

Andrea Alessi 'Interview with Davis Rhodes',  
Artslant.com, April 2012

ARTslant

'rak'rüm (noun);  
the back room of an art gallery  
where artists and art lovers hang

## Davis Rhodes



Davis Rhodes (Victoria, B.C., Canada, 1983), lives and works in New York City. He received his MFA from Columbia University's School of the Arts. He has been exhibiting his paintings since 2006 and has been the subject of solo shows in New York, Los Angeles, and Antwerp, including his most recent show at Team Gallery in New York (2012). Rhodes is presenting a solo show with his Antwerp gallery, Offic...[\[more\]](#)

Davis Rhodes, *Untitled*,  
2011, latex and enamel on foamboard, 96 x 48 x 10.5 inches  
© courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery, NY

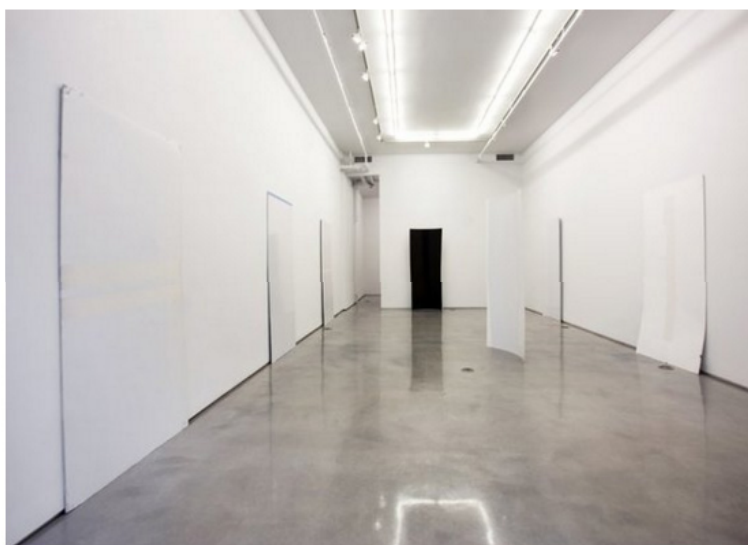


## Interview with Davis Rhodes

**Brussels, Apr. 2012:** There is a tendency to anthropomorphize the larger-than-life entities that are New York-based artist Davis Rhodes' paintings. His four-by-eight-foot foamcore panels lean against the wall or stand precariously on an arced edge, given unsolid footing by their warped, paint-saturated bodies. They (literally) drip with agency, their fragile materiality asserting its presence in the gallery and demanding an encounter.

They can be obstinate, confrontational. While Rhodes' earlier work referenced advertising and urban signage, more recent paintings admit this genealogy but deny viewers the simple pleasure of recognition. They play on the tension of an internal and external space, an art past and an art *present* (both of the moment and in existence). The shiny, achromatic panels display a proficiency in the visual languages of minimal and post-minimalism, and yet their imperfections – drips, cracks, warps – coupled with their unpretentious material presence deny fluency, imploring us to look elsewhere for these paintings' brethren. What are these objects that we meet other than latex and enamel on foamcore? Our own footing becomes as uncertain as that of the artwork we confront.

Rhodes was kind enough to speak with me about his new work preceding his solo show at Art Brussels 2012.



Davis Rhodes, *Installation view*; Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

## OFFICE BAROQUE

**Andrea Alessi:** *The term "painting" sometimes appears in quotations when applied to your work. I find myself asking this of artists a lot, but the answer can be quite revealing: Do you describe yourself as a painter? Do you find there are challenges or disclaimers attached to that label?*

**Davis Rhodes:** Absolutely I'm a painter. Painting is a symbolic modality – a particular form of agreement, a relation that is always being made and unmade. It's not a "subject". There are instances, at given times, of commitment on a material level and to a mode of relation. That's all. I'm painting with an insistence on immanence and transformation. I'm working with materialist abstraction, its extension in the social field and the way "medium" and mode of address become unstable as a result.

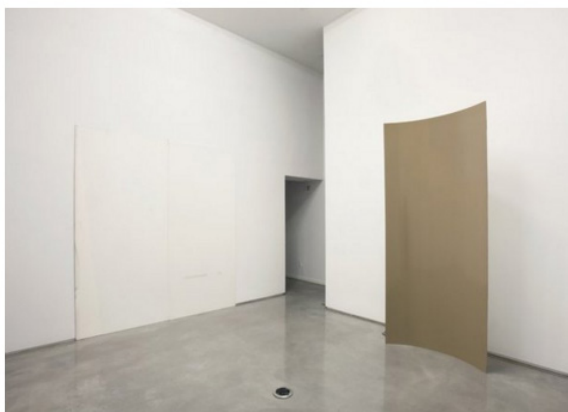
The effect of the pieces, their presence, is always coextensive with this bastard materiality, their fragility, their *capacity to be affected*. The pieces are appearances, always under threat. The surface has no support. There's no recourse. It's *only* surface. I'm interested in this groundlessness – it's where I find myself working. Michel de Certeau wrote "[Working] is born from and deals with ...the impossibility of one's own place. It articulates an act that is constantly a beginning: the subject is never authorized by a place...forever deprived of an ontological ground, and therefore it always comes up short or is in excess...linked to a name that cannot be owned." The pieces are correlatives to a condition of being. Their "body" or their "standing" can't be taken for granted.

