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Art in Review

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Helmut Federle

The Ferner Paintings

*Peter Blum
20 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Jan. 18*

A handout accompanying this show recalls an anecdote from Giorgio Vasari in his “Lives of the Artists,” in which a papal envoy asks the early-Renaissance painter Giotto for an example of his work, and Giotto offered a drawing of a circle. Rather than censuring him for his arrogance, the pope and his courtiers declare — on the basis of the circle — that Giotto “surpassed in excellence all the other painters of his time.”

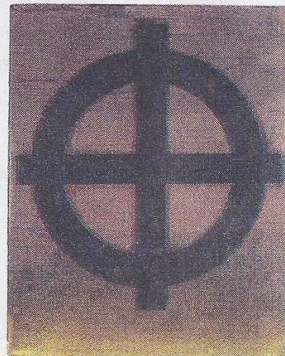
Helmut Federle’s “The Ferner Paintings,” circles drawn in vegetable oil on small raw-linen canvases, are, as the handout implies, in conversation with art

history: Giotto, Japan’s enso (circle) calligraphers, Rembrandt’s late self-portrait with two circles in the background, or abstract painters like Kenneth Noland.

But so-called excellence and Minimalist geometry are less important to Mr. Federle than other things. Austere but full of vibrating tension, the artist’s circles are like religious exercises: spare, disciplined meditations that are elemental but also deeply personal. They aren’t really painted, but rather soaked or anointed, as with an ablution. One has a symmetrical cross at its center and hangs like a religious icon, alone on a wall.

After painting for 50 years with a palette limited mostly to black, gray, white and yellow, and representing Switzerland at the 1997 Venice Biennale, Mr. Federle has said that he nearly stopped painting in 2005. More recently, he has stressed that painting for him is spiritual: He has called the art world a “world of religion without the church.” That pretty much describes what you see here.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER



PETER BLUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

“Sektion des Zorns” (2013), a work by Helmut Federle, at the Peter Blum Gallery.