JERRY BIRCHFIELD
A Pale, A Post, A Boundary
February 6 - March 27, 2021

Devening Projects

A Pale, A Post, A Boundary is comprised of a range of works: gelatin silver prints, plaster cast works for the wall and a set of freestanding sculptures–all emblematic of the investigatory approach we find in Jerry Birchfield's practice.

No matter which of these processes the works adhere to, they are all deeply rooted in a concern for the multilayered operation of images and the roles of the components that make them perceptible including representation, materiality and spectatorship. With that in mind, the works invite viewers to trace the source of their origin and the processes by which they were made, purporting that this mental tracing is as pertinent to an understanding of the work as the image-objects themselves.

The gelatin silver prints take various forms. Some are flatly mounted and framed, other gelatin silver works operate as otherwise traditional picture mats for smaller prints. And still others, hinged loosely within frames, appear to have been rescued from some tragic accident within the artist's studio.

The mounted prints, parts of an ongoing series titled Stagger When Seeing Visions, function as images in the proper sense. They are photographic, in that they were made by a series of photo-based darkroom processes, but they do not necessarily depict in ways typically attributed to photography. They drift somewhere on the middle of a spectrum between abstraction and representation where content floats behind murky surfaces invoking ghosts (some friendly, some not) of Surrealist and Modernist darkroom explorations. Parts of depicted content remain legible, while others are only nameable as the basics–shape, form, light, tone, texture or mark. Depiction and process here, staples of photography, come dangerously close to running aground and reveal themselves as parts operating with the intent of pointing us to a reflexive set of referents–compositions found in or made from detritus in the artist's studio, the fundamentally photographic language of light and shadow, the photo paper surface and myriad layers of darkroom processes by which they were made, or perhaps in some collapse of time and space we are looking at reflective representations of the other works in the exhibition that surrounds us.

Other gelatin silver works function as rectangular mats that frame and reframe other smaller prints. These works materialize and point to the pictorial framing devices present in the mounted prints and to physical borders cast into some of the plaster works. In another iteration, a tattered print is loosely hinged overtop another that has lost most of whatever photographic image was presented on its surface. The residue of a series of partially knowable processes becomes enlivened as referential. These traces of indexical material procedures connect to the photographic capacity to record and refer.

Although presently material, the plaster cast wall works are images in their own right. They hover between and signify sculpture, painting and drawing processes all at once. However, this multilayered set of media references operates within a world formed by photographic image and material relationships. The process that produces these pieces is as follows: first, a cut gelatin silver print is placed in a shallow mold. Then, plaster is poured onto the print filling the surrounding cubic space. The multi-level surface is formed when the wet plaster causes the print to warp, fix and mount in position as it dries. The surfaces are re-leveled with a flood of enamel paint then treated with graphite. Some pieces are sanded back to reveal these layers of buildup while others might be subjected to this entire set of procedures multiple times.

Finally, a set of sculptures, referred to as Pales, are made of plaster and concrete-coated gelatin silver prints. They appear to be made by interrupting the processes described above. Although here, the prints are stood on end to dry and fix in place. These works are presented on glass-topped powder coated steel stands positioned as a divide through the gallery space. In these works, there is a delicate balance between material relationships as the form of the curled prints act as armatures for the plaster that has assisted these photographs in their attempt to stand upright. These works are presented in a range of forms–some left open exposing the front and back of the print in the round while some are closed and others are filled to the brim with material–reminding that images are always operating as vessels engaged in some degree of disclosure and concealment.

Jerry Birchfield (b. 1985) holds an MFA from Cornell University (2014) and a BFA in Photography from the Cleveland Institute of Art (2009). Recent solo exhibitions include Jerry Birchfield: Asleep in the Dust at the Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH; Stagger When Seeing Visions organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art at the Transformer Station, Cleveland, OH; and You Are Not, Except As A Joke, Blaming Them at Angela Meleca Gallery, Columbus, OH. In Cleveland, his work has been included in group exhibitions at Abattoir, the Museum of Contemporary Art, 2731 Prospect; and SPACES as well as Riffe Gallery and ROYGBIV in Columbus, the Print Center in Philadelphia, and Schema Projects and Foley Gallery in New York. He lives and works in Cleveland, Ohio and is a Lecturer in Photography at Case Western Reserve University.

