



Flash Art #285

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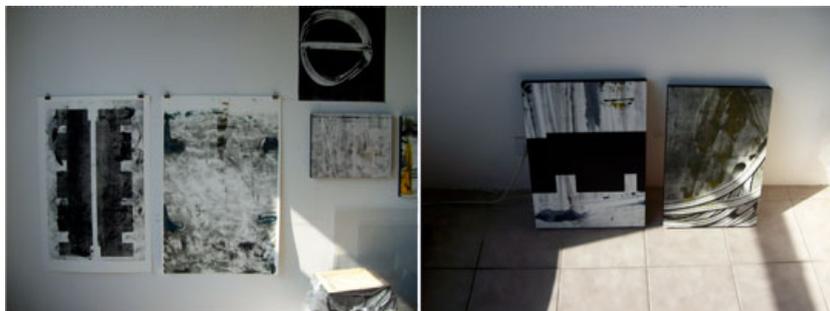


Art Diary International 2012/2013 is now out, packed with contact information for galleries, museums

Mary Simpson and Fionn Meade

David Everitt Howe

Mary Simpson's 2009 Columbia MFA exhibition at the Fisher Landau Center for Art featured an installation of large, felt paintings, assorted rods placed or leaning against paintings and walls, as well as two video collaborations with critic-curator Fionn Meade.



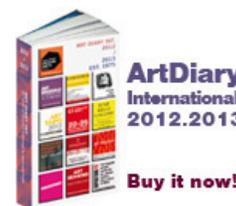
The monumental four by eight-foot paintings were marked by bold, irregular swaths of black or red superimposed upon flat monotone surfaces of light blue, grey, or brown. The paintings' hard-edged shapes make oblique sign-posts rearticulating Constructivist aesthetics, also reminiscent of László Moholy-Nagy's Bauhaus designs or El Lissitzky's divagating proun constructions in that Simpson explores three-dimensional space with abstract iconography. Meanwhile the artist remains ambiguous about her abstract references by abandoning its utopian agenda.

Two films (16mm transferred to video) accompanied the paintings, *Young Americans* and *Black Flags* (both 2009). These too produce allegorical spaces with indeterminate narratives and camera shots only to avoid precise references. The installation seemed to explore the idea of hollow signification: of images, of simulacra, that refer mainly to their ontological status as images without clear referents.

I met Simpson and her collaborator Meade at their Williamsburg studio. They discussed the relation of the image to Constructivism, gesture and affect.



David Everitt Howe: *Can you talk a bit about your interest in Constructivism, and*



museums,
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what sort of re-articulation your paintings are putting forward? They seem to really adopt the contours of a specific aesthetic language while simultaneously abandoning that language.

Mary Simpson: Sure. I was looking at Constructivist practices and the complicated nature of its utopian agenda. Within that failure, there is amazing work that came out of Constructivism, particularly in Constructivist theater. Looking at Rodchenko led me to looking at his theater and costume designs. You know, what *Victory over the Sun* was about, what its images were about. And so I started looking at Constructivist theater and I realized that there's so much rich folk heritage at play, which is why it was so complicated. Folk imagery and traditions come into both my and Fionn's work.

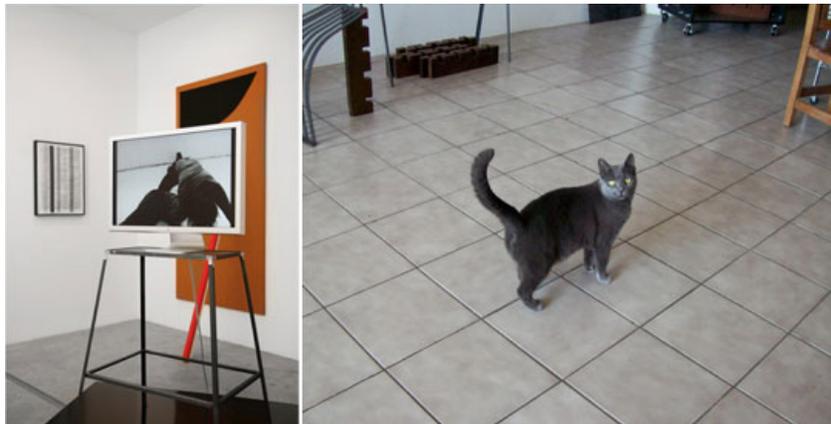
I had these four by eight-foot sheets of plywood, and I started leaning them against the wall and playing with fabric and felt, and making these panels that started to pull at the tension between abstract image and iconic object in a way that Constructivism sort of did. What is the abstract image that insists that it is something? Or, at the same time, what is an iconic image that insists that it isn't one — that defies its own interpretation.

