



Mark Hagen: *Black Swamp*
Almine Rech Gallery, Brussels
14 March – 10 April

Almine Rech's Brussels gallery is housed in an imposing industrial 800m² space that must present exhibiting artists with quite a challenge. Its vastness could inspire huge and site-specific work, yet in the three years since Rech opened here, few artists have responded in that way. Los Angeles-based Mark Hagen does so, however, and rather convincingly. Walking first through the smaller exhibition space, one sees a monumental space underneath, accessible by a staircase. Hagen emphasises this difference in level by making a self-supporting construction in metal space frames – structures formed by interlocking struts – that forms an L-shape, jutting out from the first-floor space and meeting the wall of the lower main space at an angle. The construction, with its open and closed structure, also slightly disrupts the general overview you'd normally have from above.

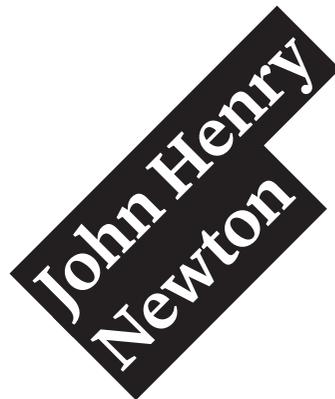
Space frames in the shapes of cubicles recur throughout the exhibition, functioning as autonomous sculptures but sometimes also as pedestals and room dividers. In their attempt to suggest a nomadic way of living via modular structures, they evoke the 1960s utopian architectures of Yona Friedman et al. On top of the frames, or in front of them like door stops, the artist has placed volcanic glass boulders, polished to a slick, mirrorlike finish. This obsidian has almost become an anachronistic material, associated with prehistory and long since replaced by materials easier to handle. Hence its obsolescence contrasts with the space frames, which recall utopia but have now been put into industrial production.

The cement screenlike sculptures further along also have a somewhat prehistoric feel, almost recalling Aztec architecture. They are formed by stacking repeated volumes that look abstract, yet are revealed on closer inspection to be cast from postal packages and soft drink bottles. Some look like marble, yet they are made from the high-quality cement normally used for LA highways. Here as elsewhere, Hagen plays with his material's origin and history, and deliberately injects temporal confusion by its almost anachronistic look.

The shape of the accumulated cement blocks is also echoed in the paintings in this show. With their white geometrical angles, they initially resemble Minimalism. Yet they are the result of a deliberate reversal of the traditional painting process: Hagen used burlap (for its rough, tactile quality), covered parts of its verso with adhesive tape, then poured acrylic paint through from the rear. The covered areas remain blank; the uncovered ones absorb the paint, hence playing with negative space. Within the fixed framework he set up to make these works, Hagen also allows for accidents. Some of the surfaces display the imprint of a rock used as a support; others show traces of tape. Hence the creation process is inscribed in the final product. Hagen's new 'cast tile' paintings, where he uses plastic tiles, plastic sheeting and packing tape as foundations, are a variation of this technique. The poured paint on the backside of the burlap sheets is also squeegeed, creating blue colour gradations that loosely recall those of the volcanic glass.

Though referring to the legacy of Minimalism and Postminimalism, Hagen reconsiders and opens up this tradition by applying unusual materials that are not slick but possess a strong sense of physicality. His work might be set up according to related principles of repetition and variation, yet it also embraces the notion of coincidence and accident. The result is a series of multilayered works that proudly bear traces from their process of creation.

SAM STEVERLYNCK



John Henry Newton:
Maximum Quality for Everyday
Frutta, Rome
28 February – 6 April

A short walk from Rome's Piazza Navona, Frutta – run by a Scot, James Gardner – has, since its opening in January 2012, proved to be something of a phenomenon. There can be no denying that Gardner's first gallery project, loved and loathed in roughly equal measure (there are many here who do not understand its very British mix of irony and irreverence), has helped to shift

the artistic focus in Rome. Its latest exhibition, John Henry Newton's first solo show, presents an incisive portrait of the Eternal City by a young English artist who spent just a few days here in 2012. This marks a first genuine engagement with Rome's politics and everyday life on the part of Frutta, which may have previously appeared at times aloof from its locality.

On opening night, outside the gallery, Bangladeshi immigrant street hawker Milan Sayal peddled umbrellas identical to one hung immediately inside – which, along with the metal coat peg on which it was displayed, forms the work *Ex-patriot? But I wasn't one in the first place* (all works 2013). The piece is inspired by the very Roman phenomenon in which umbrella salesmen, mainly of Bangladeshi origin, appear as if from nowhere as soon as it starts to rain. These particular brollies, meanwhile, featured a print by the artist of an apple ridden with a particular type of fungus often depicted by Caravaggio, whose works are displayed in several churches and museums close to Frutta.

In the gallery's small downstairs space Newton displays 43 enamel McDonald's badges worn in the past by employees of its Rome branches (*Reuniting the team*). The badges feature Romulus and Remus, the mythic legendary founders of Rome, suckling on the she-wolf that raised them, above the ubiquitous golden arches of the fast food giant. The artist collected the badges, via online solicitation, between September 2012 and March 2013. The first McDonald's in Italy opened in Rome near the Spanish Steps in 1986. Valentino, the fashion house situated nearby, had blocked its opening for years, for fears that the smell from the food would ruin the local ambience. Slow Food, the international campaign for healthy eating and dining, was founded specifically as a response to the opening of McDonalds. In Italy, where food is a fundamental part of culture, a battle over eating habits serves to define the nation's future.

While looking for enamel McDonald's badges, Newton chanced upon an enamel badge of a football hooligan masked with a scarf in the shape of the Italian flag and wearing a baseball cap bearing the acronym A.C.A.B. (All Cops Are Bastards). *All the pride that's being chucked around (A.C.A.)* features the thug's blownup image drawn in electrical tape on one wall of the upstairs gallery, together with a shelf upon which are placed three glasses of water containing seaweed and live shrimp. Each glass represents a letter of the acronym, excluding the 'B', while the shrimp represents the closed community of the football hooligan.

Criminality, solidarity and the coexistence of vastly differing realities meet in *Maximum Quality for Everyday*, as a reminder that just beneath Rome's tourist surface there reside tensions and dynamics fundamental to the life of the city itself.

MIKE WATSON

Mark Hagen
Installation view, 2013. Photo:
Kurt Deruyter. Courtesy the artist
and Almine Rech Gallery,
Brussels



John Henry Newton
*All the pride that's being
chucked around (A.C.A.)*, 2013
(installation view). Courtesy
Frutta, Roma