

LONDON

Prabhavathi Meppayil

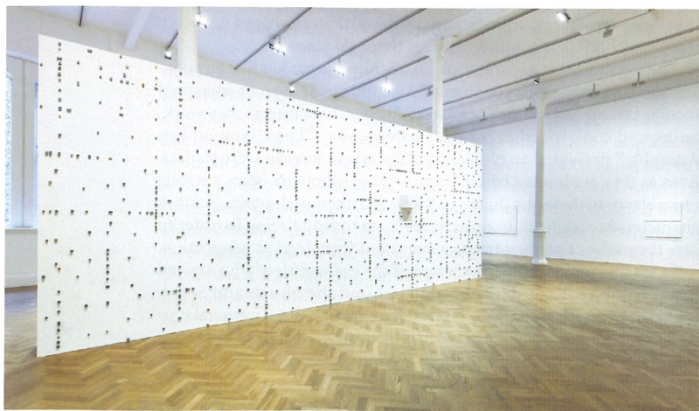
PACE GALLERY

To gild is to transform, with intricate labor, the seemingly ordinary into the precious. Bangalore, India-based Prabhavathi Meppayil descends from a long line of goldsmiths, and she embeds the precise technical language of those craftspeople in her spare and stripped-back work, literally entrenching their processes in the work's surfaces. Made of painstakingly applied layers of gesso, each of which takes hours to dry, her pieces feature the imprints of endless horizons of tiny geometric shapes made with a *thinnam*, an Indian goldsmithing tool traditionally used to embellish bangles. Many of the works are serial: Sixteen panels, eight panels, or two panels of enigmatic, barely textured white gaze back serenely as the eye adjusts and the details come into focus. Lines, ovals, corrugated rectangles, squares incised with smaller squares, diamonds, dots, and dashes: Each repeated component is just a few millimeters wide. One large panel combines alternately horizontal and vertical rectangular sections of varied *thinnam* patterns, punctuated by swaths of untreated gesso, like rigid quilting.

"The practice, the process, is a way of life" Meppayil has said of these pieces, of a kind that first came to broad attention in the West when her work was included in Massimiliano Gioni's 2013 Venice Biennale. But there is no gold used, only the holy abstraction of white on white, a geometric snow blindness that reconstitutes, if you submit to it, how and what the eye can see—an additive stripping away, adornment in the negative. Instead of encircling a wrist, dangling and chiming as the wearer gesticulates, the jewelry patterns lie flat, in matte silence. But delicacy does not mean simplicity, and as these marks invoke the tools that made them, they likewise summon the time and effort. Within the quiet is noise, the tap, tap of the tool as it is impressed on the gesso-primed surface—a tiny geometric metronome, counting endlessly into pictorial space.

Agnes Martin, Lygia Pape, Robert Ryman, and other heavyweight Minimalists and post-Minimalists are often invoked to contextualize Meppayil's work; so, too, are artisanal legacies, Indian culture, and traditional craft and technique, which also means their ongoing obliteration by industrial technologies. For Meppayil, these histories and practices are not mutually exclusive, but combine, collapse, and repeat in different iterations—a global modernism par excellence. Named according to Meppayil's idiosyncratic, nonhierarchical ordering system, *l/forty seven* and *l/hundred thirty one*, both 2018, hinted at the grid, a

View of "Prabhavathi Meppayil," 2019. Foreground: *sb/eighteen*, 2018. Background, from left: *l/hundred thirty six*, 2018; *l/hundred twenty eight*, 2019.



structure emerging from copper wires that Meppayil covered in thick layers of gesso, then sanded in places to expose the oxidized lines that shimmer green, purple, blue. As in the patterned gesso panels, tiny differences glimmer with the viewer's shifting perspective; these works contain devotion and ask for yours in return. Likewise, *sb/eighteen*, 2018—a freestanding wall that divided the gallery in two—displays 875 found iron, copper, and brass goldsmith tools in a low-relief grid. Craft relic and art object combine, become one.

Transcendent, pure, mystical, essence, presence: These words are used again and again to describe Meppayil's art. They are not wrong, these tropes of geometric abstraction, but the material and cultural specificity of her practice gives it another dimension; her work requires time, physical encounter, and attention to detail. If there is a language here, it is one of duality and shifting syntax: a metonymy both traditional and contemporary, in which the simplest mark becomes the tool, becomes the fingers, the hand, the arm, the body, and all of the bodies before and after it, a temporal and corporeal flood behind the white that delivers calm and escape from all of the above.

