

ARTFORUM

Silvia Bächli at Nelson Freeman

By Julia Langbein

9 May 2010

Silvia Bächli's oeuvre over the past thirty years continues to engage deeply with line—not as unit, brace, or grid, but as a kind of character whose behavior the Swiss artist studies and reveals. The works on paper consist of several strokes each, floating horizontally or forming stripes down the page, welded at the ends or spaced apart. Some might call these works simple, even simplistic—see, for example, the imperfect grid hashed out in oil pastel on a postcard-size sheet, or the two mere strokes of grayish-rhubarb-colored gouache forming a backward number 7. Not surprisingly, her 2009 installation at the Venice Biennale paid homage to a poet, the late Inger Christensen. Bächli's work, with its simplicity of means, operates like poetry, flooding the images with a contemplative silence that makes the viewer acutely aware of subtleties in bordering and centering, repetition and aberration. In her gouache pieces, she often starts by stamping down her brush and pulling it, leaving marks of increasing transparency, adding a record of both the direction and duration of the line being laid.

If Bächli's work blurs some fundamental distinctions between drawing and painting, or figuration and abstraction, it also restricts each work to one medium and allows that medium to shape and characterize its lines. In the series of large-format black gouaches, her strokes fall from the top of the sheet to about three-quarters of the way down in strips that act like wet, heavy fabric; in the small untitled oil pastel mentioned above, her lines also fall from the top down, but the traction of the greasy pastel stick against the bumpy paper forces them into crooked, pivoting tines.