

HYPERALLERGIC

Signs of Absence Burnt into Material Memory
In the gallery you can smell this state of being in absentia.



Claudio Parmiggiani, "Untitled" (2017) smoke and soot on board

The ideas of Jacques Derrida — the French philosopher who developed the theory of "deconstruction" — have largely fallen out of fashion. When he was still popular, Derrida grokked something enduring when he argued that presence, that is the experience of another object or person is most often mediated by signs, that is, representations of the self, such as speech and writing. Derrida described these mediations as supplements — that which supplemented the experience of what we might typically call real life. Derrida argued that we are caught up in an endless series of representations that shape our encounters with other people, for example meeting a well-known author and regarding her through the lens of the famous piece of writing she is known for. That previous mediated, supplemental experience gets in the way of speaking to the person who now sits next to you at on a park bench or at a dining table. Just so, according to Jonathan Culler, a scholar who has written extensively about the philosopher's work: "experience is always mediated by signs and the 'original' is produced as an effect of signs, of supplements."

If you have trouble following this line of argument, right now there is an exhibition at the Bortolami Gallery that may show you how "presence turns out to be a particular kind of absence," that is to say how our apprehension of other things can be all just smoke and mirrors.

Claudio Parmiggiani has installed a set of images on board that are made by combusting material close to panels arranged with several objects, or in the more evocative and forlorn

pieces, just one. Parmiggiani tends his fires to encase everything in its reach with smoke and soot, and then he takes the objects away leaving behind their signs of having been there. For those who like the ways and means of semiotics, these are all indexical (and iconic) signs of presence: something was here; it's vanished now, but its (past) presence checked the encroachment of soot, leaving an absence that signifies like a tombstone. In the gallery you can smell this state of being *in absentia*. And given the overall somberly gray hue of the show, that absence feels mourned.

There is an untitled image of a lonely violin set on its side, and in another work also untitled, the simple frame of a rectangular art piece that once occupied a wall. Both images are signs denuded of all other information except their outlines, to leave the thing itself even further away from my hands than is typical in a gallery context. There are entire shelves of spectral vases entombed in ash — all the works in the exhibition are untitled and dated 2017, except for two that are dated 1975. It's a poetic bit of irony that Parmiggiani worked as an assistant for Giorgio Morandi in Bologna for two years. Morandi's practice, in contrast to Parmiggiani's, was very much about the still life, seeing the *thingness* of the objects arranged carefully. Morandi's work explored the varicolored permutations that vases and bottles could take on in his imagination and the light that entered his studio. Here the objects leave only an impression, something said in a storm that the wind took away.