

Lloyd Wise, "Willem de Rooij: Friedrich Petzel," *Artforum*, October 2011.

ARTFORUM

Willem de Rooij

FRIEDRICH PETZEL

Although sociopolitical subtext typically lingers beneath Willem de Rooij's works, the five weavings in "Crazy Repelled Firelight," Friedrich Petzel's summer show, initially invoke Frank Stella's famous maxim, "what you see is what you see." Monochrome or subtly graded in color, the textiles are stretched, like canvas, over wooden frames, and thereby rehearse postwar abstract painting. But immersive transcendence is hardly their aim—rather, they dazzle, with metallic or acrylic threads that shimmer, twinkle, and flash. Such scintillations, nevertheless, are restrained, tipping the effect toward upscale luxury rather than downmarket glam.

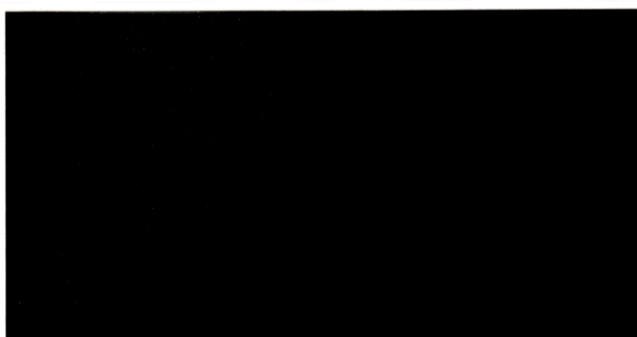
Like any good luxury object, the weavings flaunt their superior craft. To create *Silver to Gold*, 2009/2011, a suite of five monochromes first shown at the Athens Biennial in 2009, de Rooij enlisted the capabilities of O. J. Van Maele, a high-end linen manufacturer in Belgium; Ulla Schünemann, an expert weaver based in Potsdam, Germany, made the others by hand on a two-hundred-year-old loom. *Black to Brown*, *Diglot Lovers*, and *Black to Black* (all 2011): The titles of the handwoven works are, like *Silver to Gold*, descriptive (*Black to Black* describes the work's gradation of matte black and reflective black, and *Diglot Lovers* is an anagram of "silver to gold"). Given that their weave is loose, one can easily inspect Schünemann's handicraft to discern how the gradations are made. First laying down a warp of either black cotton or unbleached linen as the base, she then wove woofs that contain different mixtures of thread, adjusting their makeup to effect the gradual transitions in color.

Only *Mechanize her Jenny*, 2011, a pink monochrome with a woof composed of ten shades of pink, breaks the pattern. Its title, no doubt, refers to the spinning jenny, a late-eighteenth-century invention that increased, by multiple factors, the speed and efficiency with which a spinner could spin twine. This contraption, along with devices such as the power loom and spinning mule, allowed for the mechanization of textile production, launching the industrial revolution in Great Britain and beyond. The exhortation to *mechanize*, then, leads us down an interpretative path: By including works both machine- and handmade, the show embodies a shift from the preindustrial to industrial eras (and, perhaps, the post-industrial too, if we allow that the warp and woof interlace as do pixels in a JPEG—the product par excellence of the information age).

In a conversation with artist Christopher Williams published last year, de Rooij takes issue with recent artworks that "seem to legitimize themselves only through the interestingness of their references." The problem, as he sees it, is that referentiality is too frequently an artwork's sole focus, often at the expense of the artwork itself. "I'm amazed by the flood of art pieces I've seen lately that consist of a photograph of a book that the artist finds interesting," he says. "These books might be interesting, but the photos and sculptures are usually not." The solution, de Rooij proposes, is to bypass external references entirely, and bring the signified closer to home. Thus, in "Crazy Repelled Firelight" the works' meaning—their content—derives immediately from the materials and methods of production from which they are composed. De Rooij thereby marries the readymade to good old-fashioned facture: Meaning still derives from appropriation—in this case, of different kinds of labor—and that labor, in turn, is how the aesthetic object is made.

Nevertheless, presenting weavings as lavish as these is a risky gambit. Does an allusion to socioeconomic history justify their opulent sheens? The weavings' implicit message, no matter how cleverly conveyed, is only a sketch—and uttered in no more than a whisper. Whether or not one discovers the clues, the overwhelming effect is fascination with high-end objects: glittering textiles, hanging prettily on the gallery walls.

—Lloyd Wise



Willem de Rooij.
Black to Black,
2011, cotton thread,
acrylic thread,
53 1/4 x 110 1/4 x 2".