

Vienna Paintings

Between 2015 and 2017 Tom Phelan created a new series of paintings, which are deeply inspired by the urban environment of Vienna. The city's specific visual atmosphere, which lingers between its crumbling imperial past, the remnants of early modernity, exemplified by Jugendstil (art deco) and its contemporary architectural development have become an important source for the artist's intricate compositions. While Phelan's artistic sensibility as a master printmaker can still be felt in his choice of materials and techniques as well as his dedication to the careful exploration of the materiality of surfaces, with these works he has ventured further into the realm of the painterly. At the heart of his formal language lies a consequent engagement with architecture, which translates into compositions that relate back to core aspects of early modernism. His work refers to the Irish architect and furniture designer Eileen Grey and her patterns opening up to the space surrounding the picture plane as well as the reduced patterns that were created at the Wiener Werkstätten by Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser.

At the same time Phelan relies on his extraordinary visual memory to conjure up highly specific details of paintings or scenes from urban life. For example, the compositional idea of two works in the series goes back to the small isolated detail of a pink sash in contrast with dark armour, painted by Diego Velasquez, which can be found at the Prado in Madrid. Another composition has its roots in the artist's visual memory of a little boy excruciatingly slowly peeling back a layer of tar mixed with gravel from a market street in the center of the city. All of these visual memories are triggered by unique details in the interaction between colour and materiality, which form the starting point for Phelan's painterly process. The use of gold and palladium leaves in conjunction with his choice of red oxide base hints at the tradition of icon painting and gives testament of Phelan's artistic knowledge and careful consideration of craft and artistic traditions. The paintings, however, also draw their unique strength from contemporary urban visuality: concrete, gravel, tar, steel constructions or perforated metal sheeting. These elements are translated into the complex layering of different paints and materials and their vivid colour distributions and contrast schemes. The artist goes to great lengths in the preparation of his colours, exclusively employing individually mixed pigments, at times adding different silicates to affect their precise materiality and reflectivity. This uncompromising dedication to detail presents itself in all of Tom Phelan's exciting new works.