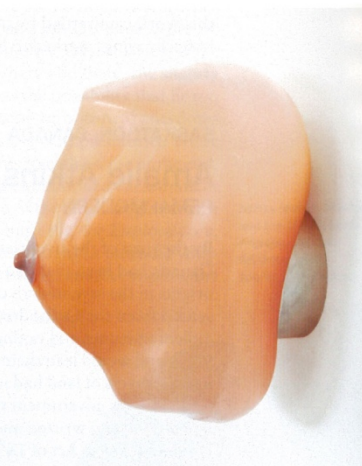
—Emily LaBarge

Nevine Mahmoud

SOFT OPENING

There are breasts, and then there are tits. With their supple glass curves and pointy resin nipples, the pair hanging temptingly on the wall here were definitely tits. The pinky-beige *breast (Rosa Alpraum)* and her deep-red sister *breast (tamarind)* (all works 2019) were convincingly smooth and perky, just begging for an illicit feel. Confronted by Nevine Mahmoud's sculptures of fragmented erogenous zones, I sensed the conflation of two prohibitions: the taboo against touching an artwork in a gallery, and that of touching a stranger's body. Both can be tempting; both must be resisted. I must not stroke the velvety, white-marble *bottom tear*: a spherical, human-size, butt-shaped peach with giant blue-glass drop emerging from the top. I must not run my finger along the fleshy folds of the orangey-pink *glass bust (phantom Li)*. A final sculpture, *carved slide*, was a curved chair-size marble slab that seemed to lie on its side atop colorful Formica floorboards, as if waiting for somebody to curl up and spoon it.

The five works in Mahmoud's exhibition "belly room" were not so much sculptures as come-ons, daring us to make the first move. There I was, staring stupidly at a pair of perfect champagne coupe breasts positioned at eye level, like some shameless creep. I studied the delicate nipple detailing, and the gentle fleshy curves molded around the smooth aluminum bracket attaching each boob edge to the wall. Next, I was crouching down to scrutinize the delicate crack down *bottom tear*, inspecting all round to confirm the fruit's 360-degree perfection. Anywhere outside an art gallery, the police would've been called. Alone and unobserved in the tiny space, amid a bevy of carefully arranged body parts as delicious and succulent as hard candy, did I dare reach out my hand and cop a feel of the high-polish glass and shapely marble?



Nevine Mahmoud, *breast (Rosa Alpraum)*, 2019, handblown glass, resin, aluminum hardware, 10 × 7½ × 7½".

“Belly room” was marvelously obscene, a masturbator’s paradise. Even the checklist, with its suggestive references to “handblown” glass, “Italian” or “Argentine” marble, and assorted “hardware,” began to read like a coded brothel menu, a sensation not impeded by the gallery’s soft-porn double-entendre name, *Soft Opening*, stamped teasingly at the top. The London-born, Los Angeles-based Mahmoud has described her delight in working with labor-intensive materials and achieving her hyper-glossy finishes through “repeated touching and sanding and stroking.” So only the maker gets to fondle this provocative art! This show was like an orgy for one: the artist. The rest of us were left to our own frustrations, imagining the physical sensation of surfaces so alive they seemed to lightly perspire. I could imagine a collector buying one just for the perverse pleasure of stroking it whenever she pleases.

Mahmoud cites Louise Bourgeois as an influence, and the connection with the late French-American sculptor’s polished, disembodied body parts is evident. Bourgeois’s *Sleep II*, 1967, is a giant carved marble phallus set on two massive rough timbers, like a bone-dry penis tower attempting to raise itself off the floor, symbolic of deflated patriarchy. In contrast, Mahmoud’s seemingly drenched, life-size sculptures were not going for symbolism. Each braless wall tit was realistically meaty, about the size and color of a roast—a pink slab of ham on the left, a bloodred cut of beef on the right. Other works appeared subjected to gravity, from the drooping silky bulges of *bust (phantom Li)* to the glass apparently seeping out of *bottom tear* to the toppled *carved slide*. Mahmoud’s living sculptures create unexpectedly intimate encounters, like accidentally brushing against a stranger’s sweaty skin in a club, complete with the unspoken anonymous frisson. Sometimes a peach is just a peach, but not here.

