

Irma Blank *Life Time*

Alison Jacques Gallery, London 24 March – 26 April

Irma Blank is one of the most interesting artists to have benefited from the artworld's recent mania for overlooked or forgotten talent. Though she's been making work since the late 1960s, the German-born artist was hardly known outside Italy, where she's lived for the past six decades, until a solo presentation in the 2013 Frieze Masters Spotlight section sparked a dramatic surge of interest (seriously, her ranking graph on artfacts.com shows probably the steepest ascent you'll ever see) to the extent that now, aged eighty-three, she's included in this year's Venice Biennale. As is often the way with such rediscoveries, a point of comparison is habitually trotted out – and for Blank, the standard one is Hanne Darboven. Both artists, certainly, share an interest in ideas of writing and repetition, the similarity being strongest in the case of Blank's works from the 1970s, which consist of dense, rhythmic scrawls of minute text, like a kind of primal, illegible calligraphy – blank verse, as it were.

Perhaps it's in order to shake off the Darboven comparison, then, that nothing from that early period is exhibited in Blank's second show at Alison Jacques Gallery. Instead, selections have been made from two more recent series, the most compelling being the *Avant-testo*

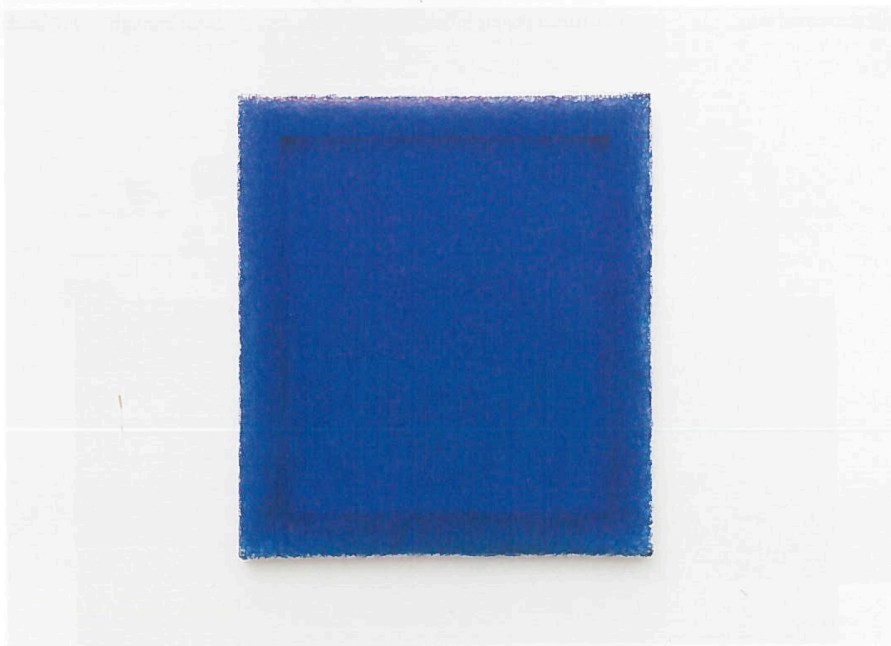
(‘avant-text’) works of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In these intense and visceral pieces, which range from small works on paper to large, polyester canvases, Blank completely abandons her previous linear structures and neat paragraphs. Using cheap blue or black ballpoints, she draws thousands upon thousands of curling, looping scribbles, as if her (non-) writing were being exploded in all directions. There's a subtle, penumbral framing effect around the edges of each work, where the marks gradually tail off; but the vast majority of each surface ends up completely coloured in – not like a child's frantic, section-by-section colouring-in but a more even distribution, suggesting a methodical, meditative approach, an attentiveness to time and process (each work's title, indeed, includes the date of its manufacture). The final results are quite mesmerising: scratchily opaque, like a fog of swirling static, a veil-like thicket of lines. It's a kind of obliteration – that is, an obliteration: a denial of readability, as if the forms and shapes of written language have become hopelessly unravelling and tangled; have become, in essence, drawings.

As such, the works imply a different sort of readability, along materialist lines. With the works on paper, for instance, you notice

the impressions and striations left by the biro. On card, meanwhile, the obsessive scribbling scuffs up the surface, giving it a softly fuzzed, almost cobwebby appearance. And as for the big polyester pieces, the bright-blue ink makes them look like nothing so much as an Yves Klein homage, with the added effect of the plastic's slight translucency letting you see the wooden stretcher frames below; yet up close, the surfaces look weirdly, dizzily shiny, the maelstrom of pen marks creating a marbled, almost nacreous effect.

Blank's newest works, the *Global Writings* series begun in 2015, aren't quite as madly scintillating, but still explore this fertile territory to do with language and material form. Except that here she approaches the idea from the opposite direction, writing actual alphabetic letters in marker pen, repeating the same short set of characters in a long continuous line or as dense blocks across adjacent sheets of paper. ‘HRI’, they read, over and over; or maybe it's ‘ltKj’. Ultimately, it's impossible to know. The gestures are so quick and small, the divisions between letters so uncertain, that the screeds once again seem constantly on the verge of dissolving into a seething, abstract mass.

Gabriel Coxhead



Ur-schrift ovvero Avant-testo, 28-5-02, 2002, ballpoint pen on polyester on wooden stretcher, 56 x 50 cm. © the artist. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London