

ROTTERDAM

Michael Portnoy

WILFRIED LENTZ

“There is a certain kind of ghost that can only materialize with the aid of a sheet or other piece of cloth to give it outline,” says William S. Burroughs in his 1953 novel, *Junky*. So too can the ephemeral, performing human body be traced by the materials associated with it. In performance or workshop settings, New York-based performance artist Michael Portnoy frequently probes the relationship between individuals and the things around them by using language and objects to provoke movement—both his own and that of his audience. This procedure is depicted in his HD-video film *THRILLOCHROMES* (all works 2013), and is central to his recent exhibition of the same name. For the film, Portnoy devised six directives for the characters’ choreography in six corresponding film chapters. Each chapter opens with the directive displayed as text in a blank frame; the scenes that follow make use of dim lighting and a foreboding sound track to effect a film-noir mood around the suspense-driven interactions between actors who generally appear in pairs and who use few words, sometimes fragmented or seemingly invented. In place of dialogue, the actors might undulate their torsos and limbs or contort their faces in Portnoy’s familiar choreographic vocabulary. For instance, in the second chapter, an encounter

between two actors who hold aggressive stances while taking turns severely blinking their eyes in a type of absurd face-off follows a chapter directive that states, *IMMOBILIZE THE OPPOSITION BY STRATEGICALLY CHOKING THE OCULAR FIELD*.

During the last vignette, which begins with the directive *BELIEVE SAVAGELY IN THE ENTANGLEMENT OF FORMALISM AND EMOTION*, we see a woman engage in a brief, physically restrained tryst with another actor in an empty subterranean hallway of the Gare de l’Est train station in Paris. Then, following the second part of the chapter’s directive statement, *BEIGE ON BEIGE ON BEIGE*, the same woman is seen running along the same corridor, where she meets another recurring character, a man with a menacing expression, who offers her pieces of oil pastels in various earth tones, which she initially resists, then accepts, as if capitulating to an addiction. She nervously applies the pigment in thick lines to the front flaps of her costume, a camel-colored trench coat—in fact, all the characters wear trench coats, in varying shades of beige, brown, and gray. In the gallery, six of these coats were stretched, with only their backs visible, over preexisting canvases. These six coats-on-canvases, titled *THRILLOCHROMES 1–6*, were hung in two horizontal rows of three on the same gallery wall onto which the film was projected. Seen separately from the film, these works might resemble abstract landscapes, though several details clearly mark them as con-



Michael Portnoy,
THRILLOCHROMES,
2013, digital video,
color, sound,
22 minutes.

structed from clothing—waist straps and folded sleeves, for example. But their installation in proximity to the film underlined their status as vestiges of the performances from which they derived.

Converting well-worn costumes into abstract “paintings,” Portnoy continues his long-standing engagement with gestural abstraction, here manifested in oil pastel on the trench coat taken from the last chapter of the *THRILLOCHROMES* film. In an essay accompanying this exhibition, Diane Bent humorously, lyrically, and persuasively derides contemporary revivals of the heroic signals of monochrome painting, satirizing the recurrence of modernist critical shibboleths in contemporary painting practices in which “claims about ‘process’ and ‘performative production’” are delivered in, as she puts it, “a monochrome monotone.” Likewise, Portnoy travesties the methods associated with the monochrome as a trope through a montage of gestures, recollected by their remnants.

—Mary Rinhold