

At first glance the image accompanying the announcement of Matthias van Arkel's open studio event in NYC appeared to be an assortment of fabrics challenging the formal traditions of painting. Humble materials conscripted into a fine art context brought to mind the fairly recent return of craft and craft related materials in contemporary art. As the elevator lights clicked off the floors up to van Arkel's space, my thoughts floated around the works of Duchamp, Pollock, Jannis Kounellis, and some of Mike Kelley's work.

I was fortunate to find the artist between appointments, and my visit was rewarded by experiencing the work featured on the announcement. The materials were nothing like fabric at all, but a unique synthetic rubber that, according to the artist, is used for industrial conveyor belts capable of withstand extremes of heat and cold. At a factory in Sweden, van Arkel tints, twists, compresses, sculpts, and layers the the work into large metal heating trays used to cure the rubber. The metal tray is then "baked" in a large industrial oven at geothermal temperatures where most metals begin to liquify. I find this apt since van Arkel's engagement with his materials yields stratified composites of form, texture, and color that

recall forms that might be associated with landscapes, tectonic plates, or on another more intimate level, perhaps they could be remnants of erotic encounters. Historically, the act of baking these "paintings" harkens back in some ways to Gordon Matta-Clark's "Incendiary Wafers" (1970-71) or his Photo-Fry gift to Robert Smithson (1969). But the work is hardly "done" after it has cooled. Van Arkel penetrates the work by way of boring perforations through the strata of pigments and polymers, allowing it to be hung on custom wall brackets. One of the works slumps against the wall while I assist him in turning the work to the hang it "backwards". We discuss the relationship the piece suddenly has to Rachel Whiteread's "Untitled (Amber Bed)" of 1991. Back up on the wall, our dialogue slides into Mike Kelley's "More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid" (1987). Van Arkel was generous with his time and I was permitted to linger with his recent series. What I find intriguing is that the final fixed aspect of van Arkel's work creates space for his audience to locate their own meanings and metaphors.

-

Stephen Conway, New York City 2008