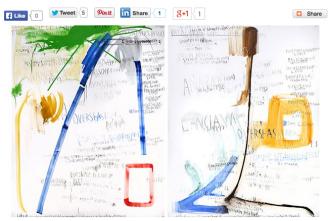## Despina Stokou Paints With Wit (And Data)

by Scott Indrisek   12/09/14 9:19 AM EDT

L-R: Despina Stokou's "Domineer (P366)" and "Fantastic Kaka (P365)" are featured in "Only Tomatoes and Horses," on view at Derek Eller Gallery in New York.
(Courtesy of the artist and Derek Eller Gallery)

Many artists take a private language and make it public; the personal, however coded or obscured, becomes aesthetic. Such is the case with Los Angeles-based Greek artist Despina Stokou's latest show at Derek Eller Gallery, "Only Tomatoes and Horses," which features a series of paintings that translate narrowly specific data and other arcana into lively, kinetic abstractions. The exhibition title may sound cheekily obscure, but it's actually quite literal. Stokou's newest pieces *are* only about tomatoes, and horses, although not in any straightforward, representative way. Her use of gesture and information, plus a newly minted degraded-Xerox effect, hint at some obvious influences and inspirations, among them Suzanne McClelland, Cy Twombly, and Christopher Wool.

The "tomato" works — looming, nine-foot-tall, charcoal-and-chalk on canvas compositions — involved the artist searching Google's image bank for the fruit in question. She then accessed the HTML data for all of this, some 62 pages, and began laboriously copying the computer language onto the canvas. "Why tomatoes?" she pondered. "I wanted something that has a clear color, for 90 percent of the population. It could've been bananas and horses, too." The catch is that all that red-tinged data becomes an exercise in greyscale — a rather dramatic change for an artist formerly known for gushing fields of color. And working with HTML rather than, say, English, presents its own difficulties: "The pleasure of words is not there anymore," Stokou admitted, other than the occasional interjection of legible language (like the confounding phrase DUMP EXCEPTION, which reoccurs several times in one painting). While the basic structure of each painting hews to the computer print-outs that it's based on, Stokou complicates the surface with erasures or glue smears; for one work, she ran an industrial vacuum cleaner over the canvas.

Installation view of Despina Stokou's "Only Tomatoes and Horses" at Derek Eller Gallery / (Courtesy of the gallery)

As for the horses, the interest arose when Stokou spent time during an art fair in the gambling-loving environs of Hong Kong. The raw data for the "horse" paintings comes from a website that lists prominent racers and their pedigrees; the text is enlivened by colorful gestural swoops, some of which resemble aerial shots of tracks. This series, with its emphasis on picking a winner in a somewhat arbitrary contest, has an obvious connection — "so obvious I won't even mention it," Stokou demurred — to a diptych in the show, "How To Fuck Things Up #1 and #2." Its text is pulled from a series of blog posts that she wrote about "schemes to subvert the art world as we know it." The name Oscar Murillo peeks out from the mass of words, as well as several mentions of dildos. (That refers to a simple suggestion, Stokou clarified, for an associate gallery director in advance of getting fired: Bring sex toys to the final VIP dinner, or organize an impromptu strip tease.)

Stokou points out other tactics hidden within the self-deprecatingly referential painting: "Paint less than David Ostrowski — if that's possible," she said, alluding to the artist known for his almost blank, single-mark-of-spraypaint works. "Or the Anselm Reyle [method]: Overproduce and then pull the hand-brake." While she may find the art world itself exhausting, if not exhausted, Stokou is still intent on pushing her own practice in new directions. The works in "Only Tomatoes and Horses" are sparer than one might expect, striving to generate a certain attention without a frenzied resort to color and density. "I call them 'unplugged,'" Stokou said. "Without the special effects."