

# HereIn

Editor's Club #25

## Review: Matt Rich at the Timken

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For Matt Rich, the art world represents a system of rules that are begging to be broken. Throughout his colorful career, he has worked diligently to dissolve the art world's expectations of art, producing work that has repurposed non-traditional surfaces—such as pedestals and empty wall spaces—as his “canvases” and stretched the definition of “painting” to its breaking point. Along the way, his shape-shifting installations have deconstructed fundamental ideas like “sculpture,” “exhibition,” “display,” and “frame,” making room for new ways of conceiving of art.

Representing a fabulous culmination of these ideas, his most recent exhibition, P&INTING—on view at the Timken Museum of Art through September 10—takes these ideas one step further. By filling the space between several pieces from the Timken's rotating permanent collection of Western-European art, Rich's colorfully prismatic interventions flip museum conventions on their head.

Equal parts cheeky and sharp, Rich's work is an interruption. Before he began, the museum's walls were already “filled,” after all, rendering each of his additions just that: additive. His imposing, ceiling-to-floor sheet of cut canvas, for instance—affectionately titled *Wall* (2023)—features waves of curved black lines that ripple behind three of the museum's oldest Renaissance works and cover the wall behind these paintings completely, smothering the convention of a “clean,” white background. By using color and shadow to generate motion, Rich's *Wall* makes dynamic a collection of work that was before, for lack of a kinder word, static.

On the other hand, his more angular, two-dimensional projections—titled *Trapezoid 1, 2, 3* (2023)—more squarely interact with

the oil paintings behind which they're stretched. By borrowing key hues and tones from the Boucher, Largillière, and Vernet oil paintings in the foreground, Rich's *Trapezoid* series materializes hazy shapes and blocks that play with the existing art in their background, simultaneously connecting one artwork to the other and dislodging each from their frames. Whereas most museum curation makes connections between different artworks via proximity, Rich's work encourages literal connections, using color, shape, and leading lines.

Rich's particular flavor of anti-art, to be sure, is defined by play. By carefully piecing together fragments of fabric, object, color, and shape, many of his wall-based non-paintings, sculptures, and installations employ familiar materials—most often acrylic and canvas—in completely unfamiliar ways, creating a sense of surprise and, for the lighthearted in the room, amusement. The pieces Rich created specifically for his residency at the Timken also seem to complement or expand upon the art already on view.

For instance, with Rich's lush yellow *Wall* behind them, the pale faces of Buonaccorso's *Madonna and Child* (1387) and Boltraffio's *Portrait of a Youth Holding an Arrow* (c. 1500) seem to radiate with new life. Beside Rich's *Trapezoid 1, 2, 3*, the clouds in Vernet's *A Seaport at Sunset* (1749) smolder like molten gold, while the red cape in Largillière's *Portrait of Barthélemy Jean-Claude Pupil* (1729) oozes with royalty. With the help of Rich's interventions, these centuries-old works participate in exciting new studies in color.

Unlike the Spanish painter, sculptor, and ceramicist Joan Miró, whose interest in deconstructing the conventions of artmaking—and notorious declaration: “I want to assassinate painting”—established him as an infamous anti-painter, Rich seems fixated on the way institutions preserve, curate, and display art to tell a story. Instead of rejecting those conventions altogether, however, Rich's creative interventions boldly erase the borders between painting and frame, frame and wall, in order to celebrate the kinds of artworks that don't depend on these kinds of parameters to succeed.

The best possible kind of art, it would appear, is the kind whose “Materials in dynamic play keep the eye moving,” as Rich once wrote (1). While so many museums continue to shuffle their “permanent collection” deck, imagining ways for old art to tell new stories, Rich prefers the kind of artworks that keep him constantly on his toes. In his mind, an exhibition is most interesting when “We tire before the paintings do” (ibid).

(1) Rich, Matt. “Looking at ten Untitled paintings by Caitlin Longan from *Made in L.A.* 2014 at the Hammer.” *Benefits of Friends Collected*, v.2. 2014.