

NOIR

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“Black is the color of my true love’s hair,” Nina Simone famously sang with singular intensity. And it appears that art history, and its artists, would agree. From Goya’s hallucinatory black paintings like *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819–1823), to mid-twentieth-century masterworks like Mark Rothko’s late-life black abstractions, which hang in his Rothko Chapel in Houston like shrouds, and Louise Nevelson’s vastly intricate wooden installations spray-painted a monochromatic and suffocating black, to the recent black crayon grids of Corsin Fontana, which conjure both prison and a kind of ecstatic intelligence, this darkest color (or non-color, as Isaac Newton would have us believe in the 1600s) has long transfixed makers of art.

Black as death, as mourning, as austerity, as authority, as exploratory, as race, as poverty, as polarity, as fascism, as urbanity, as fertility, as chic: black has always been many things to the artists who employ it so expertly. In ancient Egypt, black (*kem*) symbolized death *and* resurrection, with Osiris referred to as the “black one” and numerous statues and gods depicted in its dark stain. Since then, the color black has experienced moments of renewed fervor, as in the twentieth century, when Paris’s Maeght Gallery presented the 1946 exhibition “Black is a Color,” with works by Bonnard, Braque, Matisse, and others. Sixty years later, Munich’s Haus der Kunst mounted “Black Paintings,” featuring artists like Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, and Frank Stella. From their paintings, which hum with intelligence and a dense, gorgeous sobriety, black revealed itself to be as seductive, studious, and inevitable as night. Black’s definition might be many but it is consistently meaningful. It is the very color of portent—and perhaps of meaning itself.

On view at Tony Wuethrich Galerie are works by 16 diverse artists who approach the color black from a multiplicity of angles—narrative or abstract, monochromatic or not—and mediums: prints, painting, and sculpture will all be featured. Artists who work exclusively with black will join artists who only work in black occasionally. The time period of the artworks is equally wide-ranging: A. R. Penck and Richard Serra are represented by pieces from the 1980s, while works by the young Basel artists Oliver Minder and Pawel Ferus were made in the past few years. The other artists featured include George Baselitz, Corsin Fontana, Markus Gadiant, Róza El-Hassan, Thomas Hauri, Christian Herdeg, Hanspeter Hofmann, Leiko Ikemura, Indra., Noori Lee, Oliver Minder, Frances Scholz, and Markus Schwander.

April 2010, Quinn Latimer