

James Howell
Decoded

SEPTEMBER 3 – OCTOBER 15 / 2016



49.16 – 67.46 11/16/2005, *Six Part Progression*, James Howell, six canvases, 63.5 x 63.5 cm each

“What interests me is light. The premise of light includes movement, a little movement, change, a subtle change.” James Howell

Von Bartha presents an exhibition of works by influential abstract American painter James Howell (1935 – 2014), *Decoded*. Noted for his rigorously experimental approach to colour theory, the artist meticulously studied the parameters of the colour grey, fascinated by its unlimited tonal possibilities.

The exhibition features works primarily from *Series Ten*, a group of monochrome paintings which Howell began in 1996 and would continue to work on until his passing in 2014. Smaller sequences of works were included within the series, such as *Progressions*, which shows the development of the colour grey across six small square canvases. Howell regarded *Series Ten* as an ever-evolving body of work in its own right. The exhibition includes eleven paintings and nineteen works on paper, including graphite, pastel, acrylic, etchings and monotypes. Another highlight is the four-section acrylic painting 68.98 10/26/94, on display for the first time in over twenty years.

The sublime and minimal are both apparent within the gradation of light and shadow in Howell's paintings. The artist held a lifelong fascination with mathematics and physics as evidenced by his systematic approach to his work, as well as an interest in Eastern Philosophy. "Grey," Howell explained, *"embodies passages of time, for me. It is mysterious...and I like its softness; also its simplicity, and space."* Moreover he considered his paintings to be fields of energy, as well as an investigation between the physical and metaphysical properties of grey. Howell always used the square as a format, which he divided into 29, 28 or 30 uniformly sized horizontal lines. Each line is stroked vertically, progressing from being lighter at the top of the

work to growing gradually darker towards the bottom of the support. The movement of light is so subtly executed that at times the effect is almost impossible to distinguish. Thus, whereas some works are calibrated to expose an almost invisible narrow degree of gradation, in others, the parameters are set further apart.

Consistent throughout his practice was the use of only three pigments; titanium white, ivory black and raw umber, the latter used in order to prevent the white and black from bluing. Howell weighed the paint mixtures on a digital scale, discarding any mixture, which did not adhere to his exact measurements. Within each series the works are organised in sets numbered according to the percentage of white pigment in the mix for the first, or top, line.

Howell documented each work by date and set number, as well as recording the weights of the pigments employed for each line. His imagined tonal scale was realised by forming a curve for each painting and, having become too subtle for parabolic curves, he mapped out his own innate curves determined by three points – the percentages of white, black and raw umber in each band.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue published by von Bartha with new scholarship by art critic and curator Lilly Wei. James Howell started working with von Bartha in 1997 and this is the fourth exhibition with the gallery. His work features in *Anne Blanchet / James Howell: Light Field* which runs from September 25, 2016 to January 8, 2017 at the Museum Wilhelm Morgner (Soest, Germany). The exhibition will travel to Kunstverein, Eisingen, Germany from February 2017.

About James Howell

James Howell (1935 - 2014) was born in Kansas City, Missouri and studied at Stanford University before becoming an architect. Howell soon decided to pursue a career as an artist and was self-trained.

Solo exhibitions include: Das Kleine Museum – Kultur auf der Peunt, Weissenstadt, Germany (2011); Charlotte Jackson Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM (2011); von Bartha, Basel and S-Chanf, Switzerland (2010, 2005, 2000); BARTHA Contemporary (2008, 2004); University of Washington, Seattle, Henry Art Gallery (1993). Group exhibitions include: Minus Space, Brooklyn, NY (2016); Hauptsache Grau #04. Konstruiertes Grau, Mies van der Rohe Haus, Berlin, Germany, (2013-14); Farben-Colours, Sammlung Schroth, Wilhelm-Morgner-Haus, Soest, Germany (2013); Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente Segovia, Spain (2009); and Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, USA (2005, 2007 and 2008).

Howell's work appears in numerous public and private collections including the Albright-Knox Art Museum, New York, USA; Das Kleine Museum – Kultur auf der Peunt, Weissenstadt, Germany; Das Folkwang Museum, Essen, Germany; Davis Museum and Cultural Center at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, USA; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, Segovia, Spain; Sammlung Schroth, Wilhelm-Morgner Haus, Soest, Germany; Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe; NM Leschot Foundation, Bern, Switzerland; and Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, New York, USA.

Howell built a studio for himself in San Juan Island, Washington, USA and its design won a Record Houses Award in 1983. He moved to New York City in 1992, and worked with architect Deborah Berke to transform a 1909, 5,000 square-foot stable in the West Village into a minimalist studio and residence, which went on to win the AIA NY Design Award in 1997. The studio continues to be preserved to maintain Howell's legacy and serves as a central research and archival facility.

About von Bartha

VON BARTHA

Representing over twenty artists, von Bartha is a contemporary gallery with locations in Basel and S-chanf active in both the primary and secondary markets.

Co-founded in 1970 by Margareta and Miklos von Bartha, the gallery initially gained recognition for showing historically significant groups such as the Asociación Arte Concreto-Inventiva and Arte Madí, the ZERO group and the Hungarian Avant-Garde. They also worked with significant contemporary artists of their own era such as Olle Baertling and Aurelie Nemours. The gallery built on its foundations to establish a contemporary programme now directed by the second generation of the family, Stefan von Bartha. Today it maintains a focus on Concrete Art, Op Art, Kinetic Art, Activist Art, Installation Art and Light Art.

The gallery represents an international roster of artists that includes Christian Andersson, Andrew Bick, Terry Haggerty, John Wood and Paul Harrison, James Howell, Imi Knoebel, Sarah Oppenheimer, Florian Slotawa, Bob and Roberta Smith, Superflex and Bernar Venet as well as important Swiss artists such as Daniel Robert Hunziker, Karim Noureldin, Boris Rebetez and Beat Zoderer. Von Bartha continues to represent European modern artists such as Olle Baertling, Camille Graeser, Gerhard von Graevenitz and Bernhard Luginbühl.

Von Bartha's location in Basel is a 850m² converted garage which has been used to great effect to present large-scale installations by gallery artists. The gallery has a second space located in S-chanf in the Engadin Alps used for special exhibitions and projects. By commissioning and exhibiting ambitious new works, the gallery nurtures successive generations of artists, while supporting the continually evolving practice of their established artists.

Von Bartha publishes art books, exhibition catalogues and its own newspaper featuring commissioned essays and interviews.

Press contact: Milly Carter Hepplewhite or Emma Gilhooly at Pelham Communications
milly@pelhamcommunications.com or emma@pelhamcommunications.com
+44 (0)20 8969 3959 @pelhamcomms

Exhibition Facts

Title: James Howell: Decoded

Address: von Bartha, Kannenfeldplatz 6, 4056, Basel, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 61 322 10 00

Website: www.vonbartha.com

Dates: September 3 – October 15 2016

Preview: September 2 2016, 6 - 8pm

Opening Hours: Tuesday to Friday 2 – 6pm, Saturday 11am – 4pm, or by appointment

Admission: Free

Twitter: [@vonbartha](https://twitter.com/vonbartha)

Facebook: [galleryvonbartha](https://www.facebook.com/galleryvonbartha)

Instagram: [vonbartha](https://www.instagram.com/vonbartha) #JamesHowellDecoded #vonBartha