DEH: *It's interesting, this idea of theater, the sort of active construction of representation. A lot of artists right now are working in this kind of vein, this kind of self-conscious theatricality: with actors, scripts, cinematic lighting — the apparatus of the image, its ideology. Very Brechtian...*

MS: Yeah. How do we consume images now? How do we relate to images? What do we think of images...

DEH: *Who's making them...?*

MS: Of course, but also — this is something Fionn and I have been thinking about — has the image taken on the status of the object? Do we relate to images now the way we used to relate to objects?



DEH: *I think your and Fionn's latest project, Marysas (2010) pretty clearly, and viscerally, explicates that — which is the main reason why I'm showing it in the exhibition I'm curating, "Half a self, a cave-dweller" at St. Cecilia's convent. It contains footage of two hands, pressed one upon the other (one is black-and-white and one is in color), as they trace the outlines of various historical representations of people, from what looks like a lithograph of an eighteenth-century musician to a strange sort of Egyptian figure. In the way these two disembodied hands trace the images — which look like old, dusty photographs from an encyclopedia — the video seems to juxtapose the real with the represented, or the idea of image becoming object. Can you tell me more about the video, where the source images come from, etc.? And maybe also, speak a little bit on the subjective affects of the image?*

Fionn Meade: In part it is the compression at play here that implies the role of gesture. An image of a Roman statue upon which make-shift materials have been placed, turning it into more of a fetish than a sited historical figure; the fragmented view of dangling legs in an artist's drawing; the masked figure of a late Renaissance reveler; the shocked expression of a man looking down at his own hands in disbelief; all images with specific back-stories and interests. But here they are provisional, made into facsimiles to be caressed at a remove. What remains is the interval in between a closed, historically defined source. The hand that traces over them creates an affective, associative link that does not clearly reveal their place in a linear heritage, but emphasizes instead the capacity of a removed image to desire contact, to evoke and voice again, to adhere to another image. So the hand on camera is also framed as having the provisional status of a copy even as the actual hand is also clearly visible underneath.

This is what relates to the Agamben essay “Notes on Gesture” that we sent you. We’ve been talking a lot about this, and his idea that “In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to re-appropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss.” This is an idea brought up in relation to the hurried gestural otherness so prominent in early films. But maybe here the contemporary image, in its weakened and dispersed status is brought back into contact, embodied, symptomatic even.

This goes back to what Mary was saying and our shared interest in thinking about aesthetic potentials that are too often assumed to be closed and exhausted, and how an affective relationship might open up different questions, different problems. Meyerhold, for instance, in his version of Constructivism insisted that folk imagery and its inversions could and should share the stage with charged references to the political arguments of the moment, and that film footage of a labor strike exist within a sculptural stage scenario that featured the competing depth of abstract composition. That contact between such modes was not only possible but enabled each to resonate in an open rather than closed way. This is just one example of what might be called gestural re-appropriation.

MS: Yes, and there is a sort of strange and also playful sense of desire in this piece: the idea that the image itself desires to be interacted with. What is created when building a series of impressions or attempts at ritual language through the use and rehearsal of gesture-as-image and image-as-gesture? What happens when you try to shift the image emphasis from signification to affect? In *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Roberto Calasso writes that the first enemy of the aesthetic is *meaning*: the Greek statue actually defies interpretation. Before conjuring up meaning, the statue wants to attract our eye and install itself there; the image wants to be desired.

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