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Thilo Heinzmann

**Author(s)**

Michael Bracewell

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**About the author(s)**

Michael Bracewell is a writer based in West Sussex, England.

# Thilo Heinzmann

by Michael Bracewell • 23.07.2019

Consisting of five new works made of resin on roughly cut and shaped sections of chipboard, Thilo Heinzmann's surreally titled exhibition *Pantaloni* is stark, confrontational and compelling. Displayed across three rooms, the works (all 2019) are serially titled 'MM' and numbered 01–05. Four are fastened at a slight angle to the gallery wall by means of metal plates **FIG. 1** – industrial-looking devices, which, while barely visible to the viewer, push the works slightly forward and contribute to their formidable sense of weight and presence.

*MM 01* **FIG. 2** comprises three overlapping sections of chipboard, with a semi-circular hole hewn out of the right-hand side of the middle section. The largest work, *MM 02* **FIG. 3**, is in two separate parts, one made up of two overlapping planes of chipboard, and another, hung a little way to the right of it, acts as satellite to it. *MM 04* **FIG. 4** and *MM 03* **FIG. 5** are both made of single pieces of chipboard. The former is portrait format and the latter sharply indented with crude triangular cuts along its lower edge. *MM 05* **FIG. 6** stands on the floor, leaning against the wall and divided on the left-hand side to just above its centre by a narrowly tapering triangular cut.

Thanks to its uniformity in terms of materials and technique, the series has a singular mood that is at once inscrutable and imposing. The works face the viewer as though utterly, gloriously, indifferent to either scrutiny or critique. At the same time, they explore aesthetics and the act of painting with extraordinary and curious intensity.

All the sections of sand-coloured chipboard – an inexpensive product used in building and DIY – are violently hewn, cut or broken, and crudely angled, the raw edges revealing a biscuit-like interior of condensed wood debris. These shapes define the picture plane of each painting, upon which are pools, drips, trails and smears of colourless resin. Embedded in the resin are scatterings of the small wood fragments out of which chipboard is manufactured.

The experience of materiality that is fundamental to these works – and indeed to all Heinzmann's work – is in this case refined to a pun on media: as chipboard itself is industrially produced from wood chippings and sawdust bound with resin, so *MM 01–05* are hand-crafted extrusions of the same process, the raw elements

attacked, separated and exploded into a form of industrial and semi-sculptural abstract expressionism.

The longer the viewer studies these works, the more they insinuate a mood of absurdist anarchy – of slapstick almost, that their otherwise uncompromising brutalism simultaneously seems to deny. Within the cold austerity and confrontational energy of these excursions into the act of painting there is a tension between fervid, impulsive gestural extravagance and a fetish-like attention to form.

The viewer is drawn into a synaesthetic relationship with the work, wherein the visual is experienced in terms of the tactile. The painterly and sculptural qualities of *MM 01-05* acquire an array of sensory meanings – of smoothness or coarseness, of ‘brokenness’, glossiness, transparency, saturation and volume. The art of Heinzmann makes eloquent a dialogue between materiality and the capacities of painting that extends the monumental sensory-aesthetic statements made by Robert Rauschenberg’s work of the 1950s, into the colder and more elusive sensibilities of the twenty-first century.

Since the mid-1990s Heinzmann has made paintings out of media that include Styrofoam, glass, animal hide, hessian, cotton wool, aluminum, unbound pigment, crystal, fur, gum and wood. A common denominator of these paintings is the severe contrast of materials (shards of coloured glass in Styrofoam, for instance), which invokes a tactile response simultaneously with a visual reaction. The viewer is compelled to imagine the experience of touching the material elements of the work, exactly as they might be driven to seek a point of optical focus when looking at a work by Bridget Riley.

As the optical-sensory power of Riley’s paintings derives from their rigorous interrogation, restraint and control of formal qualities – line, shape, colour, rhythm, tone, movement – so that of Thilo Heinzmann, while equally fixated on formalism, manifests as instinctual, primal yet unexpectedly exquisite. It is the fetishist’s attention to detail, whereby sensation is conjured in a manner both direct and elaborately contrived.

The series introduces a new toughness into Heinzmann’s work which distances their temper from the primarily sensual aesthetic of some of his earlier paintings. The gauzy drifting spread and ghostly broken grids of pigment across a pristine white ground that typified Heinzmann’s works from the late 2000s – each painting then sealed within a Perspex box – possess an irresistible minimalist allure. Likewise, the slippery licks, hangs and folds of animal hide in works from the mid-2000s, or the brisk sweeps and dabs of reversed matt and gloss blackness of the ‘Tacmos’ paintings of 2012, appear tentative in comparison to the assurance and aesthetic force of these chipboard and resin paintings.

With their smashed and torn-out forms, punkish inscrutability and dark spit and piss-like splashes of resin, *MM 01-05* convey an immediacy and physicality that surely derives from a hard-won mastery of form and process. The development of Heinzmann's work over the last twenty-five years conflates the aesthetic and formalistic rigour of American Minimalism and gestural abstract painting with the anarchic and libertarian desire to disrupt artistic complacencies that emerged in German art during the late twentieth century.

As such, the odd audacious gravitas of *MM 01-05* exemplifies a divide in contemporary painting that asserts two contrasting yet equally valid sensibilities or schools. The first of these might be termed 'lateral', and describes work that is usually representational or narrative, is concerned with psychological mystery, derives from craft-intensive atelier skills yet embraces trans-media forms, and is above all more concerned with atmosphere than aesthetics. The second, of which Heinzmann's exploration of materiality and gesture is a product, could be labelled 'empirical' or 'heuristic' and tends more towards abstraction. It is fixated on the cumulative development and understanding of form and formalism within one medium, is process intensive (as opposed to craft intensive) and measures its progress or 'success' in sensory-experiential terms.

