

MIER

“AND SHE WAS STRICKEN WITH PROOF OF OVERLAPPING ATTENTIONS”

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Photographed by Kiu Kayee

“Enter at your own risk” reads a sign on the door of MIER Gallery. For tonight’s West Hollywood attendees it’s an unexpectedly ominous welcome. But considering the box of matches that are offered upon entry, it’s only fair.

MIER Gallery, owned by Nino Mier, is currently hosting the work of Cologne-based artist Thomas Wachholz. His show “Strike Gently” is an installation of two long wood panels, each painted with the artist’s own recipe of flammable red phosphorous paint.

I enter the gallery alone. One tall panel appears fully red, the other one bares a dappled, honeycomb-like pattern that appears to mimic the sides of American and European matchboxes.

Several people hover around the panels, matches in hand, tentatively striking the panels, or carefully dragging a single match against the surface with a long sweeping motion.

As swiftly as matches ignite, they extinguish, and are dropped to the floor. As bold white strokes tarnish the brick-red canvas, a trail of charred sticks amasses underfoot.

“[The work] is really fun...really engaging,” says director Geena Brown, who put the show together. “[Wachholz's work] is not isolating the way certain exhibitions can be. We want people to get involved, we want them to be passionate when maybe they weren’t seeking this kind of thing out.”

As I wait, more and more visitors follow the implicit prompt, whispering and giggling with every spark.

I am compelled to participate, so I head to the entrance to secure my own box of matches. Each is sweetly printed with “Strike Gently” in black letters.

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I return this canvas and drag my match across slowly. It bursts into flame as I pull it in a zig-zag motion, leaving behind it a matching chalky white trail, and the satisfying scent of phosphorus.

I smile, pulling out more matches, experimenting further. Lost in my own pyrotechnic-world, I turn around to find the crowd chatting, laughing, playing. Doodles, zigzag lines, curly cues, hearts, and even cartoonish bunny rabbits spread across the canvas. A vaporous cloud, and the scent of snuffed matches, wafts through the space.

Wachholz, who is in attendance for the opening, engages me, saying: “When you are lighting up a candle or a cigarette, it’s such an everyday gesture, you don’t take notice. Now you have a chance to actually get in front of the panels, and become aware of leaving a mark.”

“I’m interested in what you guys are doing, how you strike it, and all the doodling coming up,” Wachholz tells me. “It’s kind of childish, but we all have remembrance for childhood, lighting up matches.”

When I first engaged his “canvasses,” I immediately thought of being young, of that excitement I felt when I first learned how to properly strike a match.

I see my youthful pleasure mirrored in that of one gallery attendee: a young girl, no more than seven years old. She reaches into a box held out by her father, tirelessly striking Wachholz’s art work, match after match.

While this purpose of his art could be perceived as simplistic— i.e. the direct engagement of the public, and the ability to perceive it, in action, and in effect—it is no less affective. Excuse the pun, but I am struck by how the father and daughter are equally engaged. Between social media, video games, television, any parent can attest to the difficulty in finding common focus with our children.

Wachholz swears that his art “is melancholic, in a way. Since you actually destroy the surface, there’s no way back.”

He complements this introspection, though, saying, “It’s a real pleasure to see how you guys do the marks. I want to give you the pleasure of doing it.”

In spite of the warning, it’s apparent: tonight’s crowd has warmly welcomed Wachholz’s art, and shown great pleasure in doing so.