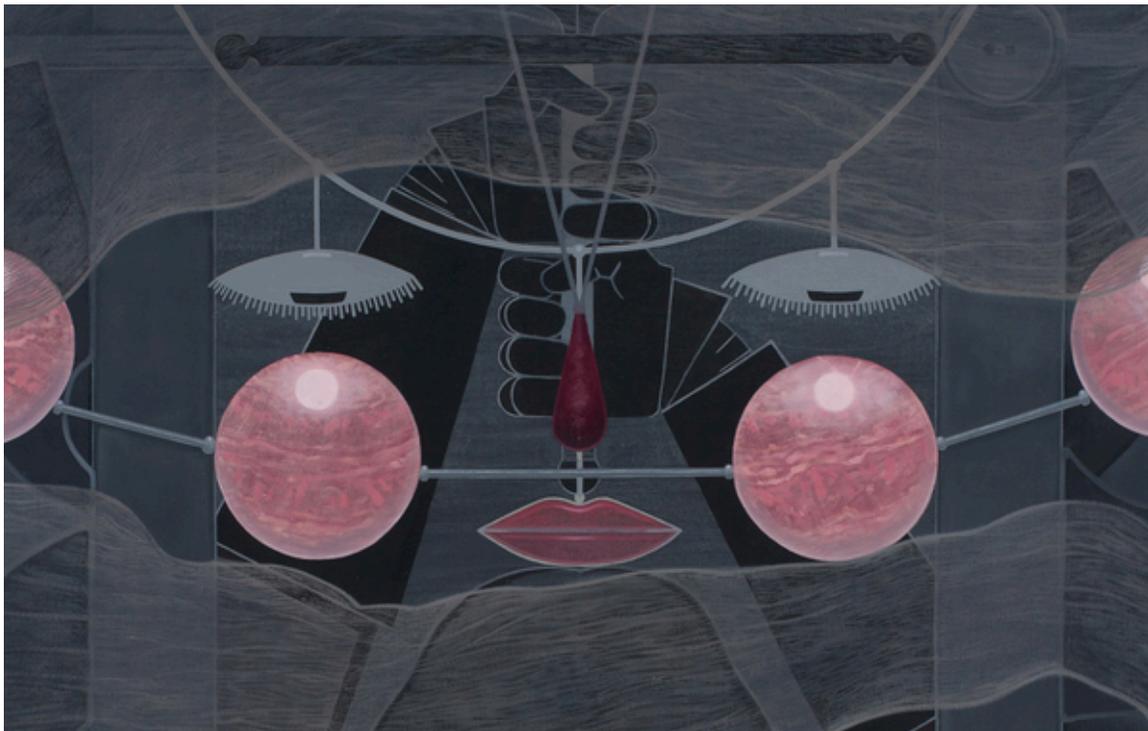


The Exquisite Therapy of Michael Stamm's Paintings



Detail of "Virtue Vest (close up)" (2017) © Michael Stamm. Courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York

A couple of years back, I met the painter Michael Stamm while I was doing studio critiques at New York University, where he was a grad student. Struck by the graphic grace of his blend of text and imagery, I brought up the fact that Roy Lichtenstein, despite his painstaking craftsmanship, was a poor draftsman, a terrible letterer, and a worse designer.

Stamm said, "You don't really mean that."

I replied that I certainly did, and that Stamm's own compositions of geometrically rigorous figures overlaid with evocative snippets of prose were more compelling examples of how the verbal can be transmuted into the visual.

The majority of the paintings in Stamm's first show at DC Moore Gallery depict the highly stylized, well-dressed torso of a therapist draped in elaborate jewelry (which, according to the press release, tacitly refers

to Stamm's own therapy sessions). The cropped perspective of these roughly two-and-a-half-foot-high canvases—basically, the distance from neckline to waist—implies a patient's averted gaze. The bling in *Nicety Necklace* (2017) features self-help buzzwords cut out in gold, such as “You! Me / Us!!!!” and “We Did It!” More text is stacked in the middle of the composition; gray and receding, it reads, in part, “Imagine the future??? My future???” All of this is enclosed in a speech bubble, imparting a sense of the pressure built up by discussing primal conflicts—be they emotional, sexual, familial—compounded by the mannered constraints between the person on the couch and the one with the notepad. Around the periphery, brown circles float like lens flares in a snapshot, perhaps light glinting off the gilt phrases. (And isn't psychoanalysis always about someone's guilt?)

The word “virtue,” placed vertically and split by the opening in the doctor's quilted vest, provides the title to 2017's *Virtue Vest*. Pale flesh and purple fingernails are fastidiously aligned with the rim and handle of a gray ceramic mug from which obscuring steam rises like a serpent. The volume of the hands is implied less by gradated shadows than by the careful tuning of hues, which shift and interplay with the panache of a Joseph Albers color study. A necklace of brown beads supports a stylized face, with pink baubles for cheeks, a ruby pendant nose and lips, and silver eyes, bizarre bling that reaches to the doctor's stomach. The effect, for patients used to navel gazing, is of the therapist's own belly button now staring back at them, though whether in rebuke or sympathy is unfathomable. Like the recounting of a dream, the outline of a pair of small, gloved hands emerges from behind the jeweled visage, at first seeming to grasp what might be the doctor's skinny tie, which morphs into a sword. Is this a childhood memory of storybook knights or visions of Oedipal rage?

Not that gender is clear-cut in these works—everything drifts in gray areas both literal and metaphysical. *Cheers Cloak* (2017) features strung glass spheres refracting a beige, gray, and brown horizon, implying that all is proper, measured, and calm regardless of the fears or anxieties brought to the surface during a therapy session. From one finger the doctor dangles a locket, open to reveal a woman. Her mother? Daughter? Lover? Or is this just an object she uses to hypnotize a patient and spelunk his or her—or the viewer's—psyche? This composition is wordless, yet everything is again framed by a dialogue balloon—image literally made narrative, the various elements loaded for interpretation. Here's one: With starched cuffs and tightly buttoned collar, the therapist figure recalls the taut geometries of both husband and wife in Grant Wood's 1930 *American Gothic*, emphasizing an androgynous gloss on a Midwestern icon from—as culture critic Greil Marcus aptly termed it—“the old, weird America.”

Stamm's palette favors plums, umbers, and burgundies; bright colors are generally cut with gray, as if a veil—of depression?—hangs between mind and eyes. And yet subtle layers of detail and narrative slowly emerge, in the way that objects or characters behind a theatrical scrim become visible as light angles change. Stamm's use of graphics is akin to Ed Ruscha's bank-shot blends of color, texture, and verbiage, as in Ruscha's deceptively simple *Another Hollywood Dream Bubble Popped* (1976), in which a mottled, bubble-gum-pink background adumbrates an ingénue's downfall.

Each of the nine panels in *April 27, 2016* (2016) is 16 inches high by 12 inches across, which could be the size of a wall calendar. Arranged horizontally, a simple scene is repeated left to right: A swizzle stick is refracted by liquid and the flat sides of a half-full (half-empty?) drinking glass. The sun is reflected in the glass planes, rising in blue tones on the left, passing through the warm beiges of midday, and then disappearing in the last, lead-colored panel. We are observing the passage of one day, and yet numbers and letters in the background—some obscured by shadows and reflections—imply months, years, and centuries measured by the rise and fall of an unconcerned sun. Of course, April is—as T.S. Eliot informed us in freshman English—the cruelest of months. But it is another poem, questioning how single days somehow morph into lifetimes, that more aptly synchs with the melancholy loveliness of Stamm's visions.