

ARTFORUM

critic's pick, 8 June 2015

Günter Umberg and Bernard Frize

FONDATION FERNET-BRANCA, St. Louis

2 Rue du Ballon

May 17–October 4



View of "Günter Umberg and Bernard Frize," 2015.

This exhibition brings together works by two artists who each developed their own radical way of painting: Günter Umberg and Bernard Frize. What's interesting about this pairing is that their works initially do not look very similar. For decades Umberg has made dark paintings wherein color appears through and within layers of black, while Frize uses as many colors as possible to avoid choosing between them. Umberg's paintings are usually monochrome fields, and some of them are grouped into so-called "territories." In Frize's serial works, the brushstroke, and its dynamic gestures, is a principal actor. Common ground between these artists can be found in the 1970s, when both became stuck in their respective practices before finding new attitudes. Umberg started to work with dry pigment mixed with Dammar binding material, applying it in many thin layers. Meanwhile, Frize sought to withdraw into an abstract vocabulary where the content and the technique of painting coincided.

The show opens with a display of several series by Frize, such as "Solitaire," 1999, which are occasionally interrupted by one of Umberg's monochromes, while in the second half of the exhibition, the main focus is on Umberg's work. In the center of the gallery is a room with two early works by Frize, both *Untitled*, 1977, facing Umberg's six and a half-foot high *Untitled*, 1976. Here, the dialogue between these two artists is most sharp with defining works from each other's output looking at each other. For the viewer, it becomes clear that both artists turned to the essentials of the medium to redefine their practices.

— Jurriaan Benschop