



Yishai Jusidman, *Majdanek*, 2011. Courtesy the artist.

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In conversation with curator Cuahtémoc Medina, artist Yishai Jusidman will discuss the place of color in the darkest memories of modern European history, and the role of painting in the construction of social memory well beyond the debate around the prohibition of images. Presented in partnership with Untitled Art Fair SF.

Cover image:
Courtesy Yishai Jusidman

All works in the exhibition are courtesy the artist.

Yishai Jusidman: Prussian Blue is curated by Cuahtémoc Medina, chief curator, and Virginia Roy, curator, and organized by Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC). The presentation at YBCA is organized by Lucía Sanromán, director of visual arts.

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YISHAI JUSIDMAN PRUSSIAN BLUE



WHY PRUSSIAN BLUE?

YISHAI JUSIDMAN

In spring 2010 I visited a retrospective exhibition of the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. A prominent place in that show was given to a small painting from 1986 that is at first sight unassuming, yet it launched Tuymans’s career. The title of this piece is, simply, *Gaskamer*, and it is said to depict the gas chamber at Dachau. Tuymans’s touch, while surprisingly casual and assured, is underplayed here to the point where he seems to seek little or no rapport with the objects he depicts. Its title aside, this painted sketch could just as well be read as showing a garage, a basement, or a nightclub. The wall text indicated that the daring vagueness of the painting is an argument in support of the alleged impossibility of representing the Holocaust in art, an assumption imprinted in the rule book of enlightened intellectual etiquette at least since 1951, when Theodor Adorno famously called for the demise of poetry after Auschwitz. I wondered: If painting cannot deal with the Holocaust, why would a painter even give it a try?

Indeed, a cursory review of postwar painting reveals a peculiar blind spot when it comes to the Holocaust. Only in isolated instances have other well-recognized painters—Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter—taken up the challenge, mostly through a painterly obliteration of Holocaust imagery, thus highlighting the slipperiness of memory and its eventual fading. Could it really be that painting is unsuited to the task of addressing the Holocaust, and that all a painter can do is lament this condition?

Allow me to retrace a bit of recent history to propose a different answer. Tuymans’s underplaying of the painter’s hand in *Gaskamer* is hardly a postmodern novelty.

An undermining of the hand was also a signature agenda of the influential modernist critic Clement Greenberg in the 1950s. For Greenberg, the total elimination of the artist’s hand was advocated as a necessity of Hegelian proportions: a painting freed from the painter’s touch, made by elevating its material condition over all else, would be an artwork liberated from Romantic subjectivity, an artwork that would be truly modern. Its purified materiality would be achieved by the fusion of the pictorial plane with the physical surface of the canvas, as in works by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis produced under Greenberg’s tutelage.

If Greenberg desired in painting a materiality untainted by any trace of subjectivity, I here risk putting forward a provocative speculation: he would have found the most perfect instance of his aesthetic program in an unlikely place far removed from the New York art world. Today it is a popular destination for tourists following the un-picturesque tour of the Nazi camps, but back then it would have been complicated for Greenberg to get to eastern Poland and witness a disconcerting mural painting where walls haphazardly permeated with intense blue blotches effectively fuse color and surface. In a gas chamber at the Majdanek concentration camp, the mural in question is the result of an accidental chemical blending of cyanide (in the pesticide Zyklon B) and ferrous elements in the walls. The compound that produces such intense blue stains is known as ferrocyanide, and by a perverse coincidence it also happens to be a pigment known by painters as Prussian blue.

While the suggestion that the Greenbergian endpoint of modern painting can be found in a gas chamber at Majdanek may be grotesque, it remains clear, however, that by a terrible chance the discipline of painting and the

genocide perpetrated by the Nazis have at least one element in common, and this element is the color Prussian blue. This affinity is not a fiction or a whim; it is a painful but very real fact, and one that undoes the notion that painting has no way of dealing with the Holocaust, because from the outset the Holocaust expressed itself in this particular color.

