brown and cheap-looking, showing obvious signs of wear. The wall was still painted a smarmy pink hue left over from the previous occupants. Nearly all of the temporary walls added for that exhibition, however, had been taken down—but the roughness of where the seams used to be remained unfinished. The skylights, soiled spots and greasy strips were still visible; the earlier visitors leaned their heads. And if you looked closely, you might have noticed out-of-place holes and awkwardly fitting corners in the space in which a show is actually in progress.

The work being presented in these musty-smelling, sometimes resemble conventional painting. Sergei Jensen is well known for his painting in the usual sense: Only in the rarest cases are the surfaces decorated with paint and brushes, and even if he does happen to make a picture in this way, he's often likely to hang it facing the wall. For the most part, Jensen paints using no real space at all, but rather invents his own with nothing but wood and canvas. He covers his stretchers with sand or paper, or even with canvas, which he then paints on. If the result is an abstract composition, and yet these pictures are recognizable as paintings, although paintings of the second degree.

*Afrotric Market*, 2008, for example, features a rough fabric applied to its stretchers, its surface showing traces of spilled bleach. But this isn’t at all what one might take it for at first glance; it appears to be an energetic composition of abstract lines and shapes, or even a simple abstract expressionistic gesture. Nor does it embody the diametrical opposite that’s become so common in the art world: that is meant to be an, almost headreserve that is meant to cut painting’s status as the paradigmatic genre of expression. Jensen’s painting is somewhere in the middle. And to describe it as a project of skillful laissez-faire, finding a sort of *peinture automatique*: an intentional “letting be” that is already there and a spontaneous “letting out” of combined with a “leaving out” of paint and primer that is a critique of the medium, reducing painting to bare essentials. Sometimes, as in the appropriately titled *Untitled 9*, Jensen takes the process of reduction as far as the painting through the thin fabric.

A consequence of this technique of letting be and leaving through the paint to the canvas and through the canvas to its exhibition space that itself has been let be, rendering it a potential painterly gesture: the old carpeting, the wall, the superfluous nails. All of these things create a tension between the paintings with their presentation, a perfectly balanced tension of imperfection. In Jensen’s work, one finds an understanding of how to create an effect, a baffling precision, and an infallible sense of placement. What at first glance appears to be a glibly intellectual undertaking reveals itself to be

HAMBURG AND BERLIN

Carsten Fock
GALERIE KATHARINA BITTEL/GALERIE SEPTEMBER

In two simultaneous shows mounted in Hamburg and Berlin, Carsten Fock presented his latest work in the form of all-over installations that group drawings, paintings, and wall treatments into coherent ensembles. The shared concerns but did not merely represent formal variations on a theme. It’s better to think of them as two separate, self-contained pictures—and this is precisely what characterizes Fock’s artistic perspective: having space come into its own as a picture and vice versa. “Earlier, my individual wall paintings functioned autonomously,” Fock has said. “Now, for the first time, the entire room has become something like a meta-painting.” Fock’s immersive meta-paintings do not, however, downgrade individual works integrated within them to mere placeholders. On the contrary, these ensembles sustain and focus the specific qualities of Fock’s framed drawings and paintings. This crossing of boundaries between individual works is underlined by the fact that in some cases the individual pieces themselves display a distinctly tectonic structure. Fock formerly tended to use typography as a basis for his images but now increasingly uses freer gestures. Figurative allusions emerge as a hint of landscape, for instance, or motifs drawn from Christian iconography. Fock aspires to achieve a precise equilibrium between reduced pictorial gesture and shading that lies somewhere in Hartung-style *informal* and the suggestion of three-dimensionality. The emphasis on process helps each painting and drawing develop its own characteristic all-over rhythmic structure.

The two shows put these principles into practice in differently tempered but equally valid ways—which was what made their juxtaposition so interesting. In Hamburg, Fock created a somewhat cooler, abstract chamber with a spread of wall paintings that rhythmically alternate between violet and black, along with a third wall painted a dense black. Taking this backdrop as his starting point, he implemented a hanging strategy of ironic self-reference—as when a framed pastel drawing was placed in isolation and repeated, on a smaller scale, the motif and color tone of the wall on which it was hung. The

Berlin installation, by contrast, had an almost sacred feel to it, suggesting a chapel devoted to abstract painting: The wall painting, regular in structure but multicolored, evoked light streaming in through church windows, and an abstracted picture of Christ against a violet background on one of the central walls contributed to the spiritual effect. And yet all of this remains not so much a theme as a template, applied to produce first a picture and then a pictorial space. “Transcendence without pathos” is Fock’s own term for it.