Jerry Birchfield

Asleep in the Dust

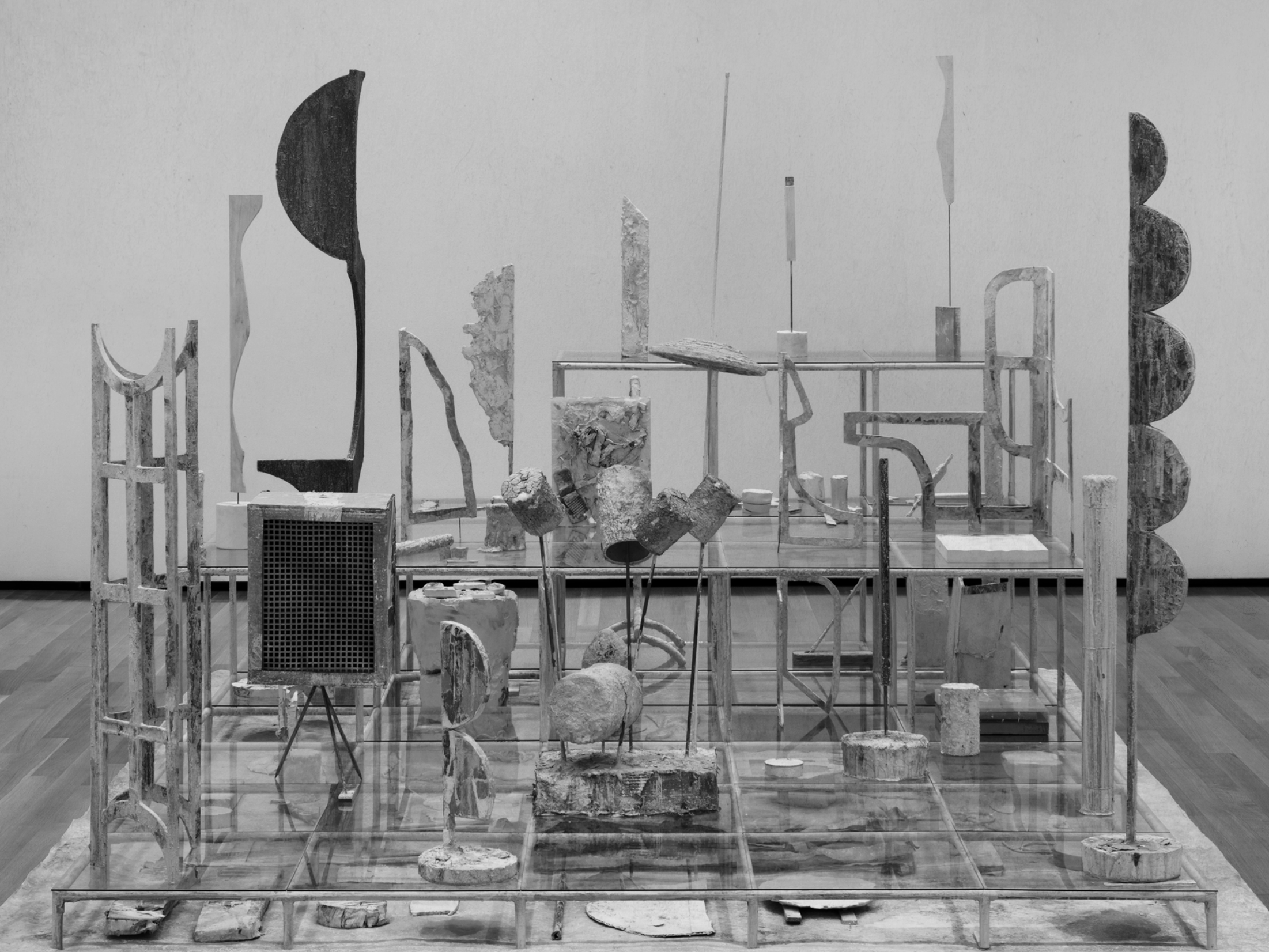
Asleep In the Dust

This practice is like two narcoleptics generously fighting to stay awake long enough to carry, or at least to start, a conversation. Each speaker—only partially aware of the other's nodding—carries on without regard for a listening ear. However, in more honest moments, just before dozing, they continue self-consciously, hoping to be heard. Both participants emerge from this rhythm of sleep at different times, slightly embarrassed, unsure if caught, and completely uncertain about the facts. They try to sort out what was said and heard from what was thought and dreamt. They improvise while carrying on in ambiguous responses—at this point, the only visible way forward without total confession. Awake, then asleep again, absorbing and translating whatever information may have been encountered during semi-conscious states. All content begins to levitate, becomes malleable, and is reshaped into a form yet to be determined by the effects of its new surroundings.

