

Walter Price *Pearl Lines*

Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin 10 September – 21 January

That Walter Price isn't about to spoon-feed viewers is apparent everywhere in *Pearl Lines*, whose title the thirtysomething American painter has used for all his shows since 2016, steadily dilating or dissolving its meaning. Eleven of the works here are sketches in black (acrylic, marker, ink, pencil), somewhere between drawing and painting, emerging slowly from blood-red grounds and made harder to see by the dark-tinted acrylic they're framed under. What's evoked, fragmentarily, as you twist and crane, is inequality and conflict along gendered and racial lines. Four works feature black figures referred to in the titles as 'Panthers' (*Panthers making a plan*, 2022, *Panther parade*, 2021, etc), suggesting the militant Black Power organisation founded during the 1960s. Women appear either undressed or, as in *Strong woman doing squats* (2022), muscling up. The lantern-jawed

trio seen in *A gathering of Mad men* (2021), meanwhile, might be paired, for interpretative purposes, with the larger, unframed panel painting *Designated Area* (2022): a bunch of mournful-looking men playing musical chairs around an armchair reserved for 'Alpha'.

That work, like the six further panel paintings here, is also predominantly red-toned, an atypically narrow palette for Price. In an interview reprinted in the handout, he says he chose the colour as it's the dominant shade on the German flag and because he recently 'stared at Matisse's *Red Room* painting for about seventeen minutes'. These are playful-serious rhetorical feints, like Price's pointing to fractious human dynamics while also swerving into luscious near-abstraction in small, smeary red-and-black panels like *Double checking my high hopes* (2020). A frieze of five small, abutting canvases,

featuring loosely head-shaped black outlines on red, is titled *Conversations* (2022); the implied toggling between people speaking feels consonant with the exhibition's aesthetic ping-pong and conceptual cat-and-mouse. You feel Price consistently a few steps ahead, frequently hoisting open an interpretative trapdoor. You can't even call this a painting show, due to the sculptural, floor-based circle of canvases (*Talking in circles*, 2022), and a prominent found object: *The weight of thought* (2022) is a burgundy suitcase (perhaps a nod to David Hammons's use of the same object as freighted readymade) with two books zip-tied to it. One, suggestive of getting from A to B in career terms, is Rosey Grier's inspirational *All-American Heroes: Today's Multicultural Success Stories* (1993). The other, something like a leather-bound diary, is sealed shut – not for you. *Martin Herbert*



A gathering of Mad men, 2021, acrylic, ink on paper, 68 × 56 × 4 cm (framed).
Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin