

HESSE FLATOW

Phan, Mary Anne. "Pietà Mondrian and Drip at Tops Gallery." *Burnaway*. Online. July 19, 2019.

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REVIEWS



Pietà Mondrian and Drip at Tops Gallery

BY MARY ANNE PHAN
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Installation View of *Pietà Mondrian* at Tops Gallery, Memphis. Courtesy of the artist and Tops Gallery.

The title for Christopher Chiappa's first exhibition at Tops gallery, *Pietà Mondrian*, elicits as much of a small chortle or eyebrow raise as his playful sculptures on view. *Pietà*, an art historical reference to art depicting the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus, serves in the context of this show as an analogy to gravity. In this installation, Chiappa is interested in sculptural depictions of weight. In context of the *Pietà* in Renaissance and Baroque sculpture, cold marble is rendered into flesh and emotion, manipulating folds of drapery, the artist's hand morphing stone into agony and drama. Chiappa alludes to Mondrian in the show with both his simple palette, and in titling all the works "*Composition*" followed by a number. Mondrian himself called his own non-representational forms "Neoplastic," which focused on fundamental geometric shapes and asymmetry—tenants that Chiappa utilizes but also breaks in *Pietà Mondrian*.

Chiappa's new sculptures are lacquered MDF constructions of lines and shapes, hanging on the gallery walls at a size that one could easily hold them in an embrace. Their simple, elegant forms seem like they may start to writhe and dance against their concrete backdrop which emphasizes the gravitational and animated concept suggested by the title. Maybe in

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a small joke about the confectionery quality of the colors in the show, *Composition #71*, hanging in the main gallery area, pays homage to an ice cream cone. As the least abstracted form in the show, *Composition #71*, has the strongest aura of the sculptures in the exhibition, declaring that this art is, most importantly, made to be enjoyed. The theme of *Pietà Mondrian* is its immense physicality and its simple forms deriving from, as the artist states, "a determinism of gravity". Unlike the endless scrolling of our contemporary lives, Chiappa's work is meant to ground the viewer with the weight and presence of minimal forms.

Chiappa takes ownership of now, ironically, historical Modernism, in this body of work. A century after the Modernists abstracted the forms of their world, Chiappa explores our contemporary environment with his own abstractions. Chiappa's abstractions and minimalism

in *Pietà Mondrian* does not intend to ask of the viewer anything more than to appreciate simple elements, simplicity being ever more rare in our always bustling world.



Installation View of *Drip* at at Tops Gallery, Memphis. Courtesy of the artist and Tops Gallery.

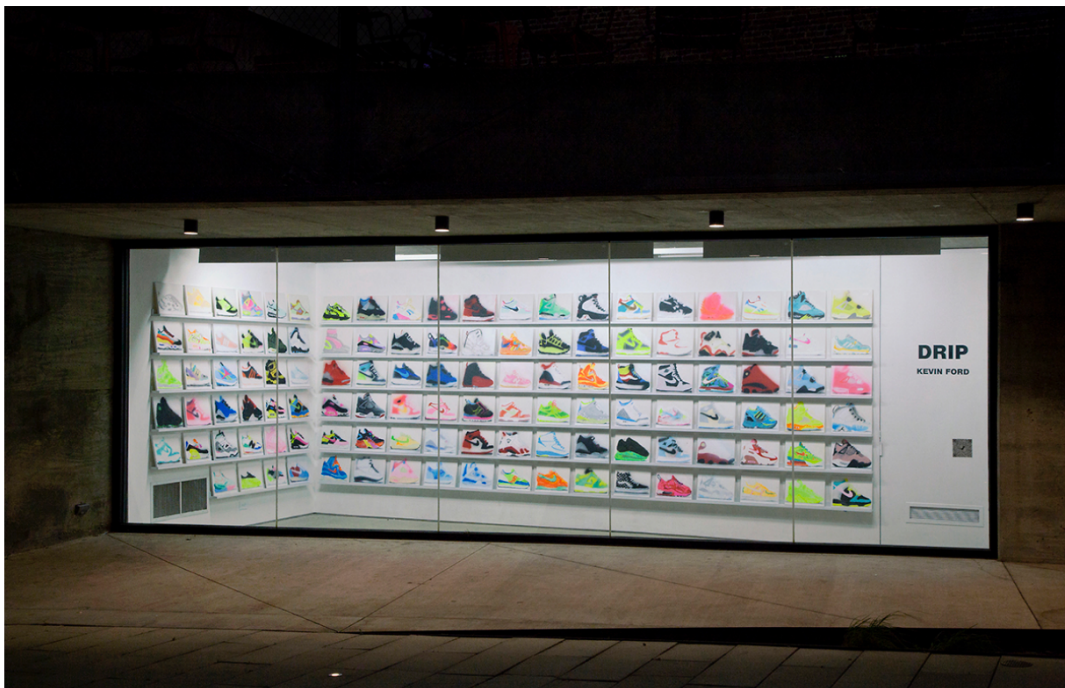
Along similar lines of play with language and form, Kevin Ford's exhibition *Drip*, occupying the window front of the Tops Madison Avenue Park gallery, considers the double meaning of the word "drip": in the form of a painter's hand, and in the essence of street slang The

