

METRO PICTURES

Fixsen, Anna. "Squaring the Circle," *ChicagoWeekly.org* (February 1, 2012).

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If Jean-Michel Basquiat, Edward Munch, and Willem de Kooning were to combine their artistic genes and make a baby, the result would be the work of German artist André Butzer. Or at least, the work he used to make. Fast-forward five years and it seems that this artistic ménage à trois has disbanded.

In preparation for his debut at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in the West Loop, Butzer gave a presentation last Wednesday at the Cochrane-Woods Art Center that demonstrated a reactionary shift in his style.

In the dim light, Butzer gripped the lectern, a cable-knit cardigan draped over his thin shoulders. "I have something entertaining for you," he began, "something that is entertaining for both you and for myself." Appearing before the crowd in round wire glasses, corduroys, and a striped polo shirt tucked conspicuously into Jockey boxer briefs, the artist looked like a more stylish Buster Bluth. He removed a stack of folded paper and explained he would read lines from the writings of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus—first in German, and then in English—in conjunction with slide images of his work. "So sit back, relax, and enjoy the show." The audience perked up their ears in anticipation.

He paused and flicked on the projector to reveal an image of one of his paintings: smoke gray with two rectangular outlines encroaching on one another.

"The sun is wide as a human's foot," he read. After clicking for the next slide, Butzer slowly turned over a new sheet from his stack of paper. "If everything that exists should become smoke, even nostrils would still distinguish it." The audience squirmed as he deliberately read the phrase forcefully in German, paused for effect, then repeated the phrase in English.

Butzer's recitation held the audience in rapt puzzlement. Each slide deviated only slightly from the ones preceding it—a slight thickening of the ubiquitous black rectangles, a minuscule variation in the gray hues. These paintings are nothing like the vibrant cartoon-like work he completed in the mid-2000s. In fact, it seemed as though his work had undergone a complete genre swap: Butzer's self-proclaimed "Science Fiction Expressionism" now reads as stark non-fiction. But Butzer insisted, "I see [the paintings] as similar to everything I did before. [The audience] should react and be irritated by it."

The exhaustive exploration of the formal black and gray paintings is essential to Butzer's artistic process. "If it seems familiar to you then it's new...[The repetition] is how you can get closer to the birthplace of painting."

When asked about his shift in aesthetic, he answered without batting a lash: "I wanted to escape the dualism of polychromatic and monochromatic." He looked at the projector screen, and said, "These works inhabit color. They are primary colors living in the painting inside—not being added on the surface." The audience gazed blankly at the flat gray paintings, trying to fully comprehend this assertion.

An attendee asked about the black rectangular forms, but Butzer did not see it that way. "I have never painted a rectangle in my whole life because I do not believe in earth-bound geometry," Butzer asserted, somewhat opaquely. "I calculate coloristic values rather than geometry. I would call the paintings round, even. I paint over these laws and calculate every bit of it and paint over again and again. It's about annihilation. It burns away measurements because they are round."

Continuing the theme of annihilation, Butzer told the crowd that he only draws inspiration from dead artists and cited Raphael as his latest artistic muse. "I cannot accept the [artists] that live," he said. "It's not my job to like other artists."