For six years I labored to provide a positive answer to the question posed by the Holocaust to painters. The result is a series of works articulated almost exclusively in Prussian blue, and the nearly fifty that I produced over this period are distributed in sequences that developed as the project advanced. A common thread among them is a discomfiting tension that curator Cuauhtémoc Medina describes thusly:

Prussian Blue places us in an aesthetic and ethical bind while risking an inadmissible experience: How must—how can—one engage an image that calls forth the most refined visual resources . . . and also focuses on the archive of the worst mass atrocity of modern history? How is one to cope simultaneously with moral indignation and the material appreciation of shades, forms, shadows, and lights molded in pigment?¹

Each spectator might choose to answer these questions for him- or herself. My aim is to trigger an affective dissonance that is experienced in the presence of the paintings by way of what paintings can actually do—namely, seduce viewers, but also repel them. This dissonance is accentuated in the core grouping of the series, a set of fourteen paintings that, for all practical purposes, have been traced from photographs of the gas chambers. Some of these photographs were taken right after the war, others were taken when the camps became memorial sites, and yet others are

pictures recent visitors uploaded to the internet. In these works the hand of the painter is altogether explicit but neutral: its task is to follow the photograph as closely as possible. The hand is not displayed as an insurmountable obstacle (as it is for Tuymans) or as a contaminant to be purged (as it was for Greenberg), but as a purposeful instrument that strives for precision and transparency, despite its fallibility.

The *Prussian Blue* series led to a set of large monochromes built up in hundreds of thin layers. A supplementary link to their subject is suggested through the addition of pigments of German origin, which are disclosed in the titles. Historian Norman Bryson reflects on these works:

Modernist painting had always maintained the purity of its colors by keeping them at a safe distance from the grasp of language; they were to have no literary meaning, no color symbolism. . . . But the colors in *Prussian Blue* have lost that protection, and are no longer “optical” colors, language has adulterated them. . . . What is revealed is an exorbitant expenditure of labor, and one that continuously cancels itself, as one stroke covers another, and one layer buries another. . . . The sheer accumulation of Jusidman’s self-canceling marks on the canvas without any apparent productive gain is felt within the viewer’s body as a direct, almost physical impact. It is the *Prussian Blue* series’ way of stating the absolute and irredeemable loss that was the Shoah, its part in a work of mourning that nothing, not even art, seems able to end.²

If Bryson is correct, he is in more than one sense, because the final sequence added to the series turned out to be a group of paintings that came about in a totally unplanned, haphazard fashion.

Their appearance most directly recalls the blue stains on the walls of the gas chambers, at least in a strictly formal way, because they are literally the stained rags with which I cleaned my brushes, palettes, spills, and drippings in the studio, now stretched and mounted. These small paintings contain the material leftovers of my work process, and in a rather primary way they satisfy Greenberg’s parameters for a certifiable material painting. However, my *Rags* repudiate the modernist desire for objectivity, purity, and truth. Quite the opposite, their condition is thoroughly human: irremediably soiled, evidently flawed, and forever anchored to the history that makes us who we are.

Notes

- Cuauhtémoc Medina, “Atrocity and Pigment,” in *Prussian Blue* (Barcelona and Mexico City: RM Verlag, 2016), 100.
- Norman Bryson, “Prussian Blue: In the Shadow of the Shoah,” in *Prussian Blue*, 124–25.

This text is adapted from a lecture given by Yishai Jusidman at Salem State University, Massachusetts, on November 4, 2017, as part of the symposium “Emerging Consequences: Aesthetics in the Aftermath of Atrocity.”

ARTIST BIO

Yishai Jusidman (b. Mexico City, 1963) lives and works in Los Angeles. His solo exhibitions include *Prussian Blue*, Americas Society, New York (2013) and MUAC, Mexico City (2016–17); *Paintworks*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City (2009); *The Economist Shuffle*, Yvon Lambert Gallery, New York (2007); and *mutatis mutandis/Working Painters*, which traveled to SMAK, Ghent, Belgium; MEIAC, Badajoz, Spain; and MARCO, Monterrey, Mexico (2002–3). His work has been included in many group exhibitions, including the 2014 SITE Santa Fe Biennial; the 2001 Venice Biennale; *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art*, which traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Miami Art Museum (2000–2003); and ARS 01, KIASMA, Helsinki, Finland (2001).