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installation consists of white shelves with over a hundred 11x14 paintings of various streetwear shoes. Every shoe represented is painted from an existing model, the smaller canvas size making all the paintings out to be a roughly life size, two-dimensional representation of a single shoe. The dominant theme of the paintings is the ever iconic Nike swoosh. The installation is engaging and, as nearly all of us are familiar with at least some of the shoes, satisfying to peruse and perceive.

Forming the image of a store front, *Drip* commands a trompe l'oeil effect on a passerby, who, at first glance may see a shoe store, and at second glance discerns the small canvases and misty shapes of Ford's shoe paintings. The labor of painting over a hundred paintings rewards the artist with plenty of elements to play with in an installation. His decision to align them in neat rows nods at the commercial, conspicuous world of sneakers, a culture that Ford states fascinated him as a child. Reflecting on his childhood practice of sketching out countless iterations of sport's idols sneakers, he revisits this practice as an adult with *Drip*. This nostalgia also acts as a statement Ford makes on the American experience — one in which children sit at home, fantasizing about footwear mass-produced by a faceless corporation — that these consumerist dreams are an illusion. The canvases of *Drip* are representational to the degree of how one may experience them in a bygone memory, only re-sparked by these corporation's endless feeding of these objects into our minds.



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Though there is not a pinpoint from which *drip* appears as common, specifically Black, slang, Genius.com places its origins somewhere in the mid-90s in Houston, as a reference to street culture's fashion, diamonds, and the abuse of lean. Its first reference in a hip-hop track is credited to DJ Screw and Lil' Keke in *Pimp Tha Pen*, "*I'm draped up and dripped out, know what I'm talkin' bout*". A culture in which coveted shoes are displayed and worn, tag-on, as objets d'art in their own right. The J's in Ford's painting are blobby and blurry, not the crisp kicks of streetwear provenance. Ford's paintings are made with acrylic spray brush, imparting a hazy quality to his shoes. The artist is not concerned with perfect draftsmanship or perspective in his work, rather, he leads us into a conversation about the fetishization of these supposedly functional objects. Outside of the enthusiasm and economy these shoes command, what is the actual form and function of these objects in our minds? The irony of a commercial art gallery displaying and selling these paintings of these shoes perhaps playing into the statement itself.

Kevin Ford's oeuvre as a painter encircles what he describes as intense looking. Regarding *Drip*, the matter of his work succeeds in inviting the viewer to look closely and engage with a familiar subject in a new, impressionistic, light. *Drip* can be read as Ford's simple nostalgia for the Nikes of his youth, an extracted view of sneakerhead culture, or a commentary on commercialization. Ford is a prolific and thoughtful artist, and his current installation at Tops is a provocative use of the Madison Avenue Park location.

Pietà Mondrian and Drip are on view at Tops Gallery in Memphis, TN through August 21, 2021.

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