

Sunday, February 4th, 2018

## **Biting a Thumb at Monochrome: Jim Lee at Nicelle Beauchene**

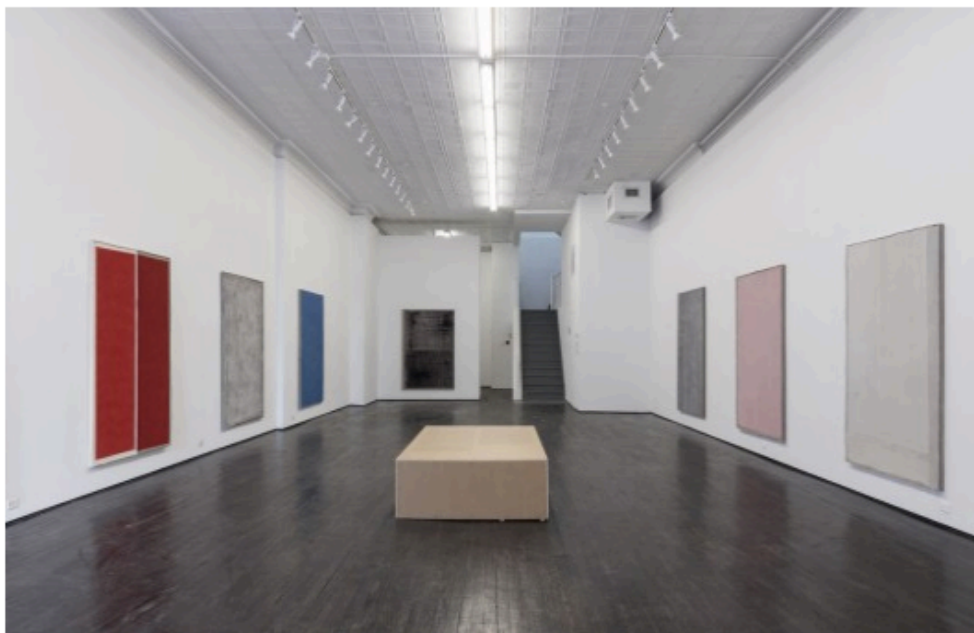
by Kara Cox

**Jim Lee: Half Off at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery**

January 5 to February 4, 2018

327 Broome Street, between Bowery & Chrystie Street

New York City, [nicellebeauchene.com](http://nicellebeauchene.com)



Installation shot of the exhibition under review: Jim Lee: Half Off at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York

Is painting in monochrome in 2018 retrograde? Jim Lee's solo exhibition *Half Off* at Nicelle Beauchene seems to suggest as much as it fixates on the absurdity of this investigation. Lee explicates the perverse nature of painting monochromes (or painting itself) through tongue-in-cheek illustration of them. The paintings become physical manifestations of his casual approach and slapstick process and efforts to undermine the stoicism historically found in painting.

Uneven in texture, saturation, and hue, Lee's paintings boast their apparent ineptitude: He unabashedly folds, staples, and tears lopsided seams, which feels irreverent given their nod to color-field abstraction

and notions of purity. This is made meaningful by Lee's use of different historically class-laden materials, such as oil paint and linen, intermixed with crass interlopers—Flashe, zone marking paint, visible staples, glitter, acrylic: lowbrow materials that feel deliberately applied to expensive supports that have been previously agitated and aggressively handled. The lowbrow materials occasionally impersonate highbrow ones or gesture over them, denouncing any aura of opulence implied by high quality. Lee's works are biting their thumb at the elitism and purity bound to the stuffy history of the monochrome.

Highlighting the texture of the raw canvas or the slick plastic sheen of acrylic, mimicry and illusionism in Lee's gestures double as surface depictions. Registered quickly for their tactile surface, their substance draws from deeper-rooted content, heavily contingent upon a viewer's diligence. That they ask for a patient and persistent viewer can be seen in the paintings' multifaceted intersections – these arise as time is spent with the works—whether between the digital and physical, humor and solemnity, elitism and the egalitarian. Lee's surface quality, materials, gestures, and handling juggle anecdotes of the heavy baggage paintings can carry.



Jim Lee, *Half Off (A Cream Divide)*, 2017. Acrylic medium, spray enamel, and staples on canvas and linen, 76 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York

Intentionally or otherwise, Lee's work often imitates the behavior or interaction a user has with an interface, such as manipulated screens that press against the picture plane and simultaneously recede into a deep space. *A Cream Divide*, split in half by conjoined canvas and linen, recalls a Photoshop preview dialogue box, de-saturating an image on the right half of its surface. The bright red panel on the left has a soft, blotchy red coating, unevenly mirrored by a seemingly darker red shaded by the underlying linen on the right panel. Similarly, in *Safety and Senegal*, Lee connects two distinct yellow surfaces of different prismatic intensity, sheen, and texture. Comprised of Flashe and zone marking paint, the lighter yellow intensified by its dark linen support, and conversely its light beige canvas, amplifies the deeper yellow. The physical and conceptual subtleties in Lee's work invite the viewer to spend time with them, contradicting our expedited relationships to the information available via the screens alluded to in some of his works. Other paintings, such as *Rutting Moon* and *Mr. Pleasant*, inch closer to a "truer" monochrome with only a single color applied scrappily to a cobbled surface, appearing simple but still jabbing at traditional color-field painting. Lee has provided his own bench from which viewers can fully absorb his faux monochromes. The same size as the paintings, the bench has printed on its seat a story from the artist's hometown about a peeping tom and inevitable chaos that ensued. There is humor in peering around seated visitors in an attempt to read the text, mimicking a peeping tom's mannerisms oneself. Looking back up at the paintings after reading the story feels like a violation of the paintings' and artist's privacy, and removes the deified objecthood to which works of art aspire. Paintings as an extension of oneself splayed out in a sterile gallery space is now re-imagined as unwelcome trespassing, but also realized as a necessary evil of continuing a sustainable art practice within a capitalist society. In this vein, the artist has provided a take home tee shirt emblazoned with the text "F♥CKER" for visitors to purchase. Who is the real fucker here?



Jim Lee, Untitled, 2018 (bench with printed text). Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York