

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Helmut Federle: *Basics on Composition*

By David Rhodes

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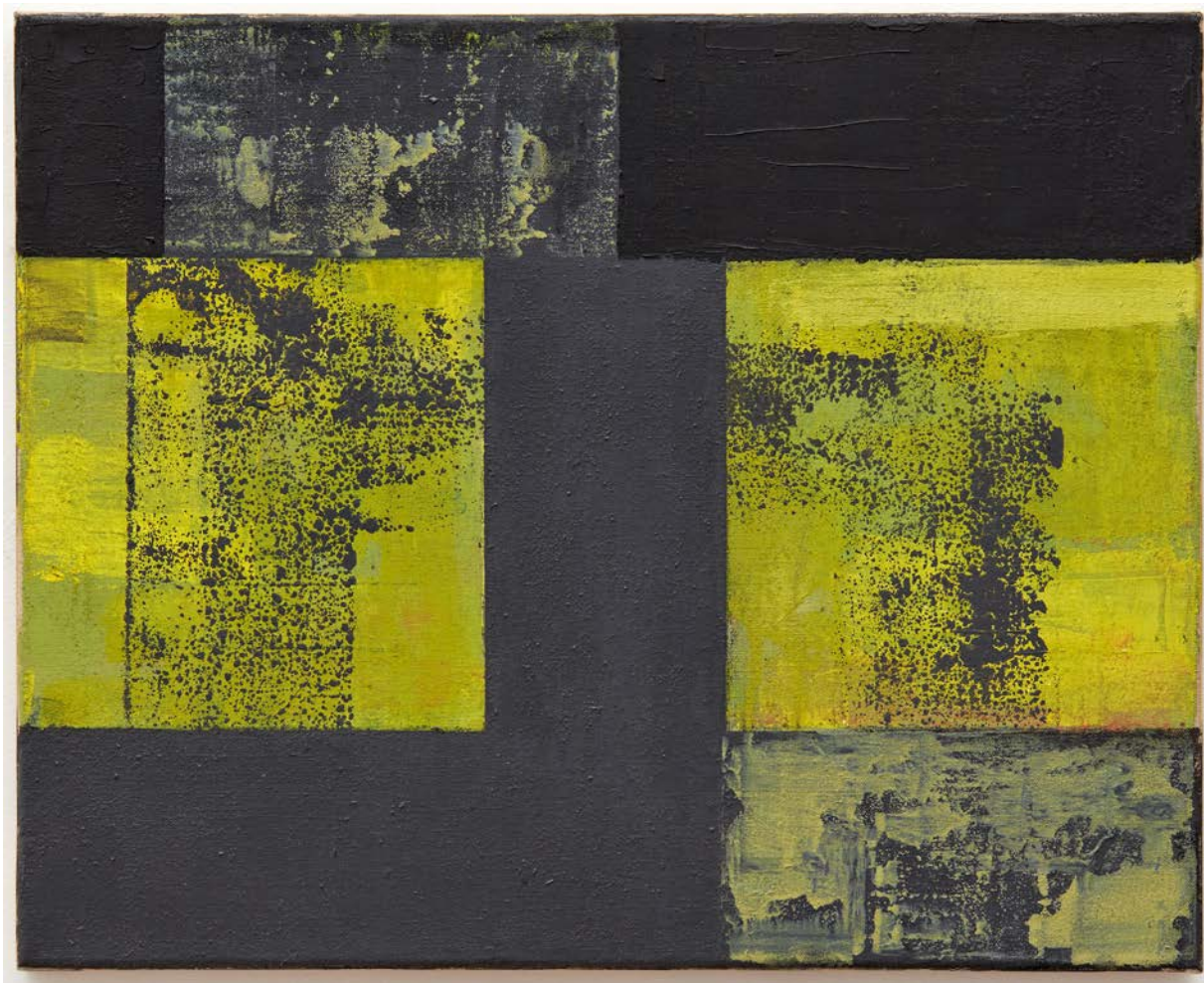
Helmut Federle, *Basics on Composition I (The Road/Beau Travail)*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

