JORINDE VOIGT *Codification of Intimacy: Works on Nikolas Luhmann*

by Alana Shilling-Janoff

DAVID NOLAN GALLERY | MAY 1 – JUNE 21, 2014

“A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art.”

—Paul Cézanne

It is a curious matter when an exhibition engages the mind with dexterity and arouses an emotional response not at all. That, at least, is the predicament countenanced by German-born artist Jorinde Voigt’s current exhibition. The 21 works on view are the equivalent of a perfectly proportioned classical Greek statue—just as logically conceived and no less marmoreal. The drawings are predicated on a conceit which, in other hands, might have resulted in a farcical hippocryph fashioned by superficiality fused with pedantry. But Voigt rescues her project from such a fate.

The suite takes its inspiration from *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (1982), a monograph by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. There, Luhmann proposes that we understand love not as an emotion, but as a code for communication, with a semantic value all its own. Though all of Voigt’s works take their titles from concepts expressed in *Love as Passion*, her drawings do not illustrate but instead transform Luhmann’s model of intimacy into a conceptual metaphor for making art, not love. Intimacy is used tralatitiously; Voigt domesticates it into a visual language with a muscular decisiveness that inspires admiration if not ecstasy. For example, the colors of “Attention” (2014) collude perfectly, with hues of salmon pink and saffron entwining in a helix. This is a matter of precision, not passion; it is easy to imagine the form before it was a helix, before the chromatic embrace was imposed, but it excites more awe at Voigt’s technical virtuosity, her precise application of colors, than it does vicarious desire.

In the sequence “A Difference that Makes a Difference” (2013 – 14), four of which are featured in *Codification*, two forms, one in gold leaf, one in ink (in shades at times as deep as...
sapphire, at others azure) spread across the canvas with caprice, one shadowing the near-kinetic motions of the other. In *Love as Passion*, the phrase is meant to describe the small distinctions that separate love from mere eros. Voigt translates the magic of those distinctions—somewhat mechanically—into a separation of media, which enables the viewer to experience an interaction between the gold and the ink. Still, the interaction is gelid, as theoretical as its source.

An enduring theme of *Codification* is the illusion of indeterminacy wrought by intimacy, by “part of you becoming part of me.” Drawing after drawing in *Codification* gives itself over to the paradox of an element being simultaneously lost in and defined by another. What might be erotic in life is, in Voigt’s work, a bloodless interplay between drawn elements and the gold leaf that has been imposed upon it. Indeed, collage allows Voigt to produce a seamless suture between gold leaf and drawing that simultaneously constitutes an invasion of the drawn world and conceals it with near-perfection.

This union is less exhilarating than it might be. In “Interpenetration” (2014) for instance, a form in gold leaf is overcome by an oceanic surge of Persian green pastel. Not even the media can remain circumspect and heed their own boundaries; gold leaf seems to find sympathies with the wave that engulfs it while that green sea seems to be on the brink of achieving human form. Still, the scene is anti-climactic. Both the sea and its figure are arrested, the possibility of their enchanted union suspended in the “not-yet.” Even the lines drawn on the pastel simultaneously collude to give a sense of movement, of currents and cross-currents, yet seem to be creatures of calculation, not the improvised ecstasy they seek to evoke.

Voigt’s work is most engaging when it addresses the semantic content of abstract art. She often creates forms that are entirely illogical in construction, the stuff of molecular biology gone mad, as she does in “The Incorporation of Sexuality” (2014). Whether space-ships reminiscent of an abstract-era Guston or bizarre vesicles, the order that Voigt imposes on these elements highlights another obvious and frequently forgotten central paradox of abstract art: The forms are so empty of semantic content that their illogic creates a meaning in a willfully-welded world. Conversely, the frenetic motions proscribed for the figures, the
enigmatic yet strangely ominous presence of a perfectly straight crimson line labeled “Now”
that weaves like a viper through many of the compositions, lose their semantic value and
become aestheticized, mere ornaments for forms without signifiers, for the forms of Voigt’s
abstract conceits.

Viewers are unlikely to experience Stendhal Syndrome while viewing Codification (though
some works, like “Magical Substitute” (2014), are startlingly luminous). Still, the works in
this Möbius strip of an exhibition do not just refuse “codification”; they also fail to integrate
the central duality of art and sentiment. In Voigt’s hands those two are indifferent strangers
whose faces do not bear even the illusion of familiarity.

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