

Bernd Ribbeck

GALERIE KAMM

When Joanna Kamm announced, in July, that her gallery would close at the end of September, an exhibition by German painter Bernd Ribbeck—his fourth with Kamm—had already been slotted for that month. A September show coincides with important events on the local calendar such as Berlin Art Week and the art fair abc art berlin contemporary. Although nothing about the show overtly registered that it would be the gallery's last, the fact turned out to be inadvertently pertinent.

Ribbeck's small-format abstract paintings are usually rendered on MDF with acrylic paint and ballpoint pen, the visible coexistence of the two mediums imbuing the works with hybridity. Traces of subtractions—the scraping off of layers of pigment—are as central to his process-based works as the pen's pointy, scratchy lines or the paint's iridescent, misty staining. The mandala-like geometrical forms that feature in Ribbeck's earlier works evince his clear interest in outsider artists such as Hilma af Klint or the Swiss healer Emma Kunz, both of whom channeled their art production toward spiritual ends. However, Ribbeck is less concerned with the metaphysical elements of this work and more interested in the stylistics of hard-edge modernist abstraction—that is, in its complex symmetries and architectures.

The seven new paintings on view (all *Untitled*, 2014) mark a step away from the rounded, repetitive shapes and mirrored duplications of Ribbeck's previous works and toward more defined three-dimensional, architectural figurations. Here, the squares, cubes, and arches depicted in vibrant colors evoke such materials as concrete, steel, and glass. For instance, a rectangular block punctuated with window-like squares fills the center of one painting. Alternating blue and red sections aid the illusion of perspective, as if the changes in primary colors were caused by shade, thereby alluding to a source of light. The block's lower half is broken into oblong rectangles that could be support columns, though they appear to be floating in midair. Reminiscent of a top floor of a skyscraper, the motif seems to intersect an angular white field in a way that generates spatial incongruities, disrupting the form's vanishing point.

All the paintings are set in wooden frames whose slender front edges are painted a shimmery, metallic silver. They thus recall small aluminum windows, opening from within the gallery's white cube into an imaginary city skyline brimming with impossible high-rise structures. Ribbeck's urban allegories reflect his stated interest in revisiting Rem Koolhaas's *Delirious New York*. That seminal "retroactive manifesto" depicts the city's spontaneous development as a metaphor for the variousness of human behavior. Yet Ribbeck's urban experiments appear more like hermetic spaces of the mind, ominously illogical structures that become increasingly complex throughout his process of constructing the image.

While Ribbeck's images send the viewer into rich associative realms, the show as a whole had a quietly melancholic tone. The gallery appeared rather empty with Ribbeck's small works strewn sparsely around the space. The presence, in a gallery on the verge of closing drawn, of motifs from the urban landscape created a resonant statement—albeit an unintended one—about the situation in Berlin today. Kamm's closure followed that of several other Berlin galleries that featured consistently dynamic and experimental programming. Meanwhile, the city's much-criticized sellout to developers sees its skyline filling up with standardized, quickly erected glass-and-steel structures. It's the cursed nature of the so-called creative class to cluster together, branding and then metabolizing urban centers.



Bernd Ribbeck, *Untitled*, 2014, acrylic, ballpoint pen, and pigment marker on MDF, 23 1/2 x 11 3/4".

—Hili Perlson