



New York

Rico Gatson

EXIT ART

475 Tenth Avenue

September 28–November 23

Rico Gatson, *The Group*, 2011, acrylic paint on wood panel, 49 x 56".

Emblems simplify complex matters and often slide dangerously into propaganda. Using the clean lines and precise forms of familiar signs and symbols, Rico Gatson's art does the opposite, opening wide a world of resounding significance. As seen in this fifteen-year survey, Gatson's achievement comes in part from his recurring subject matter—twentieth-century African-American history—but also from his keen exploitation of wide-ranging visual strategies, with sources including hardedge abstraction, Minimalist sculpture, Soviet-era posters, and Emory Douglas's iconic designs, among others. The exhibition forgoes chronology and skims over earlier breakthrough videos to focus almost exclusively on Gatson's painting, sculpture, and mixed-media output from the past five years. Nearly half the forty-six works date to 2011 alone; yet many of these pieces should be counted among Gatson's best.

For *Southern Comfort*, 2006, he systematically applied modest tones of red, blue, orange, and brown paint on a plywood panel to create intoxicating triangular patterns, with thirteen faintly visible stars in the central X-shape that come straight from the Confederate flag. An identical color scheme turns up in *Nazi Eagle*, 2006. In dialogue with other works, this depiction of a Reichsadler encourages an alternative, associative historical reading, establishing a lineage starting with Jesse Owens's victories at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and ending at Tommie Smith and John Carlos's Black Power salute at a 1968 medal ceremony.

Fields of black granulated glitter in *The Group*, 2011, outline the forms of Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, Bobby Seale, and other Black Panthers. The contours of their springy Afros, berets, and stylish boots, filled in like bruises with red and purple acrylics, portray the revolutionaries as glamorous rock stars. In decades past, both entertainers and activists—Josephine Baker, Stokely Carmichael, and Sam Cooke all make visual or textual appearances in Gatson's work—were equally considered subversive, controversial, and inspirational. Their emblematic appearances across the exhibition remind us of a rich heritage to regularly reexamine.

— *Christopher Howard*