The works in *Pantaloni* arrest the viewer's gaze and demand the act of looking and seeing to equal the act of painting. As such *MM 01-05* can be seen as an intervention that defines a position. Their balance of aesthetic longing and formalistic violence would collapse into bombast were it not for their concision and strangely emotional intensity. They hold the gaze in a manner akin to a crime scene, as though the material and psychic residue of an unknown event, a catharsis or revelation, had been frozen in time. Heinzmann's art, as it relates the act of painting to materiality and formalism, asserts a commitment to classicism as much as to enquiry.



**Fig. 3** *MM 02*, by Thilo Heinzmann. 2019. Resin on chipboard, two pieces: 60 by 90 cm and 140 by 280 cm. (© Thilo Heinzmann; photograph Roman März; exh. neugerriemschneider, Berlin).

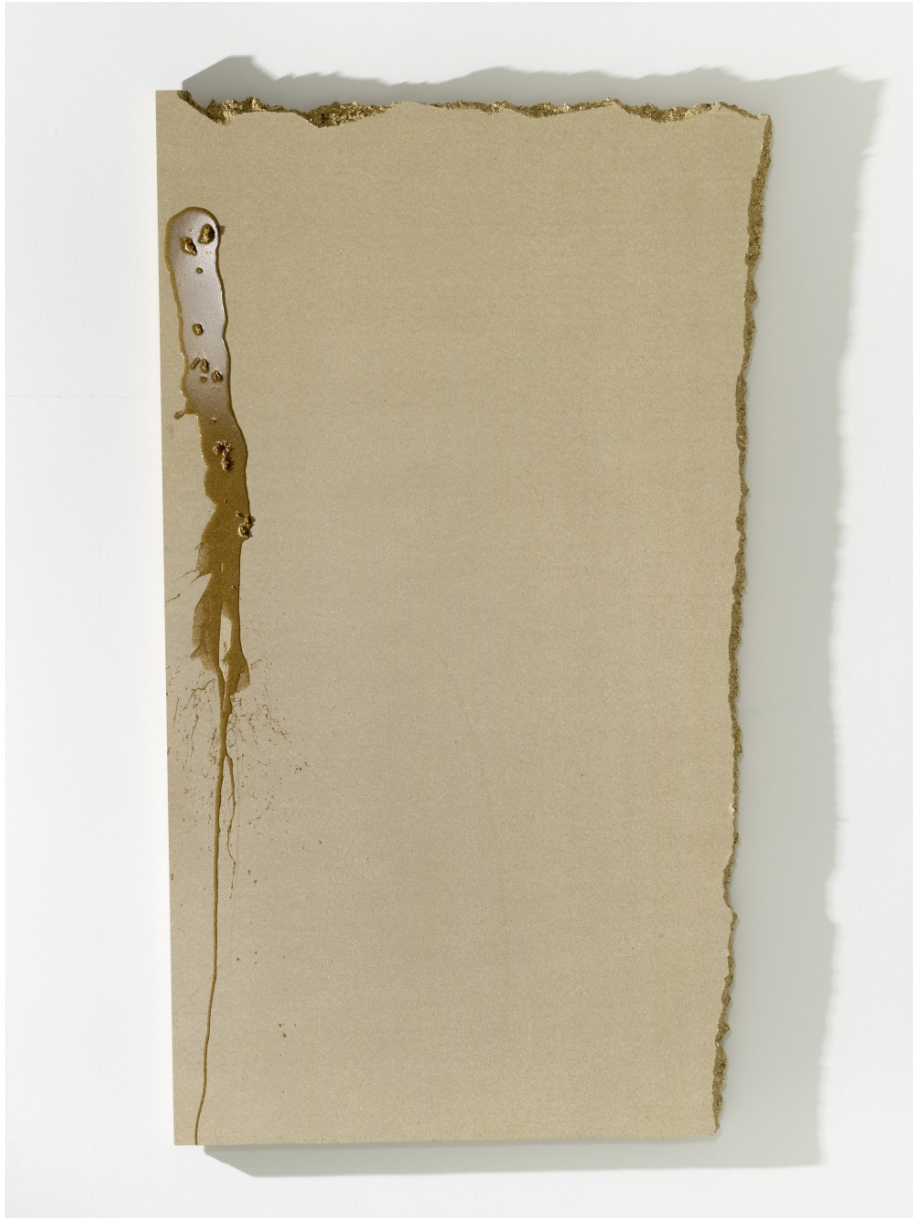


Fig. 4 *MM 04*, by Thilo Heinzmann. 2019. Resin on chipboard, 220 by 140 cm. (© Thilo Heinzmann; photograph Roman März; exh. neugerriemschneider, Berlin).



**Fig. 5** *MM 03*, by Thilo Heinzmann. 2019. Resin on chipboard, 200 by 250 cm. (© Thilo Heinzmann; photograph Roman März; exh. neugerriemschneider, Berlin).





**Fig. 6** *MM 05*, by Thilo Heinzmann. 2019. Resin on chipboard, 230 by 200 cm. (© Thilo Heinzmann; photograph Roman März; exh. neugerriemschneider, Berlin).

**Exhibition details** Thilo Heinzmann: Pantaloni  
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