

Nordic Art Review

Surface Tension: Mickael Marman's energy bombs fish us out of the abyss of doomscrolling

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Mickael Marman, *RUM BOOM (Juvenile)*, 2025. Gjengitt med tillatelse fra OSL contemporary. Foto: Uli Holz

Stepping inside the doors of a completely ordinary art gallery, with its obligatory patinated concrete floors and chalky white walls, has suddenly become a welcome escape from reality – here everything is as before, and the nagging longing to replace today's problems with yesterday's is given a temporary break. In Mickael Marman's exhibition hello driver! at

OSL contemporary, there are simply paintings hanging on the walls, nine of them. Marman's pictures also have a quality that emphasizes the almost self-explanatory nature of painting as art, and which must have something to do with the fact that it is not necessarily burdened by being an object. The interest clearly lies in the painting's more superficial qualities.

In Marman's exhibition *Gemælde* at the Artists' Association a couple of years ago, the starting point for the paintings was the ubiquitous canvas bag, the tote bag, which had been applied and I had almost stuck paint on it in a kind of action painting-referencing gesture that gave new

meaning to the phrase oil-on-canvas. The painting collages at OSL contemporary immediately have something of the same energy – all have accumulated layers of brightly colored dots that are splashed or scattered over dirtier and earthier colors in the ground, but the pictures are large (up to 170×210) and considerably more self-contained.

The cotton canvas is still important, from what I can see it is not primed, but instead applied with color that is absorbed into the textile in a way that in places creates blotches and exposes the cloth-like surface. One of the pictures even appears to be painted on denim, or at least a similar textile, I can tell from a quick glance down at the diagonal lines that run across my own trouser legs (Untitled, 2025, MM25-03). The surface's different textures and levels of abstraction are also broken by thin paper glued to the canvas – both newspaper clippings and photos printed on newspaper-like paper.

The clips turn out to be from the Jamaican Weekend Star dated December 2024, and the photos showing urban and suburban motifs are apparently the artist's own from a trip to Jamaica: According to the exhibition text – a fresh case penned by Vibeke Tandberg – Marman's process consists of traveling somewhere, then painting a series when he returns (the tote bags in Gemælde were found on a trip to Morocco).

In this sense, one could consider the exhibition as a travelogue, a genre that after postmodernism is more commonly placed in the category of self-representation than journalism. And there is certainly something about the displacement, or perhaps the in-between position that the journey creates, its flow and stasis, that acts as a catalyst for the artist's subjectivity here. The journey can be a sensory reboot or reset, a trip, but is at the same time at the mercy of the notions one already has and, not least, who one becomes in this encounter. In addition, Marman has previously expressed an interest in the diaspora experience, which in some ways can be seen as an eternal, and partly involuntary, journey. He himself is based in Oslo, until recently also in Berlin, has run the nomadic exhibition concept bbberlin and was raised in Norway with a Gambian father. The title hello driver! can thus refer to an anthropomorphic concretization of what mediates between a place and its perception. The driver as a medium, but also a witness to the witness.

In an age where the experience of place is more about dynamics, relationships and networks than geographical territories, the surface of things also takes on a new character as eternal references where inside and outside collapse, fold or fold together. Perhaps that is why so many of Marman's gestures here orient themselves towards the image as a kind of stratigraphy of layers upon layers that, more than depth, form converging surfaces. The various materials in the image that create texture and relief, strips of paper, grains of sand (?), transparent splashes of colour and opaque paint clumped together after having been applied with what seems like any other tool other than the brush, are not really very much about materiality, at least understood as the actual cycles or properties of the materials. They are there to contribute to an interesting surface, like Robert Rauschenberg-like gestures and the tics of the subconscious, a solidified physical energy that also resonates in the colour palette's use of yellow, orange and bright blue as accent colours.

It is a staging of something initially intimate that here becomes almost theatrical, especially in the widespread use of dots in various forms – splattered, drawn, stenciled, stamped. At the same time, Marman's paintings are unmistakably post-digital, and the pasted-on photographs create screen-alluding images within the picture and straight lines and angles that break the arbitrary pose of the paint splatter. It is also striking how the photographs from Jamaica seek out symbols and signs painted on walls, fences or sheds – a yin/yang logo, a taxi sign, a stylized map of the island kingdom, and not least flags. The latter could theoretically be a reference to Jasper Johns's proto-pop paintings of the American flag, which in the late 1950s provided an emergency exit from abstract expressionism. In any case, this gaze helps to emphasize Marman's self-conscious handling of the color surface and form.

The list of works provides strikingly little information about the materials of the works beyond "mixed media on canvas", and helps to reinforce the impression that everything is subordinate to the surface and the characteristics created in it. In a way, it reflects the cognitive dissonance that haunts everyone who tries to be conscious in the environmental apocalypse we are currently trying to live through, the separation from the craft and the origin of the materials, which, for example, allows (eco)political contemporary art to be housed in exhibition spaces that simultaneously produce quantities of construction waste in the form of plaster walls that are continuously built and demolished, and are rolled with liters of completely ordinary, but relatively

polluting, latex paint. Or the interior pest lime paint, which rolled across the country a few years ago and which basically has little to do with the historical building material lime, but is about creating surfaces (still plastic-based) that allude to old Florentine or Sicilian palaces. Such fantasies are easily staged in the painting.

At the same time, it offers something more, in its personal semiotics, a traceable will. It definitely feels like Marman's painting collages do, which almost become membranes without boundaries for where the subject begins and ends, where all that is missing is a hand that reaches out and offers contact.