



View of “Alan Charlton,” 2013. From left: *Vertical Triangle Painting*, 2013; *Vertical Triangle Painting*, 2013.

## Alan Charlton

HOLGER PRIESS GALERIE

Alan Charlton describes his work with characteristic understatement: “I am an artist who makes a gray painting”—a declaration that seems just as minimal as the paintings themselves. And since 1970, true to his word, this protagonist of British conceptual Minimalism has consistently hewed to monochromatic painting in gray, developing his works as specific objects based on clearly proportioned constructions. Reduction, in Charlton’s work, is primarily a means for generating complex and exacting formal relations—between painting and its support medium as well as between the work, the space around it, and the beholder—and throwing them into sharp relief.

Over the years, Charlton’s works have charted a wide range of forms and formats; many are conceived as ensembles of interrelated elements. The seeming uniformity of his palette enables extremely fine distinctions, as he blends his ostensibly unassuming gray from acrylic paints of various spectral colors, creating it afresh for each new picture across a gamut extending from very light gray to very nearly black. Working with a brush, the artist applies the prepared color in several layers, making sure that no visible trace of brushwork remains. The flawlessly smooth result looks like a visual depletion of the pictorial space that leaves nothing but pure surface. By

reducing the palette to the presence of a single nuanced (non-)color, Charlton also emphasizes the object-like quality of his paintings and their interaction with the space around them; his work is always also about what is outside the picture.

“Vertical Triangle Paintings” was Charlton’s first show of works from the new series of the same title, begun last year, for which he selected seven out of the total ten pictures. But it was his second show of three-sided canvases; in 2012, he presented pictures in equilateral-triangle formats under the title “Triangle Paintings” at Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin. The paintings at Holger Priess, by contrast, were isosceles triangles. All works share the upward-pointing tip and a uniform height of just under six feet—a dimension Charlton chose to fit the gallery’s rooms—while the length of the base varies. In combination with the shade of gray chosen for each picture, very different distributions of pictorial weight and volumes result. The triangle’s base lengths are determined by a formal parameter that plays an essential part in Charlton’s art: They are multiples of 4.5 centimeters. Initially an arbitrary choice based on the depth of his stretchers, this measure has been fundamental to the artist’s oeuvre for four decades. The narrowest of the paintings, the medium-gray *Vertical Triangle Painting* (all works 2013, and all identically titled), has a base of 45 centimeters—about 17 3/4 inches—resulting in a narrowly tapered format. From there, Charlton systematically proceeded in steps of two times 4.5 centimeters: The next largest *Vertical Triangle Painting*, in light gray, has a base of 54 centimeters, followed by one with a base of 63 centimeters, and so on, concluding with the largest picture in the exhibition, whose bottom measures 126 centimeters, or a bit over four feet.

The gradations of hue, in contrast, are explicitly not determined via a similar linear scheme—they are the results of individual decisions that mark what one might call a moment of intense painterly irrationalism on Charlton’s part. For the exhibition, he deliberately mounted the pictures in no apparent order, laying out a subtle dramaturgy that de-emphasized the systematic aspect of his art in favor of the manifest presence of the individual paintings. Inspecting them, the beholder was struck by an unexpected coloristic aspect: The various grays are not just lighter or darker but sometimes suggest the most delicate nuances of color—one may, for instance, seem slightly reddish, while another may look blue. Yet such impressions never reach the threshold of unequivocal certainty; they are visual intimations rather than information. Charlton explores the constitutive limits of seeing, urging the viewer to practice close perception and meditative contemplation.

—*Jens Asthoff*