

An Evening, Chapter 32

R. H. QUAYTMAN // SECESSION

by Ezara Spangl



[THE SEEN]

In R. H. Quaytman's exhibition at the Secession, the artist—whose 2011 publication *Spine* requested that no pronouns be used in reference to the artist—has once again staged what Quaytman calls a 'chapter.' The chapter functions to explore, explain, and elevate the artist's self-reflective lyrical paintings, while doing what the work is known to do: hold a discourse with the institution itself, tie the work to the artist's ongoing survey, and tip its hat to pivotal historical artists and movements. Far from simply following a checklist, this exhibition,

portrayed as a geometric pattern, as well as to re-state the objecthood of the work. The format of the chapters also maintain that the exhibitions exist even after they have ended: thereby ensuring that the show does not simply get packed and stored, but that it continues, as do all previous, in the next iteration of the 'chapters.' Quaytman's own techniques and surfaces are truly those of a master. As in all the 'chapters', the size of the wood panel supports fit Quaytman's modular criteria of the artist's ten sizes; the square and

figuration is central to this exhibition, Quaytman relies on relief of material to sculpt, rather than paint, figures. As in all of Quaytman's 'chapter' exhibitions, the individual works function independently, but are framed to support the entirety of the installation. This is due partly to the artist's practice of finding content from the exhibition space itself. In the Secession, Quaytman once again references the location—hereby building a structure in the main gallery, addressing Gustav Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze*



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Coming from a family of artists, Quaytman began working in 'chapters' in 2001 as a means to preemptively organize, catalog, and store future production. Like books on shelves, the paintings may be viewed on their side as well as from their front. The motif of the side edge is

rectangle shapes are closely related as the artist strictly adheres to using the ratio of the golden section in all of the panels. The works include signature beveled sides—intentionally done as a cue that the work is made on wood panel rather than stretched canvas—as a reference to abstraction, invoking the edges of Piet Mondrian's *Lozenge Compositions*. The panels serve as supports for technically masterful silkscreen print images, which meet the artist's hand in the manipulation of textiles in the grounds. Though

(1901), which is housed and permanently on view in the Secession. The significance of the *Beethoven Frieze* cannot be overstated, and remains a testament to the Art Nouveau artist, whose historic involvement with the founding of the Secession, began as a social movement, and led to the formation of the space that remains still today, as an artist-run exhibition space and organization.

In response to the *Beethoven Frieze*, Quaytman built two large walls, nearly



connected at one end, set at a forty-five-degree angle. On the inner side of the two walls hang works on panel, whose combined lengths equal the measurement of the *Beethoven Frieze*. The angle of the two walls—which do not connect, but are left ajar—pertains to one-point perspective in Renaissance painting. This is the third instance of a ‘chapter’ in which Quaytman has used such angled walls. Yet here, it is a strategy to incorporate a work by another artist.

Within the exhibition, there are two old master paintings to which Quaytman directs attention. These are works by the Late Renaissance Flemish artist Otto van Veen. Both of van Veen’s works are in the collection of Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum (KHM), though have not been exhibited since the eighteenth century, and have since been in storage. Upon the re-discovery of the paintings, Quaytman has worked with the KHM to bring the works back into the museum’s galleries. By partially funding the paintings’ restorations, Quaytman acquired permission to photograph and study the paintings for the artist’s own production. Quaytman’s show coincides with the KHM’s special exhibition of Peter Paul Rubens—van Veen was an instructor of Rubens, and one of the said works, *Amazons and Scythians* (before 1629), is included there. The second van Veen work of topic is *The Persian Women* (before 1629) for which the artist enlists its own privilege to hang the painting in the Secession as a part of the ‘chapter.’ In hanging this work, and building the exhibition around it, Quaytman explicitly directs visitors to view and contemplate the piece.

— Van Veen’s *The Persian Women* was owned by Rudolph II in Prague as part of his collection of burlesque figuration. The painting is far from typical—in fact, the work depicts a subject so rare, that it was unknown for quite a long time. Borrowed from writings of Plutarch, the story is that the Persians were losing in a great battle and the fighters attempted to retreat back into the city without having conquered the enemy. Upon seeing the fighters—the men—on horseback and foot running back toward the city wall, the women of the city emerged. When they were outside of the protection of the wall, the women pulled up the skirts of their dresses showing their naked crotches to the men while saying: “Whither are you rushing so fast, you biggest cowards in the whole world? Surely you cannot, in your flight, sink in here whence you came forth.” Seeing the sight of their mothers, wives, sisters,

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and lovers, and hearing these words, the men were so shocked and embarrassed that they turned around once again and set off again into battle. This is the tale that van Veen depicted, and which Quaytman uses as the bedrock of the show.

— With access to work directly from the van Veen paintings, Quaytman photographed elements of the compositions and then by using sophisticated silkscreen techniques—which is fundamental to all the ‘chapters’—reproduced the image, or parts of the image, onto panels. With the silkscreened image of the *Persian Women* and the *Amazons and Scythians*, Quaytman painted into the silkscreens, also incorporating *The Judgement of Paris* (c. 1636) by Rubens. Doing so opens a door for Quaytman’s own practice in the context of the show, as the artist also includes representations of landscape photos taken in Poland, while conducting research for the Secession exhibition. Additionally, references and applications of Op Art—black and white checker and line patterns—appear in many panels.

Steinway black piano lacquer is used on eleven of the panels as a reflective mirror-like surface, specifically drawing lines of sight, and re-emphasizing perspective.

Analogous to a mannerist artist, Quaytman uses the means of selection as the tool to develop an immersive depiction of a social commentary that is critical of female subjugation, which reexamines a long-standing negative stigma, as well as reframes depictions of the female body. In addition to selecting the works to be restored, Quaytman also reworks imagery from the van Veen works, as well as one Rubens painting to the artists’ own ends. In Quaytman’s production, there is a specific aesthetic employment of hard-edged patterns and embedded fabrics as both collage elements, and stand-ins for brush strokes. The static, yet all the while pulsating images, are tied to Op and process-based practice—which, in relation to Quaytman’s historical material, is crucial, as it brings attention to the dichotomy of long and short viewing: the old master works



demand significant time to fully absorb. Aware of this, Quaytman prints cropped views and selects partial elements, distilling the work to emphasize the female nude.

Cunningly, Quaytman uses art historical movements, art historical works, and the history of the institution itself to build the stage to present these works. The artist manages to make concise statements in each individual work, yet each is entangled in its own historical and architectural content, as well as the complete ‘chapter.’ Presenting visual double entendres and innuendo—such as repeating the story that van Veen borrowed, both transposing and mixing it with optical fields, as well as representing a modification of the *Beethoven Frieze*—Quaytman’s complex logic manages to digest the macrocosm of history, finding instead opportunity to physically engage with material in response.

— R. H. Quaytman’s *An Evening, Chapter 32* ran at Secession, Vienna, Austria from November 17, 2017–January 28, 2018.

IMAGES:
R.H. Quaytman, *An Evening, Chapter 32*, installation view, Secession 2017, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Buchholz (Berlin/Cologne/New York), Photo: Hannes Böck.