

New York

ARTFORUM

Jessica Mein

SIMON PRESTON

301 Broome Street

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When São Paulo's ban on outdoor advertising went into effect in 2007, it left the city's billboards looking something like Jessica Mein's paintings: sun-blached color fields with the scaffolds showing through, like perspective grids held up to the sky. In Mein's case, the scaffolds are canvas stretchers, exposed not by progressive urban policy but by X-Acto knives and unthreaded hemp. The urgency of these destructive gestures is, at first blush, no clearer in Mein's work than in any other contemporary canvas-vandal, punishing a medium without caring to indict it for anything in particular. Yet her latest exhibition, "Obras," sidesteps much of the preciousness and vacuity of this vogue by turning it toward a history of blanked-out spaces.

Obra means both artwork and construction site, and Mein intends both senses here—telescoping urban and pictorial space in what appear to be modest abstractions on distressed canvas. Their geometric motifs, in fact, come from sections of now-disused billboards. In the transfer to the stretcher, these graphic fragments assume a waxy, spectral quality, alternatively hovering over the surface of the canvas and sinking some inches below it, as the slashes and unwoven sections compete to occupy the foreground. This oscillation might be an old trick—and indeed the exhibition is almost mobbed with references, from Barnett Newman's zips to Ellsworth Kelly's shaped canvases to Agnes Martin's parallels—but at their best moments Mein's paintings are as oblique as the exhibition's architectural intervention: a vertical slipshod slice through one of the gallery's walls, aligned with a weftless "zip" that runs through a cantaloupe-colored canvas. As many commentators noted, when the billboards came down in São Paulo, the favelas beneath them came to attention. Mein's excised canvases might not have that degree of social potency, but they're admirable for seeking contact with a history beyond painting's false endgames.



Jessica Mein, *Obra Onze*, 2013, acrylic medium on canvas and wood, 15 3/4 x 23 x 1 1/2".

— Joanna Fiduccia