—Gilda Williams

PARIS

Bernard Frize GALERIE PERROTIN

Rules can set you free. This credo has defined Bernard Frize’s practice for more than forty years, leading him to design various systems, protocols, and restraints intended to rid his paintings of self-expression. To this end, Frize has, for previous bodies of work, engaged assistants in an intimate choreography whereby six hands worked together, used multiple brushes to map out all the possible moves for a knight on a chessboard, and stretched up dried “skin” harvested from a large basin filled with gallons of house paint. The results of such techniques—mostly large, colorful abstractions—were recently on view in the Centre Pompidou, Paris, retrospective “Bernard Frize: *Sans repentir*” (Without Remorse). And while the survey duly celebrated Frize’s unconventional practice and the diversity of his oeuvre, it failed to delve into the artist’s characteristic serial approach, in many instances showing only one result of a painterly experiment the artist repeated numerous times. Fortunately, Perrotin provided a concurrent showcase, “Now or Never,” for Frize’s recent series. As seen here together, works produced under more or less the same set of conditions found distinction from one another mainly via the painterly accidents—drips, bleeding, or splatter—that sometimes also result in unintentional pictoriality and illusionism. While these chance and subjective effects disrupt Frize’s highly regimented practice, they serve as further proof of the artist’s having ceded creative control.

Produced between 2016 and 2019, the eighteen paintings in the Perrotin show were made with a blend of acrylic and resin, a concoction that Frize has been using since the mid-1980s. Dragging transparentized jewel tones across the canvas with a thick brush, the artist creates

colorful and luminous linear patterns that range from simple vertical bands (*Deuz*, 2018) to an intricate basket weave of brushstrokes (*Bork*, 2018.) A particularly indicative installation in an upstairs room featured five identical square canvases that had each been divided into thirty-six squares with red or green pencil prior to being painted. Slight variations in the paint application from one painting to the next resulted in a series of patchwork-style compositions that ranged from one constituted of tidy pastel cubes (*Epa*, 2018) to a bright, drippy madras (*Buc*, 2018.) While adhering to a modernist grid, Frize lets the paint do what it will. The ensuing imperfections—stunning dark bands of overlapping colors, swirling watery seepages, and delicate monochrome dribbles—beautifully illustrate the tension between order and disorder that is at the heart of Frize’s practice.

Three of Frize’s most recent works, *Nami*, *Bem*, and *Go!*, all 2019, were the by-products of a new protocol involving distinct layers of paint. Frize forms the backgrounds of these paintings with strokes of color that subtly shift from blue to purple to orange to yellow and back again as they run from the top to the bottom of the canvas. Over these vertical striated bands, Frize has added splashes of blue-green paint, which unexpectedly bring a sense of realism to the ostensibly abstract compositions. The new paintings’ surfaces remain characteristically smooth and flat, but the splotches create illusions of texture and distance. To this viewer, these works alternately look like planks of acid-eaten anodized titanium and leaves fluttering over a blurred, light-streaked highway. Indeed, interpretation is the final variable in Frize’s experiments—and it gives the artist one more chance to distance himself from his paintings.

—Mara Hoberman

Behjat Sadr BALICE HERTLING

In *Le temps suspendu* (Time Suspended), Mitra Farahani’s 2006 documentary on the Iranian painter Behjat Sadr, the artist explains that “in painting, you suspend time.” Sadr passed away ten years ago at the age of eighty-five, but in this exhibition, her decades-long practice crystallized in nine oil paintings (one supported by steel struts running from floor to ceiling), seven collages, and four photographs. Her canvases often read as abstractions, but they are squarely grounded in the real: in the materiality of the varied surfaces and the viscosity of oil paint.

As an art student in Italy in the late 1950s, Sadr took European art informel as a reference point. Here, two paintings dated ca. 1957, around the time the artist exhibited at Rome’s Galerie Il Pincio with the support of her teacher Roberto Melli, bore witness to the influence of that movement. Both *Untitled*, like all of the works on view, these two vertically formatted canvases feature wide strokes of black oil paint and muted flickers of red and green. But Sadr did not adhere to the tenets of European modernism; instead, she created a practice that was



Bernard Frize, *Nami*, 2019, acrylic and resin on canvas, 39 3/4 × 31 1/2".