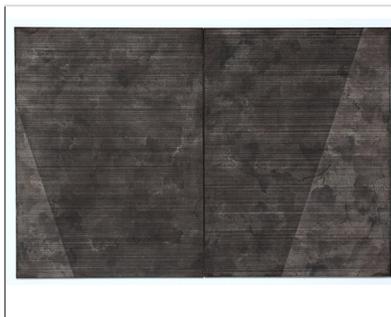


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Blaise Rosenthal @ Johansson Projects

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by [Julia Couzens](#)



The Torrents, 2016,
charcoal and acrylic on
canvas, 64 x 96"

Meticulous and moody, Blaise Rosenthal's asymmetrical paintings are like slow moving boxcars, carrying the freight of painting across a vast American landscape. Thin, closely packed charcoal lines, the color of asphalt or coal, stretch across watery mottled grounds of umbra, delineating veins of deep feeling and solitary dioramas of desire.

Raised in the rural Calaveras foothills of the Sierra Nevada, Rosenthal grew up saturated with the hot earth of red dirt summers and dank, oaken winters. Self-taught, the language of Rosenthal's painting is informed by the terrain of memory. The meaning of his work is found in its intrinsic sensuousness and its physical reality.

Devoid of decoration, overt expression, and painterly drama the work is stripped to its bones. Rosenthal refreshes and restates the question of what a painting is. Like Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin — and in considering the surface entity, Ellsworth Kelly — Rosenthal deploys paint, stretched canvas, and the application of surface marks to construct specificity. His decisions are based on faith in the aesthetic experience and an impulse for the elemental.



A Divine Gesture, 2016,
Charcoal and acrylic on
canvas, 32" x 23

But Rosenthal's melancholy tone — the exploration of the sooty blackness of the dense strata of charcoal lines traveling across his surfaces, paint the color of oak galls — imbues the work with a 21st Century incantation of Casper Friedrich loneliness. This is the stuff of distant train whistles, Cormac McCarthy, and silent odysseys on the road.

Rosenthal builds his paintings with the painstaking concentration of a bricklayer. Decisions are based on composition, how the painting is constructed and what constitutes its form. Most of his paintings are composed by joining differing- sized, rectangular canvases to emphasize their identities as objects, rather than as supports for pictorial illusions.

Using tape to define steeply angled sections, he saturates and covers the canvases with layered pours of earth toned acrylic paint, staining and burnishing the surface with blackened shades of sienna and umber. This ground is the armature upon which Rosenthal rules his severe, precise, and delicate charcoal lines.

The eclipsing vastness of *The Torrents*, the largest piece in the show, spreads out before us, a yawning canyon in the night. But the abutment of two canvases cleaves a line down the middle, causing us to recalibrate our relationship to the painting not as an image, but as an object. The least inflection, such as a tiny grit of charcoal ensnared by the tooth of the canvas, gives body to the line. Simultaneously grand and minute, the painting determines an architectural site engaging the viewer in time and space.

A Divine Gesture is composed of two vertical elongated canvases, one longer than the other. A single, slanted angle spanning the abutted canvases deeply lances the bifurcated painting. The different tone,

the different pressure to the lines, the different relationship of the slant to the plane stages the painting in a closer, more intimate space than the diminishing expanse of *The Torrents*.

Rosenthal's paintings are constructions and blank slates that leave us to our own mindfulness, without narrative or noise to interrupt the infinite possibilities that may come to us. There is no hierarchy to his work; no component, no shape, surface, or ground is more important than another. Paint, support, edge — all are equal. And though he takes pains to extract any semblance of rhetoric or story, his elemental marks and methods convey a commitment the fundamental acts of painting, which continue to possess a deeply rooted hold on us.

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Blaise Rosenthal @ [Johansson Projects](#) through June 11, 2016.

About the Author:

Julia Couzens is a Sacramento-based artist and writer whose work has been widely shown, most recently at the di Rosa Preserve. Her drawings and hybrid objects are in museum and public collections throughout the U.S. These include the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts; Berkeley Art Museum; Oakland Museum; Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina; and Yale University. She lives and works on Merritt Island in the Sacramento River delta.

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