

John Spiteri

Social climbing

The title of John Spiteri's recent show at Neon Parc, *Still life social climber*, could be referring to himself, in a self-deprecating way, but I imagine there is a little salt meant for the audience too.

I wonder what social climbers do, besides being a little blank? Watch being watched. Join in carefully. Show they've got the wares. Make a move, get a step ahead—not too far ahead though 'cause they want to be included. Make the next move, there's the game, something everyone will see and recognize. Maybe Spiteri is suggesting art in Melbourne is a bit like this.

Spiteri's last show at Chert was titled [The house of hair](#)—the full hair-shirt for hard-nut Berliners. I can see that.

All this reminded me of something I read about Francis Alÿs recently, where he was quoted saying, 'However elliptical you want to be, you have to make contact ... The paintings are a way to trap in the viewer'. Alÿs's exhibition was titled [A story of deception](#), and the writer was hesitating about who was the object of this deception and if Alÿs was at some level disingenuous.

Abstract painting

John Spiteri's Melbourne exhibition comprised a series of absolutely intriguing and original small paintings on linen. I first noticed their strange quietness—the works seem so reductive. There was a slight feeling of ambivalence and ambiguity. It's something that you read in the way he has handled the painting process, not so much in the final images of the paintings, which are actually very stylish.

Each of the works is a series of deletions and revisions (or reverses) in paint. The linen starts unprimed before each new layer is put down and allowed to dry for a while. Spiteri has then washed away most of any new surface (what he doesn't like?) to eventually get a build-up of sedimentary increases of rubbing out on top of rubbing out and only minimal colour. The upper layers include very simple gestures, like doodles, in the paint, never too heavy. There are scratches and bits

of line-work and coloured-in bits—not quite absent-minded scribble.

There is a lot to see.

Spiteri's process of attrition has a bit of 'horse cure' for me but he is clearly interested in the structure of the paintings and in finding new means. The abstract in the work, the absence or emptiness or randomness, is actually an opening. Spiteri looks for authenticity in entropy. Each painting is casting for a lesser degree of order (or greater order, if you think about it).

John Spiteri, [*Still life social climber*](#), Neon Parc, Melbourne, 22 August - 22 September 2012.



John Spiteri, 'Denim & lace',
2012, oil and enamel on
canvas



John Spiteri, 'Dirty secrets', 2012, oil and enamel on canvas



John Spiteri, 'Permanent blue', 2012, oil on canvas



John Spiteri, 'Living for the night', 2012, oil and enamel on canvas