The group of paintings that comprise Helmut Federle's fifth solo exhibition at Peter Blum Gallery originate in a work made in New York City in 1979 after moving from Basel, Switzerland. He would stay in New York City, with some interruptions for four years. Federle began to further investigate the *Liegendes H* (reclining H) composition—the “H” a reference to the first letter of the artist's first name. Intended to be singular, it was only later that he decided to repeat the composition—thus beginning an exploration of the composition's “informal multitudes.” During 1992 and 1993 Federle returned to this composition, now entitling the series “Basics on Composition.” Federle resumed the series in 2019; the



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paintings here at the gallery span the years from 1992 to 2020. This series is important, as are some others, for example the “Corner Field” paintings, in Federle’s oeuvre. He moves between the series as they represent differing “concentrations” on the possibility of painting. Federle has said, “Bringing down the paint in different mentalities, this is my main concern. I see myself as a traditional painter. I am interested in the aspect [of] what painting itself means.”

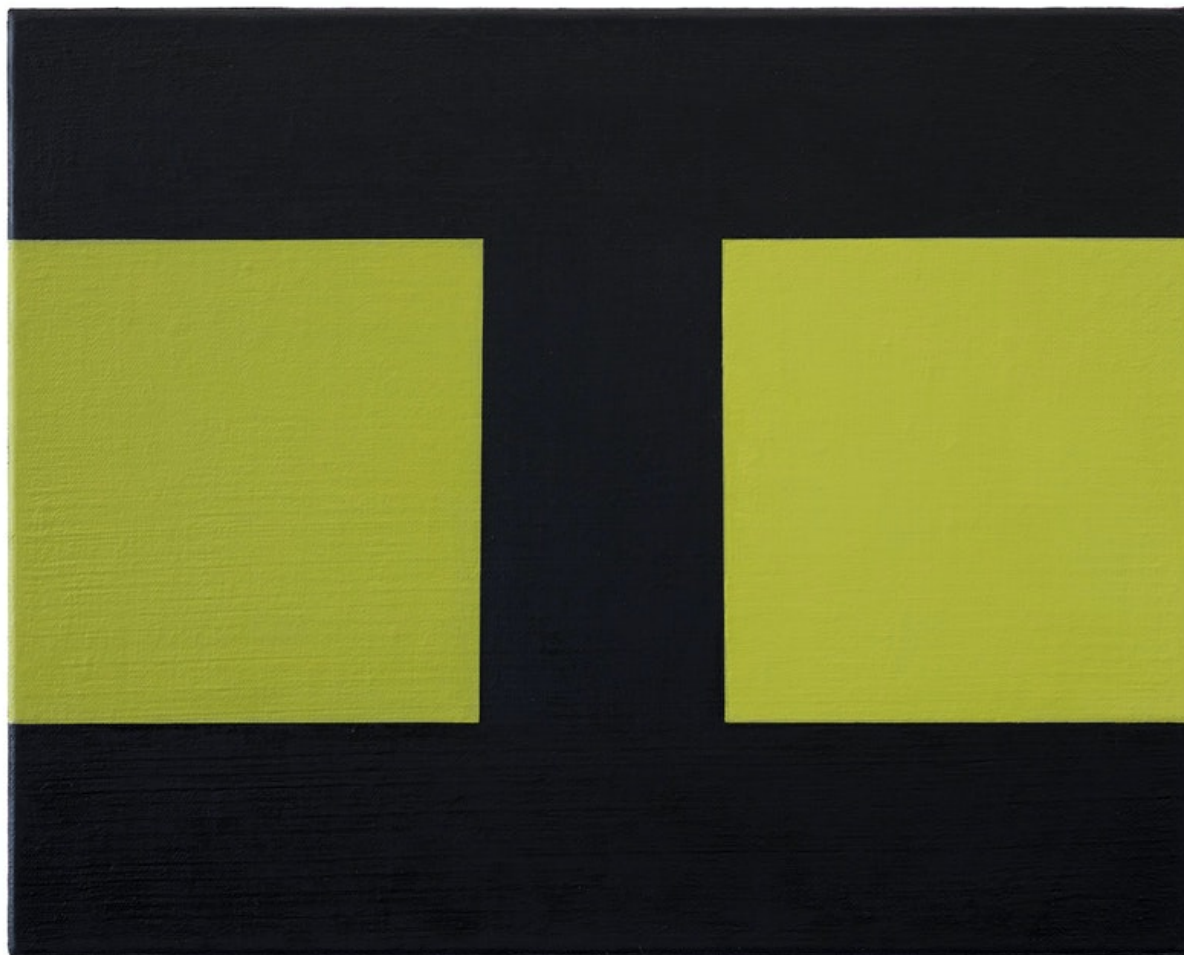


Helmut Federle, *Basics on Composition XXI (For Lee Harvey Oswald)*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 19 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

All the “Basics on Composition” are 15 3/4 × 19 3/4 inches. The paintings differ not as formalistic variations, but rather as what Federle has called “vegetative” or “climatic” differences. Take for example *Basics on Composition XXXII (First Phase Navajo)* (1992) and *Basics on Composition C (April at Kamikochi)* (2019). The characteristics are often felt rather than seen to begin with, registering in time because incidents of many kinds are wrought by the many changes in paint application and color. In *Composition XXXII (First Phase Navajo)* the two yellow green squares differ clearly in color and vary in brightness and position in pictorial depth. The yellow green contrasts with the black in another way as it reaches the painting’s outer edge. The eye follows the perimeter of the painted object unlike an unpainted object, and registering a physical change at that edge (even when it remains actually constant) because of the color. These varying qualities poetically charge the painting with an inexplicable immanence so unlike regular hard edge formal abstraction. Seen close up, the black (and many blacks are used in the other paintings) evinces at its edge a previously applied dark violet. The edges of the

