

Press Release

Michail Pírgelis

Opaque Surfaces

July 2–August 27, 2022

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

Sprüth Magers

Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are delighted to announce *Opaque Surfaces*, a solo exhibition of new works by Michail Pírgelis. In his complex artistic practice, the artist approaches the subject of sculpture from various levels. His work tests the limits of our understanding, radically expanding our experience of the sculptural form.

For over twenty years, Pírgelis has culled material from the wreckage of discarded airplanes, most of which he finds in the Mojave Desert. A meticulous process of abstraction finds him manipulating their surfaces with increasing intensity, stripping them to expose details and structural features that are otherwise not visible – but always present. This fragmentation of the aircraft, along with subtle interventions such as grinding or polishing individual parts, leads to a transformation of the material towards abstraction. Natural processes also mark the surfaces with traces of use and evidence of weathering from the sun and desert storms over aircraft graveyards. The result are complex aesthetic works that offer clear painterly references.

The exhibition features two groups of works. Large-scale, dark monochrome sculptures including *American Black* and the *Desert Star I* and *II* are installed either free-standing in the space, in front of a wall, or hanging. Thus, they constitute a space-defining element, lending an architectural dimension to the presentation. These expansive works, made of rectangular floor sections from the passenger area, are subdivided by metal braces and bits of leftover adhesive. Their vertical structure and repetition conjure associations with American Minimalism, and Barnett Newman's *zip paintings*.

The second body of work consists of smaller works in matte green and white. By placing these – sometimes directly on the large monochrome works – Pírgelis erases the boundaries between surface, image, and sculpture while creating his own sculptural point of view. The constituent moment of this work group is a significant dark green, varying qualities of which either trigger associations with the source or seem to eliminate them altogether: *Hic Sunt Leones* and *Italic* appear to show sections of the Alitalia logo. Several works, including the *Nature Studies* and the *Phantom Hands*, have a clear painterly quality while others show the artist working down to the bare aluminum, as seen in *Opaque Surface* and *Desert Training*. The industrial character of aluminum appears to reference the Minimalist sculptures of Donald Judd

and Robert Morris. However, the surfaces of Pirgelis' works are anything but flawless: paint residue, scratches, and holes give the works something of a graphic quality that more closely resembles a drawing. Leftover traces of paint echo the gestural character of Abstract Expressionism.

Pirgelis's works derive their haunting quality from a fundamental self-questioning. The objects are neither invented nor manufactured. Nor are they ready-mades in the strict, post-Duchampian sense of the word: Their material and form have become completely detached from their former function; their origins barely discernible. The materiality of the works seems strangely familiar, and yet it is difficult to say why it is so or what exactly is familiar about them. Thus, the works oscillate suggestively between object, drawing, and painting, highlighting Pirgelis' complex understanding of sculpture.

Opaque Surfaces is also the title of a recent monograph published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, with texts by Tenzing Barschee, Camila McHugh and Nicolaus Schafhausen.

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Michail Pirgelis (*1976, Essen) lives in Cologne. Solo exhibitions in 2022 are planned at Fuhrwerkswaage as well as Odyssey in Cologne. Other solo exhibitions include Braunsfelder, Cologne (2019, with Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt); Sculpture in the City, London (2018); Leopold-Hoesch-Museum, Düren (2016, with David Ostrowski); Autocenter Berlin (2015); and Artothek, Cologne (2011). Selected group exhibitions include Lantz'scher Skulpturenpark, Düsseldorf (2022); Gewölbe and byvier, Cologne (both 2021); Ludwig Forum, Aachen (2020); DuMont Kunsthalle, Cologne; Kunsthalle Nuremberg; Haus N, Athens; Riot, Ghent (all 2019); Athens Biennale, Kunstverein Reutlingen, and Marta Herford (all 2018); Rubell Family Collection, Miami (2015); Istanbul Modern (2014), Bundeskunsthalle Bonn (2013); Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen (2012); Thessaloniki Biennale (2011); Kunstmuseum Bonn (2010); and Stadtmuseum Düsseldorf (2005). Pirgelis was shortlisted for the DESTE Prize, Athens and 5x5, Castelló (both 2013). His numerous awards and fellowships include the Berlin Fellowship of the Academy of Arts, Berlin (2013), the Audi Art Award for "New Positions" at Art Cologne (2010), the Adolf Loos Prize of the Van den Valentyn Foundation, Cologne (first awarded in 2008), and the Villa Romana Prize, Florence (2007).

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