, while wondering what is the game to be played?

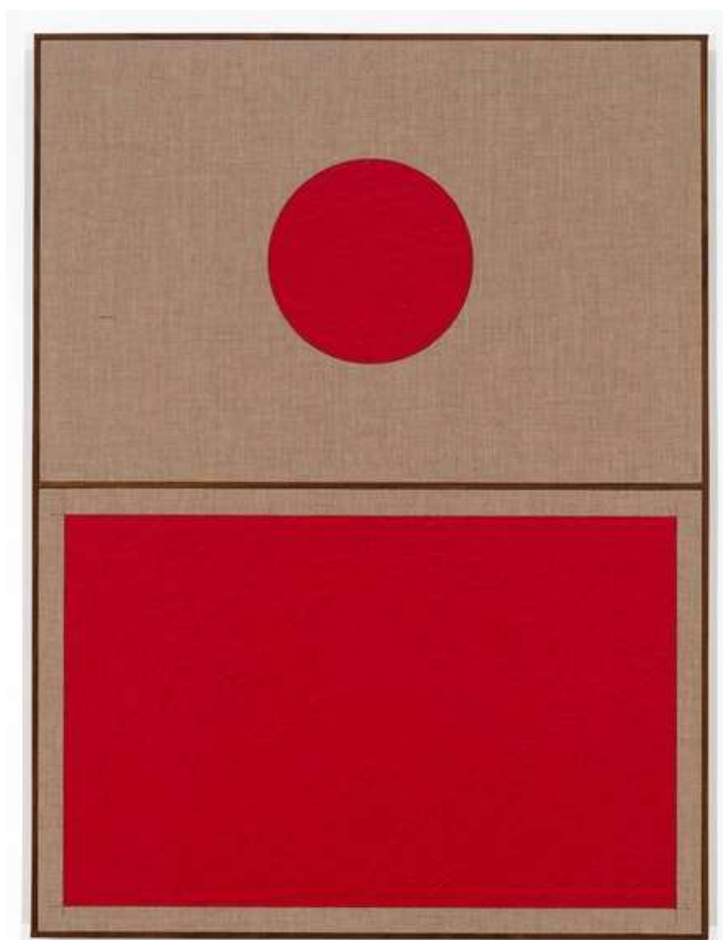
Without the immediacy of feeling, one must negotiate an entry: a reading of the painting with possible correspondences to the physical or psychical world, if they exist at all. A revelation happens when the viewer steps back and registers the slight curve on the bottom of the rectangular shape. The curvature echoes a horizon, turning the dark rectangle into a vast landscape. However, imagination stops short, as the thin strips of raw linen around it flaunt the inert materiality of the painting's construction, short-circuiting any possibility of illusionistic image. Rather than using the calibrated pulsation of surface as an evocative instrument, Fägerskiöld's investment is in the literalness of his shapes and obduracy of his paint. They constitute a kind of redoubled inertia, at once emblematic and anti-sensualist, that endlessly swerves between image and thing. Like the sphere descending into Flatland, its appearances are as inexplicable as its thingness is indeterminable.



Paul Fägerskiöld, *Flatland*, 2019, oil on linen, 98 3/8 x 120 1/8 inches.

Image courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

Other works in the show also grapples with the battle between conception and execution. The title of the two-paneled painting *Impression, Harvest Moon* (2019) references the natural world, yet it is constituted of two vertically arranged identical panels each containing a centered elemental shape: a circle on the top, a rectangle on the bottom. The shapes are made with thick brushstrokes in precise delineation. Along with the panel edge that makes up the horizon, the duo of elemental shapes floating within the rarefied air of the bare linen provide only a velleity of signification. On the other end of literalness, the adjacent painting has no title (suggesting an experience too slippery for language) and holds numerous specks of sprayed paint that are slightly oblong (the spray caps are specially modified) coalescing into a rough-edged rectangle. The specks' conspicuous physicality, however, gathers into a space-defying nebulousness from afar.



Paul Fägerskiöld, *Impression, Harvest Moon*, 2019, oil on linen, 34 x 25 1/4 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard

The largest work in the show is *42nd Parallel Symphony* which is comprised of 54 separate canvases, each containing a circle, a number, or a handprint. The palette and composition pay tribute to both Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943) and Blinky Palermo's *To the People of New York City* (1976). The numbers are colored, grouped, and arranged on different concentric spiral lines, which include references to sources important to Fägerskiöld such as Mondrian and Palermo and the numerical measurement of time.

In Fägerskiöld's paintings, issues of formal reduction converse with issues of dimensionality. Like the novella from which it takes its concept, *Flatlands* is about the politics of seeing. In Abbott's *Flatland*, self-conception is determined by the limits of the physical world the shapes inhabit. For them, two dimensions is all there is, with no imaginable beyond. Similarly, Fägerskiöld's flat shapes claim their status as impregnable painted constructions. Therefore, despite the compositions' persistent hinting at illusion and outside references, the forms exist as concrete beings rather than reductions of something else. Fägerskiöld's *Flatlands* reminds us once again that painting's flatness is at once a limit and a cause for reverie.