

PETER BLUM GALLERY

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Helmut Federle: Scratching Away at the Surface at Peter Blum Soho
by Joe Fyfe

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New York City, 212 343 0441



Helmut Federle *4.4 Resurrection II* 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 23-5/8 x 19-5/8 inches.
Courtesy of Peter Blum Gallery.

Helmut Federle's exhibition at Peter Blum encompasses the first five of a series of nine works done in early 2009. In a revealing interview in the November issue of the *Brooklyn Rail*, the artist states that the recent works are "God-related" and were made after a considerable period of time not painting.

PETER BLUM GALLERY

Born in a mountainous community in Switzerland, near the Austrian border, Federle was not trained as a painter but studied sculpture, photography, architecture and typography in a school of the applied arts, a significant fact in the understanding of his work. Another theme that emerges from the study of his career relates to his travels in Asia and elsewhere, as Federle's predominantly abstract paintings are informed by an evocative visual language developed from other traditions and cultures. Boldly graphic, quietly brooding neo-plastic amalgams sometimes heavily, carefully rendered or marked with splotches, textured roller-marks and dragged brushstrokes began appearing internationally in the early 1980's. Many were mural-sized, others diminutive, and could be construed as lone units, or often as part of a progressive series.

The present group evidences a lighter touch and perhaps involves the sustained variation of a quasi-illusionistic image for the first time. Each 23-5/8 x 19-5/8 inches (60 x 50 cm), they depict a variously illuminated five-sided figure that glows at various wattages from deep within an angular, chiaroscuro cave-like chamber. The dusky, greenish-gray tonalities of most of the canvases are reminiscent of the dull patina of bronze sculptures. Color comes from the same basic palette that Federle has utilized for most of his forty-year painting career: white, black and yellow. Here, it has been sponged, swiped and brushed in dirty washes of acrylic or oil that has then been washed off in places and repainted. The thinly applied paint collects in furrows of the canvas weave, while in other spots, the raw canvas reemerges as the paint is rubbed away in the revision process.

The precedent for this series can be found in a 50 x 60 cm work from 1985 titled "Innerlight", a Turner-esque depiction of a spiritual light breaking through darkness from a great distance. To anyone familiar with Federle's work at the time, this painting appeared relatively anomalous, but here, twenty-five years later, the initial glimmering of a theme has been developed. It is significant that it has been installed in such a way that the paintings may be considered key elements of an architectural/conceptual continuum.

Each painting is progressively hung a greater distance from the previous one based on multiplication by two. There are three on the left wall, progressively further apart; one on the narrower back wall; and one around mid-point on the right hand, long wall. The hanging of the work is based on the Fibonacci sequence. This numerical progression is often found in nature, in the upward spiraling of stems on a plant or in the horizontally spiraled interior of a sunflower, for instance. The sequence was also the basis of many geometric-decorative patterns in Islamic art, where it was meant to evoke the creator, as imagery was prohibited.

PETER BLUM GALLERY



installation shot of the exhibition under review

The installation also reflects on some of Federle's recent architectural projects, of which I have visited several [[see images](#)]. One is large relief on the side of the Swiss Embassy in Berlin, which molds cement into a familiar vertical /horizontal bar motif familiar from Federle's geometric paintings. Another, realized in the lower reception area of the Museum Rietberg Zürich, (specializing in art from Africa, Asia and Oceania) is a long, very deep concrete wall relief that museum patrons can slowly gilt by purchasing rectangles of gold leaf.

From this perspective, it appears that working in architecture in actual space has freed Federle from evoking the monumental, an aspect of his earlier, large paintings. It has also enabled a more fluid interaction among his triadic praxis: space, metaphor and measurement. The placement describes a spiral within and beyond the gallery space, as it magnifies the spiral movement within the individual works.

Federle's attempt to create an atmosphere of spiritual mimesis makes this current installation a fairly unique event among what is currently being offered by abstract painting. One would have to go to the work of contemporary composers such as John Tavener or Arvo Pärt to find similarities to Federle's current intentions.

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