MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY
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John Wesley & Jo Baer

Installation view of "Jo and Jack: Jo Baer and John Wesley in the Sixties" at Matthew Marks Gallery

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Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
Through August 13, 2010

Someone give Matthew Marks a hug. While Larry Gagosian has earned the love of a grateful city for his sprawling, no-expense-spared blockbusters devoted to superstars like Picasso and Monet, Marks has been mounting equally impressive, though less lauded, exhibitions of artists far more deserving of a museum-quality touch. Sublime prankster Charles Ray received the royal treatment, and heretical Minimalist Anne Truitt was feted in a retrospective that just closed.

Now two idiosyncratic and underserved American painters, Jo Baer and John Wesley, have received Marks' discerning attention, in a show of work that the two made while living together and sharing a studio in the 1960s. The lone work in the front room is a tall, thin painting by Wesley that shows a short young man half-heartedly reaching out to catch two identical babies floating overhead. Its titled "The Day It Rained Babies, I Caught a Couple," and comes with a canny biographical footnote: it may portray the show's curator, Josh Baer, the artist's son.

But there is more going on here. The man and the raining babies float against an empty pale-blue background, and they're framed with a thick band of gray. Imagine the work without its strange figures (admittedly a difficult task), and one would be left with Baer's abstractions. A similar color palette served as the foundation of these 19 works (ten by Baer, nine by Wesley): blacks and blues cut with trace amounts of white, turning those colors gray.

Baer and Wesley also seem to share a parallel approach to design, a desire to dominate a painting's frame and control its center. In Wesley's ink and graphite "Rudyard Kipling" (1964), its bespectacled subject is shown in profile inside a circle at the work's center, while eight women — mouths open, as if in ecstasy or pain — encircle his head. Likewise, in Baer's works, like "Untitled" (1968–69), which outlined with a delicate black band and a narrow green stripe, the center is left untouched and undisturbed.

What these works mean is, of course, another matter. Both artists spent the 1960s feinting toward, but never quite embracing, the movements that they were grouped with — Baer with Minimalism, Wesley with Pop — and their distance from those orthodoxies still looks strange, and wonderfully so. Wesley, for his part, seems intent on determining the bare minimum needed to render a culturally legible figure, a slip of the pen turning an Indian's hair into a president's wig in "George Washington and Three Indians II" (1963) or morphing a pillow into a polar bear in "Turkeys" (1965).

If Wesley is concerned with the fragility and pleasure of representation, Baer seems more determined in casting doubt on the entire medium of painting. Her works are variations on a definitive formula: black borders, surrounded or embedded variously with luminous blue or green lines. Occasionally, as in "Wraparound Triptych – Blue, Green, Lavender" (1969–74), she sets these lines on the sides of her canvas, as if unable to act on the work itself. In the 1980s, Baer would quit abstract painting, describing it as an artistic dead end. Which is a shame: her paintings look like models of restraint, ideally suited to these times.