Here, dust is made of words and images, remnants, flour and plaster, and guitar solos and stolen goods. These components hang in the air while they combine in the referential work of each other. Then, this dust slowly settles, covering all surfaces inside and out until it is again disrupted and circulates in search of a new resting place. The words and images do their best while the paint and glue treat, cover, seal and mend remnants that have already been used. The flour, valued almost entirely for its potential, awaits another purpose while the plaster casts vessels and models and broken bones. The myriad supports lie around before they are eventually repurposed. They are built up, then torn down and stripped back. The studio absorbs these objects, materials and subject matter. Then, through a process of assembling, framing, staging and imaging, they reemerge in slightly more conscious states, prepared for the work of seeing and parsing. The resulting forms are fixed and activated to engage participants on new terms: upright, mobile, and unsure.

In this space, there is no force. Or there is so much force in correct amounts and in correct directions, that it all remains suspended, as if in a magnetic field or an anti-gravity chamber or some imaginary realm capable of levitation. However, the slightest effort can shift one form into another. Surfaces touch, meet, and stick together. Residue from each form transfers to the surface of the others so that they are only seen through the veneer of each other. At times, these layers are so thin that their presence and effect goes unnoticed. Although mostly familiar, something feels altered about the forms beneath. These layers are looked through–sensed rather than acknowledged. At other times, the layers are so dense that the identities of the forms they cover are overlooked. We try to sort out what was said and heard from what was thought and dreamt, but only the surfaces are seen and the load-bearing armatures that support both their histories and their weight are forgotten altogether.

■ Jerry Birchfield



Latency in the Work of Jerry Birchfield

The darkroom is a transformative space. Light cast through a film negative activates photo-sensitive silver bromide dust that is suspended in a gelatin emulsion coating a sheet of paper, which does not appear to change. Then—like magic—when the sheet is slipped into a tray of liquid chemistry, the image gradually appears. In those moments following its exposure to light, the paper carries a latent image that is invisible to the human eye. Through chemical processing the image emerges, and the photograph comes into being. A latent entity is not absent. Rather, the image, object or thought must be discovered—then developed—in order to fully be.

Latency infuses Birchfield's artistic practice, which encompasses photography, sculpture, written text such as the adjacent essay, installation and performative gestures. Coated by a subtle layer of plaster dust, his bright, white-walled studio is dense with ideas in various states of development, some of which are manifest in physical objects. Through Birchfield's iterative process of finding, making, unmaking, masking, subtracting, adding, breaking, repairing, coating and recoating, dormant potentialities emerge from these objects. By the artist's intentional gestures of selection and framing, the artworks finally appear. Like photographs that have been fixed (chemically treated so that further light exposure won't alter the image), realized sculptures can be extracted from their generative space and displayed in other contexts.

Yes, They Were Made to Level is a monumental sculpture made up of many parts, both literally and conceptually. Most of the components began as trash—tall forms built of half-moon shapes were made from found scrap wood; cardboard boxes, shims and tin cans can be identified under layers of paint and wheat paste; blobs of plaster were originally the excess of poured plaster slabs. The sculpture's glass-topped skeletal platform structure acts as a stage, upon and within which Birchfield has placed individual items to form a coherent whole. Micro-compositions are framed by sections of the structural grid, and new relationships among the objects become apparent as the viewer moves around the work, shifting perspective.

Many of the work's component objects have had past lives as part of previous activities by the artist, appearing as the subjects of photographs in a book Birchfield published in 2016, also titled *Yes, They Were Made to Level*, and shown in a two-day outdoor exhibition in 2015 at the sunroom, an art space in Cleveland Heights. The installation in Akron is the current iteration of this evolving body of work and references its past versions. Accumulated material layers, including the dust that continuously accrues on the work's surfaces, index the passage of time and trace the artist's repetitive actions.