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painting itself are taped: they must have become marked with paint as the painting was in progress; sometimes the tape has been repositioned, but not removed, as might be expected when tape is ordinarily used to create a clean and unvarying line. In *Basics on Composition C (April at Kamikochi)* the yellow greens are much closer in color but not the same, and this small contrast is somehow very intense in effect, more so than in the yellow green's of *Composition XXXII (First Phase Navajo)*. The only thing to do is look longer, and to contemplate the differences.



Helmut Federle, *Basics on Composition H (Eight)*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches.  
Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

*Basics on Composition E (Dedication: Musashi Miyamoto 1584–1645)* (2019) has two red areas in the left of the reclining H, the yellow green squares now bounded above and below with red not black on the left side. The composition divides because of the C of the remaining black, but connects because of the two yellow greens. The painting recomposes itself in many ways because the two sides are so structurally different, and at the same time connected. In the very different, equally engaging *Basics on Composition I (The Road/Beau Travail)* (2019) the brushwork is open along its lower edge. The black and a gray-white underpainting now integrate in the painted construction of the composition. Also included in the exhibition are a work on paper, *Liegendes H* (1979), from the first year of Federle's use of the H composition, and a photograph, *Untitled*, (1986/2020). Federle was working frequently on paper in his New York apartment in 1979 and this work on paper is a wonderful addition to the paintings seen here—a kind of origin story. The photograph, of a single dark horse, still above its own dark shadow somewhere out in the American Southwest references Federle's desire to see other cultures and new