—Jens Asthoff
Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.

ZURICH

Martin Soto Climent
KARMA INTERNATIONAL

The site-specific title gave the name to Julia Kristeva—literally closed itself off from the viewer: The gallery was locked and could not be entered. Instead, one had to view the show through a large, rectangular slot set into an interior wall that separated the exhibition space from the gallery’s entryway. How disorienting that one stands before a locked door during a gallery’s open hours, and to have to view the show from a distance! The exhibition was thus reduced to a framed picture. We wandered through it with our eyes rather than our bodies.

Mexican artist Martin Soto Climent is known for his graceful manipulations of found objects, which he combines, recasts, and arranges to create poeticized and eroticized artifacts not unlike Surrealist abiens. In his first solo show in Switzerland, he presented two series. “Phantasy of an Immigrant Dream,” 2009, consists of seven worn-looking broomsticks whose brush ends have been replaced with both new and frayed hairpieces. Leaning against the wall—gaunt sculptures threatening to topple over—they lend a rhythmic structure to the space. Along with these, Soto Climent also presented samples from a series that has been in progress for quite some time now: “Tights on Canvas,” 2007. True to the title, these are white, medium-format canvases, each of which has one or two pairs of nylon stockings stretched across it. Some of the stocking feet hang down like dripping paint, and the series as a whole makes reference to both abstract painting and the female nude.

Like many of the everyday objects used by Soto Climent, stockings, brooms, and fake hair create multiple layers of association. A title like “Phantasy of an Immigrant Dream” helps give those associations a more specific focus: The figure of the immigrant typifies a subject with utopian hopes that gradually wane as hardships exceed the fulfillment of these dreams. Are the worn hairpieces melancholy signs standing in for the longing for another identity and a more glamorous reality? Can the brooms on this polished stone floor, which no one is allowed to walk on and sully, be understood as an allegory for social obligations taken to the point of absurdity? The separation between subjectivity and objectivity, representation and reality, is performed here peering through the window. But the weight of such topics by the charm of the objects themselves, which, like all of Soto’s works, perform a balancing act between melancholy, laughter, and humor. The stocking pictures, with their naked climbers and displayed legs, join the brooms with hairpieces in marking the body and the insistence of its desires. And it was no less devastating as disorienting to be forced into the role of voyeur through the window. With this estranged gaze, Soto Climent us to confront the way in which we go through the world blindly, as our perceptions and imaginations become more impoverished.

BRUSSELS

Richard Venlet
ELISA PLATTEAU GALERIE

Walking through the door of Elisa Platteau Galerie, one is immediately struck by the aesthetic of Richard Venlet’s Untitled (Claustra) (all works 2009), a large white grille that stretched from the floor nearly to the ceiling, immediately to the right and parallel to the wall. Behind its bars was a large map, square in format and obviously aged, preserved within a frame, apparently showing a neighborhood in Rome. Across from this single adornment, a narrow and steep staircase led to the second floor. The character of the space there was completely different: The floor was covered with the aptly titled Untitled (40 Hexagon Floor Elements)—carpeted wooden modules, randomly arranged. At times, they formed piles of two or three; there were gaps between them, but these were too short to constitute passages, and the hexagonal platforms were too wide to step over, so that you had to climb over them when necessary. Moving gingerly in order to get around the room, you came upon the presence of another white grille, also Untitled (Claustra), hung on the wall corresponding to the one on which its twin was seen on the ground floor. The contrast between these two floors, augmented by the lighting (muted downstairs, abundant upstairs), was a distinct mode of perception was elicited. Yet both were subjected to stumbling blocks: The entire environment was placed under the sign of impediment. Access was not diverted; both the eye and the body were constrained thereby suggesting a narrative reading of the exhibit encouraged by the return of the grille at the end of the wall, a story in two acts, in which the protagonist, after it is perceived that the initial object of his quest had evaporated.

The map displayed on the ground floor, a drawing by Battista Pitareni, dates from 1762. It is not the property but was lent to him by the University of Ghent; it was