**AA:** *You speak of working in a state of "groundlessness". On the one hand, it seems like at some point you relinquish authorship and let the works exist (i.e. their willful material properties, their interactions with viewers). On the other hand, I'm not sure you totally want to give up control. There still seems to be a suggestion of what you want a viewer to experience - an instability that is at once immanent and staged.*

**DR:** Yes, definitely.

**AA:** *Can you talk a bit about your process? Your materials seem to have an agency of their own (the not entirely predictable behaviors of cut vinyl and paint-saturated foamcore, for example). Do they ever rebel?*

**DR:** I'd prefer not to speak to my studio process in detail right now, though I appreciate you saying the materials have an agency of their own. It's true. They're not passive. There's lots of chance in the process.



Davis Rhodes, *Installation view*; Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

## OFFICE BAROQUE

**AA:** *Installations of your work have gone from recalling the horror vacui of the sign-laden urban landscape, to a systematically staggered layout, to the most recent pared-down set up where each painting gets a lot more breathing room (in your show at Team). How integral are these installation decisions to the meaning of your work and what do they have to say about the autonomy of the artwork?*

**DR:** The recent show at Team in NYC worked through presence, porosity and displacement. The pieces are super sensitive surfaces, registering traces of *life elsewhere*. That elsewhere haunted the immediacy of the pieces. It also gave them specificity. That's why the work was installed with lots of space – to put pressure on its being-in-the-world, its capacity for enchantment.

The pieces have no more or less autonomy than we do as subjects. That's in a way what the [number] 1 is – the conditionality of singularity, but presence nonetheless, and very specific operations in different contexts. The point is just what it does. Nothing inside the pieces is meaningful. It's about staging an unstable presence – of the works and of the viewer.

**AA:** *So, for you, the encounter is paramount?*

**DR:** Yes, the encounter, and the reality of the work.

**AA:** *What and where is this equivocal elsewhere? Anywhere but here in the gallery? A specific sign or object in the world? Or is it something more nebulous than that?*

**DR:** Something more nebulous.

**AA:** *If the painting is an index of "elsewhere", then what is the relationship between your paintings and their referents? Do they become part of the visual economy they stand for? Or perhaps that is too narrow a question. Do you think all paintings everywhere are part of this visual economy?*

**DR:** I don't know about all paintings, and there is no "referent". It's not a question of the pieces referring, but of operations and modalities of address being cut out of the world and put to different use.

Silence is most attractive to me now, in a culture that is hysterical for transparency, for the consummation of identity. I'm interested in opacity, alterity, intimacy, a kind of perceptual zero point – to allow what *cannot be painted* to be present and threaten what is visible.



Davis Rhodes, *Untitled*, 2011, latex and enamel on foamboard, 96 x 48 x 10.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

## OFFICE BAROQUE

**AA:** *I know you're not interested in discussing your development, but it seems to me where you are is either a rejection of or evolution from where you've been. Is the appeal of "silence" as big of a shift as it seems on the surface? Or has it always been there?*

**DR:** There's always been remoteness. Since I started them in 2006, there has been a latent non-identity in the foam-core pieces. The work was all about connecting to the outside, to particular places and economies of presence – horizontality, total exteriority, transversality, "public" forms. There was a mimetic possibility with the materials, but also evacuation and a refusal to signify, to fully "participate". I've tried to go further in this direction. The work I'm making now is an inversion – the outside is a negative presence. A void that is the afterimage of the world.

**AA:** *It's difficult to wrap the mind around the inverse of presence (which is not necessarily absence), and it opens onto some of what you mention earlier. "Silence" can perhaps be seen as the consequence of this severed connection. Or is it the other way around – was the connection severed in search of repose?*

**DR:** The connection wasn't severed, it was deepened. It's a compression rather than an inflation of different modalities. The "figures" of the work have been collapsed into its materiality, into a *state of interiority* that is an inscription of its exterior coordinates. A body hyper-sensitive to its outside, resisting representation and moving in different ways. It's an intimate state.



Davis Rhodes, *Untitled*, 2012 enamel on foamboard 92 x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist and Team Gallery.

**AA:** *There are a lot of terms and names thrown around in discussions of your work – Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Spatialism, Arte Povera (to name a few). To what extent do you subscribe or react to these or any other art historical movements?*

**DR:** I've forgotten what these terms mean. I'm interested in a suspension of mediation. The work intensifies, de-structures; it produces opacity, not knowledge. What matters is how things operate now, in our current condition.

History is the catechism of painting. To be the author, the subject, the one who knows is always the demand... It's better not to be trusted. To have your abandon, your pleasure. It's better to say "I am every name in history" and let it amount to nothing.

—Andrea Alessi

*Artslant would like to thank Davis Rhodes and Office Baroque Gallery for their assistance in making this interview possible.*