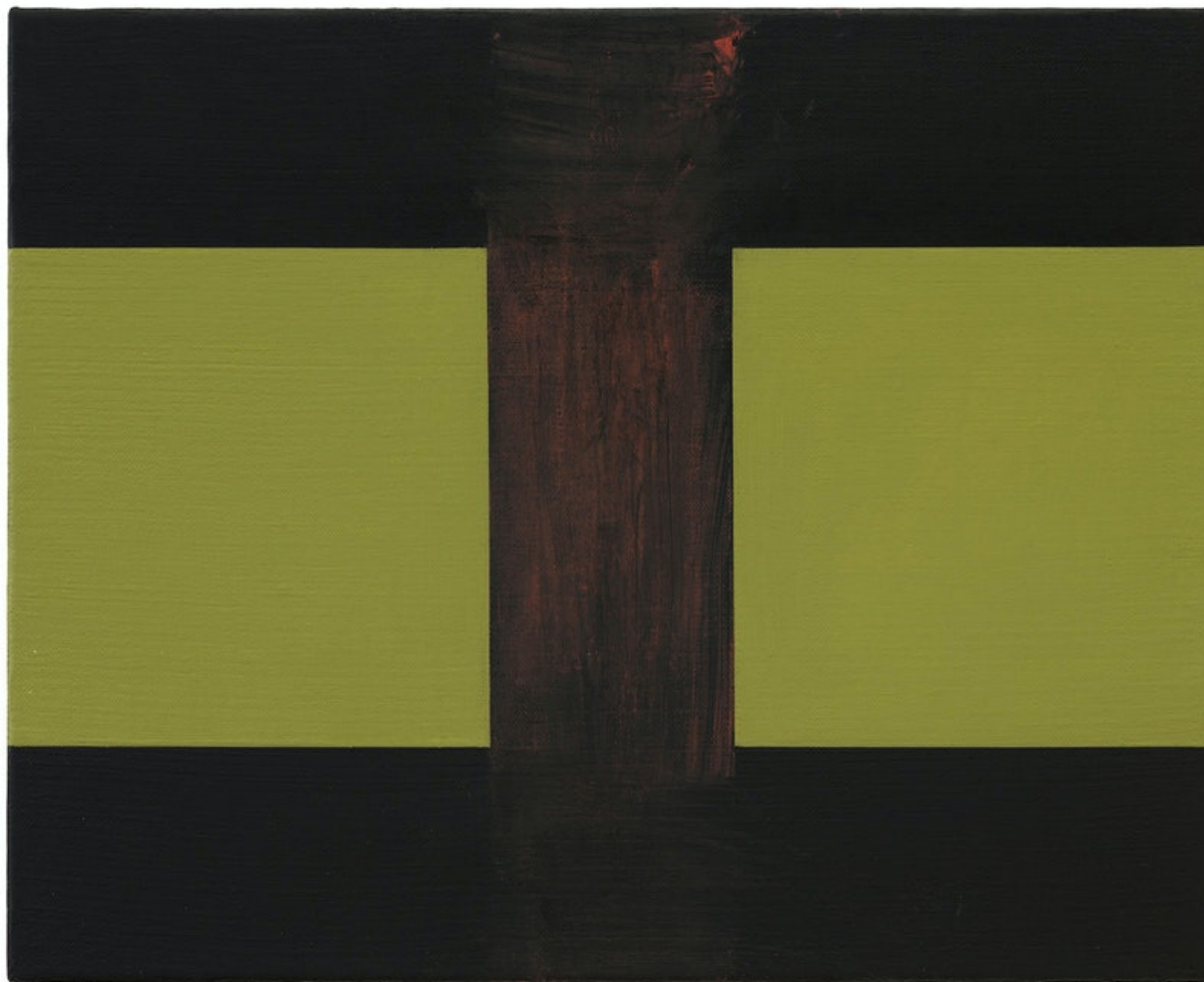
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landscapes by traveling there in person. In recent years he has more and more identified with the Japanese aesthetic of life from re-visiting Japan. The Japanese desire to consider an environment as whole: paintings, bowls, furniture, walls, floor all in relation with each other is apposite to the installation here, the works are placed through the gallery space intuitively and sparsely, the whole space, together with the works, form an exquisite environment.

### Contributor

**David Rhodes**

DAVID RHODES is a New York-based artist and writer, originally from Manchester, UK. He has published reviews in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum*, and *artcritical*, among other publications.



Helmut Federle, *Basics on Composition K (Spätherbst / Winteranfang) (Polarente) (Man of Nazareth) (Disruptive Elegance) (The Vail)*, 2019-20. Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.