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Emil Lukas

Sperone Westwater

Something mysterious, cosmic, and deep radiates from Emil Lukas's thread compositions. At times, these works (as large as 78 by 96 inches) appear to be flat. From a distance, they have auras—as though we are witnessing space in slow motion and seeing into and through vast distances. Close up, we think we can see the mechanics—thousands of threads of different colors pulled taut at opposite sides over a rectangular box of wood. Closer inspection, however, reveals that there is no discernable pattern; the colors cross each other in all directions. How did the artist invent this way of working? How does he achieve ethereal effects? How long does this obsessive way of composing take?

Even though Lukas calls his compositions "paintings," they consist of three-inch-deep wooden boxes painted white inside. He works by putting the boxes on sawhorses, inserting small nails into the sides, and then stringing polyester thread in different directions across the open end of the box. His process is slow—he tests the effect of every thread and hue. He calls the works with lighter centers "hums" and the works with vertical threads "curtains." Once hung, each work plays with its light sources. For example, skylights create shadows inside the boxes behind the thread lines. Indirect light creates aura effects in the centers.

In the small, very dense *Heavy Gas* (2013), an ovoid or head-like central

shape appears beneath the blend of mostly darker threads. The threads were spray-painted from behind to achieve the fuzzy effect. Neatly looped over the 18 or so nails on each side, the threads form a zigzag pattern on the wood. Around the lighter central area, red, green, and other hues are layered with deep blue threads on top. In *Red Gas* (2013), a lighter central orb physically under the over-layers appears to come forward. Inside the red layers, many hues are present.

When I met Lukas at the gallery, he told me, "The needle and thread is, for me, the perfect visual and structural tool due to its pictorial line and structural function. I'm looking for the smallest visual mark

that has the greatest impact." In the catalogue accompanying the show, he notes: "The paintings, due to their radial structure, are not on one plane. The depth from the front of the field of color to the white back is about three inches. The space in between is what I mean by atmosphere. Thread paintings engage with density, color reflection, opacity, or translucence very much like an atmosphere does as light travels through it."

—Jan Garden Castro

Above: Emil Lukas, *Heavy Gas*, 2013. Thread over wood frame with nails, 16 x 14 x 3.5 in.

