

## Vanessa Maltese: Two-fold Tally

Erin Stump Projects, Toronto

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by Bill Clarke

Despite not yet having been on this planet for even a quarter of a century, Toronto-based painter and sculptor Vanessa Maltese is that rare breed of young artist who appears to have emerged from art school (in this case, OCAD University) with a clear vision of what she wants her art to be. Maltese's two exhibitions at Erin Stump Projects since 2010 have demonstrated a remarkable consistency, and have featured work incorporating aspects of the Bauhaus, Minimalism, Op and Conceptual art, mid-20th-century textile patterns, as well as the funkier side of late-20th century furniture and architectural design. Although this may seem like an unwieldy combination of influences, the result is work that manages to have its cake and eat it too, cheekily flaunting this bundle of art historical references while combining them in ways that feel fresh and new. Perhaps it is for this reason that the judges of last year's RBC Canadian Painting Competition awarded her work first prize.

To say that Maltese makes "paintings about painting" does not describe her work precisely enough. Rather, in her most recent show, *Two-fold Tally*, she engages in a methodical deconstruction of the physical structures of painting. The canvas and the physical structure of its frame are examined with a surgeon's eye, her painting tools like scalpels that slice beneath the surface to uncover and move to the foreground what is usually concealed from view. The closer one steps towards a painting like *The painted surface is the painted surface* (all works 2012), the more dynamic and confounding it becomes. Black, taupe, beige-gold and white horizontal bands of varying widths serve as the bottom layer of the painting. Over this, Maltese has placed a pattern of baby-blue slanted stripes, which are divided into four sections that radiate out from the centre of the painting towards its four corners. As if this wasn't enough to fool the eye into thinking the work consists of separate sculptural layers, Maltese places a large X-shape overtop to represent the frame's X-brace support. The illusion of three-dimensionality is so well rendered that it takes a moment for the eye to be convinced otherwise and, indeed, Maltese thinks of her paintings in sculptural terms. Such a conflation of Rothko-esque expressionism, hard-edged abstraction in the vein of Frank Stella, and the reductive, minimalist X-form that brings to mind Richard Tuttle, should not work well together, but they do.

Those intrepid enough to delve into the other two smaller paintings in the show—*Balaclava # 2* and *Understudy (stand in)*—found

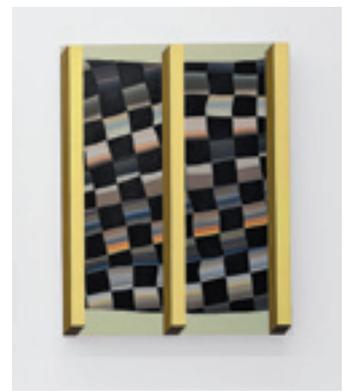


Vanessa Maltese, *The Painted Surface is the Painted Surface*, 2012, 152 × 122 cm, oil on panel

PHOTO: JIMMY LIMIT; IMAGE COURTESY OF ERIN STUMP PROJECTS



Vanessa Maltese, *Coat Rack Composition*, 2012, 99 × 71 × 6 cm, wood and acrylic paint



Vanessa Maltese, *Balaclava #2*, 2012, 46 × 36 cm, oil on panel

PHOTOS: JIMMY LIMIT; IMAGES COURTESY OF ERIN STUMP PROJECTS

themselves in the delightful thick of more chromatic dissonances, and clustering and ebbing forms. The first consists of what appears to be a midsection of undulating black squares arranged in grids through which are seen horizontal bands of soft colour—this time pink, yellow, blue and grey—similar in style to those in *The painted surface*. The top layer, three horizontal forms that look like short pieces of wood, tamp down the layers underneath, especially the black grids, which look as if they might float away if the block forms weren't keeping them in place. The second painting brings to mind 40s and 50s fabric and wallpaper design. Here, a brown vertical rectangle with an uneven top edge and a pattern of scattered rice-like shapes across its surface is sandwiched between a flat geometric plane of red and white, and three thin red and white stick shapes. A wonderful tension between disorder and structure radiates from all three paintings.

Accompanying the paintings are eight sculptures influenced by the deceptively simple and disarming gestures of the aforementioned Tuttle, as well as the quirky sensibility of the Memphis Group, a collective of Italy-based designers and architects formed by Ettore Sottsass that created fanciful furniture, objects and textiles throughout the 80s. Again, the kitschy approach of Memphis design and the pared-down sensibility of Tuttle's sculptures seem like an improbable pairing. However, the sculpture *Coat Rack Composition* looks like a convincing cross between something that Tuttle might have made in collaboration with the Memphis Group—think mid-60s Tuttle wall works like *Turn* or *Bit* mated with Sottsass' iconic "Carlton" shelving unit. Elsewhere, like Tuttle's work, Maltese's sculptures subtly disrupt the gallery space, and seemingly produce something out of nothing. For example, in *Frame*, she expands on Tuttle's 3<sup>rd</sup> *Rope Piece* (1974), which consists of three inches of white cotton clothesline nailed to a wall, by using a significantly longer length of thick black rope to delineate a rectangular empty white space on one of the gallery's walls.

Maltese produced the paintings and the sculptures in this show at the same time; motifs and colours from the paintings reappear in the several of the sculptural works. For example, the "wooden" stick forms in *Understudy (stand-in)* move into three-dimensions in a suite of five vertically oriented thin, square wooden bars of equal length. All vaguely resemble measuring devices, hence the prefix "tally" in the pieces' titles (and the name of the exhibition). The white *Tally-Camouflaged* recedes, shyly, into the gallery's wall, while the forest green *Tally-See fit* includes wooden dowels that allow the work's top section to be repositioned. One of this exhibition's many highlights, however, could have been easily overlooked. Another of these sculptures, *Tally-Hanger for*, is painted a muted grey. From a single dowel near the top hangs a small rectangular block with a circle cut through it. Upon circling the work, the eye is surprised by a pop of bright orange in a strip down one side of the dangling block. This unexpected shock of colour is a delight, animating a work that, at first glance, appears nondescript.

To date, Maltese has proven herself to be a most generous artist. She is creating work that provides a dizzying excess of visual surprises, work that invites viewers to not only look *at* the work, but also to look *through, around and into* it as well. ×

Bill Clarke is a Toronto-based arts editor and writer who has contributed to ARTnews, Canadian Art and Modern Painters magazines.