While meant to be viewed in the round, this sculpture was designed in response to the gallery space and with the goal of making a photograph in mind. Birchfield adjusted the composition of the objects in response to its appearance through the viewfinder of his camera. The resulting image, reproduced in this publication, will outlive the ephemeral installation in Akron. During the exhibition, as Birchfield describes, the objects are "prepared for the work of seeing and parsing...upright, mobile, and unsure." They are active, engaging with us. After the exhibition's close, they will return to a latent state, asleep in the dust of the artist's studio.

■ Elizabeth M. Carney, Assistant Curator

Jerry Birchfield: Asleep in the Dust

March 24-September 23, 2018

Akron Art Museum

Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell Gallery

Jerry Birchfield (born 1985, Cleveland) works as a photographer and sculptor in Cleveland. He earned his BFA in Photography from the Cleveland Institute of Art in 2009 and MFA from Cornell University in 2014. All works by Jerry Birchfield and courtesy of the artist.

Works in exhibition

Yes, They Were Made to Level, 2018, PVC conduit, glass, plastic drop cloths, wood, masonite, cardboard, metal, foam, plaster, concrete, papier-mâché, plexiglass, paint, flour, dust, arrows, 80 x 159 ½ x 115 in.

Strange Work, 2018, gelatin silver print, plaster, enamel paint, graphite, 20 x 16 in.

Sometimes All I Need is the Air that I Breathe, 2017, inkjet print, plaster, enamel paint, graphite, 40 x 30 in.

How Great is that Darkness, 2017, gelatin silver print, plaster, enamel paint, graphite, 20 x 16 in.

Untitled from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2017, solarized selenium toned gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in.

Untitled from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2017, solarized selenium toned gelatin silver print, 16 x 12 in.

Six untitled works from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2017, solarized selenium toned gelatin silver prints, each 20 x 16 in.

Untitled from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2016, bleached gelatin silver print, 20 x 16 in.

Untitled from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2016, solarized silver toned gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in.

Jerry Birchfield: Asleep in the Dust ***is organized by the Akron Art Museum with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Ohio Arts Council.***

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Cover image: Untitled from series *Stagger When Seeing Visions*, 2017, solarized selenium toned silver gelatin print, 16 x 12 in.

Center spread: *Yes, They Were Made to Level*, 2018, installation at Akron Art Museum. Photo by Jerry Birchfield.

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CAN JOURNAL
WEBSITE OF THE COLLECTIVE ARTS NETWORK | CLEVELAND

JERRY BIRCHFIELD: ASLEEP IN THE DUST AT THE AKRON ART MUSEUM

Author: Douglas Max Utter

While FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art occupies other rooms at the Akron Art Museum, Clevelander Jerry Birchfield brings his multimedia, photo-based work to the Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell Gallery through September 23.

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12:2)

"Dust" is a subtle word, which in the King James translation of Hebrew texts is synonymous with mortality. Short and blunt, it evokes sudden silence and shallow burial. Jerry Birchfield in the title of his show Asleep in the Dust brings to mind a well-known phrase from the book of Daniel, which describes the "sleep" of the dead prior to their final awakening on Judgment Day. But in the context of this exhibit, that apocalyptic vision serves as a distant (if titanic) backdrop to a very contemporary exploration of the nature of photography, and of artistic procedures more generally.

Sometimes All I Need is the Air that I Breathe
Cut inkjet print embedded in plaster, enamel, graphite
40" x 30" x 1.5"
2017

The dust referred to in Birchfield's work is mainly the accumulation typical of an artist's studio, inflected less by eschatology than by the slow physical facts of dissolution. His often photogram-like innovations, aiming at a condition midway between three and two dimensions, explore the atomization of all material objects and beings. They depict—even as they act out—the gradual, endless mist of once-and-future materiality that envelops the living world. Time seems to rain down on the fragmentary objects that Birchfield arranges and photographs, dissolving even the idea of form itself, while the ever-evolving chemical and digital processes of photography generate intricate, shadowy layers of visual clues and blind alleys.

