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**BROOKLYN RAIL**  
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

## MATT KLEBERG

*By Jonathan Goodman*

MORGAN LEHMAN | MARCH 31 – MAY 7

MULHERIN NEW YORK | APRIL 1 – MAY 8

The work in Matt Kleberg's two recent exhibitions—brightly-colored, striped paintings that describe interior or architectural spaces—slowly but surely takes over the viewer's attention. Kleberg, a recent graduate of Pratt Institute, makes work that feels like a contemporary version of the New York School, with a rough edge that ensures its presence in a current context. Beautiful to look at, almost to the point of decoration, the works echo out toward the viewer, and one is easily taken by the romance of the pleasing combination of color and structure, and the quiet reference to an earlier artistic tradition of painting interiors. At the same time, though, we must acknowledge their urban buoyancy, forming a nearly kaleidoscopic vision that addresses both the surface of the canvas and the illusory perspective of inner space. The combination of these qualities enable Kleberg to have his work both ways—as a series of experiments in color, and as a nod to periods of art history when the structures of internal space were given close attention.

In the galleries of Mulherin New York and Morgan Lehman, the paintings put forth a direct simplicity. In a way, the variations of brightly colored stripes aligned in rows are musical, changing slightly from piece to piece. This allows Kleberg to develop a serial repetition, with the alterations sparking interest as his audience moves through the space. Mulherin New York is much smaller than Morgan Lehman, yet the overall effect of both installations was the same: the rooms overflowed with color and occupied the areas like small abstract icons—remnants of a time when art played out against a religious context. This is not to imply a deeply driven spirituality on Kleberg's part, but it does indicate his awareness of the past. Today, we can hardly make any kind of image

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or object without it referencing something that preceded it. Kleberg's art is no exception.

A word, too, might be said of the possible decorative aspect. Individually, the many-hued works are quite beautiful, but the overall effect is a bit ornate, orienting toward a tableau of something almost exceedingly appealing. But to experience Kleberg's art as merely decorative is to undercut the careful arrangement of the paintings. In *LL Bean Boudoir* (2016), both sides of the painting are framed by cascading, curving drapes, which set off a small, intimate space—the boudoir of the title—whose lines are darker in color. It is a highly attractive, even gorgeous painting, in which the artist's genuinely expressive flair is supported by tightly-built constructions. This balance of colorful abstraction and architectural elements is what gives Kleberg his unique quality as an artist.

In current art practice, particularly in New York City, there are truly no rules or legacies to follow, and the contemporary painter stands out as one of the very few types of artists who has a relationship to the past. This doesn't make Kleberg old-fashioned in any way, but it does underscore the traditional potential of his medium. Kleberg's output occurs in a milieu in which the viewer's attention is taken up by myriad kinds of expression; by remaining a painter, he asserts his connection to a method practiced for a very long time.

*Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet* (2016)—the titles of Kleberg's paintings are smart and often funny, though this example borders on a confessional absurdity—is taken up with a frame of blue and black stripes. On the left side of the inner framework are a series of horizontally angled, multicolored stripes, which lead to the back wall, which is composed of very dark gray, blue, and black stripes—almost the black of midnight. Kleberg doesn't exactly offer a dark view here, but one remembers that he is only one year out of grad school, so the name of the painting quite openly makes fun of his desire for recognition. At the same time, a caution: the works are often highly similar, and Kleberg, one hopes, will move forward—toward greater diversity.