Six untitled solarized selenium silver-toned gelatin prints from 2017 resemble the Victorian-era cameraless photograms that are photography's experimental progenitors—the Adams and Eves of our own, vast, fallen visual world. Even more mysterious than these shadowy images is a 40-inch-by-30-inch print titled Sometimes All I Need Is the Air That I Breathe. The work consists (somehow) of an inkjet print, plaster, enamel paint, and graphite. But it looks more like wax, like encaustic—sensuous, almost fat, projecting a smoothly polished sense of physical volume. And while it could be an example of microphotography or even medical imaging deriving from heat or sound, it seems almost lyrical, like a watery post-impressionist nature study. Maybe that's what suggested the Hollies' super romantic song title to the artist. Its milky gray modulations are as soft as fur, and invent an unusual beauty, composed of touch and curiosity and caution.

Yes, They Were Made to Level brings the concerns and tensions that wink in and out of view in Birchfield's wall-mounted works all the way out into the center of the available gallery space. Measuring maybe ten feet by ten feet, the constituent materials on its wall label read like a contractor's wish list. PVC conduit, plastic, wood, Masonite, cardboard, metal, foam, Plexiglas, concrete, paint, flour, and arrows: Home Depot meets King Tut's Tomb. It's as if concepts of form and function are here gathered from the corners of western history, "whitened" with a liberal sprinkling of plaster of Paris and flour (playing the part of the dust of ages), and surrounded with a three-dimensional grid of Plexiglas and PVC. King Tut's crowded underground storage facility is one comparison, but in any case, Birchfield's work here speaks of excavation and perhaps even the uneasy vibe that haunts any disturbed burial site. The grid is a trope for scientific method as well as a formal device of late modern art forms. The bone-like whiteness and overall texture of the work describe the dead, but also modeling and creation in relation to the inchoate stuff of life (the gods in many traditions create human beings from available materials), while the random shapes and objects that Birchfield includes could be the accumulated contents of a cultural midden. On another associative front, Birchfield's constructed cubes are clearly "Cubist" in intent. They mount an advancing program of deconstruction across the midden, like the initial girders of an emerging high-rise. Included in this dungheap/construction site are a Picasso-ish or Max Ernst-like totemic tower and a swooping boudoir screen, plus shapes that could be soup cans, and a medium-size cardboard box with metal screening. Birchfield's "Yes, They Were Made to Level" is like crumbling evidence of an ironic history of Form, half-uncovered in the course of a post-apocalyptic investigation, displayed as if in situ, in all its messiness. Of course, these objects, these events in aesthetic progress now partly visible, might also be half-hidden, caught at a moment when history is being erased or otherwise betrayed.

ARTS

Cleveland Museum of Art offers fantastic solo shows on Scott Olson, Jerry Birchfield, at Transformer Station (photos)

Updated: Nov. 04, 2017, 1:05 p.m. | Published: Nov. 04, 2017, 12:05 p.m.

By Steven Litt, cleveland.com

CLEVELAND, Ohio - A famous Leonardo da Vinci quote has special relevance to an outstanding pair of solo shows at the Transformer Station on the works of Cleveland artists Jerry Birchfield and Scott Olson, organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In his famous "Treatise on Painting," Leonardo urged artists to seek inspiration in unusual places:

'If you look upon an old wall covered with dirt, or the odd appearance of some streaked stones, you may discover several things like landscapes, battles, clouds, uncommon attitudes, humorous faces, draperies, etc. Out of this confused mass of objects, the mind will be furnished with an abundance of designs and subjects perfectly new."

Birchfield and Olson are abstractionists, and as such not interested in translating random stains on walls or stones into battle scenes or drapery. But they are interested in how randomness and chance can produce moments of ravishing beauty.

Provocative pairing
By pairing their shows - the first institutional exhibition either has received - Reto Thuring, the museum's curator of contemporary art, is obviously asking viewers to compare their works, which have a lot in common.

Birchfield, 32, a Cleveland photographer who produced an excellent series of portraits of Cleveland artist Dan Tranberg before his death earlier this year, uses inkjet print, plaster, enamel paint, graphite and unspecified tools to produce objects that might be slices of the walls described in Leonardo's treatise.

He also makes abstractions by casting unusual shadows on photographic paper and then solarizing the prints, exposing them to light to reverse the original light-dark relationships. The resulting images evoke mysterious nocturnal landscapes that crackle with a strange electricity.

Exquisite and intimate
Olson, 41, who lives in Kent, produces exquisite, intimately scaled abstract paintings that seem to have emerged organically on canvas or panels of wood without the artist's direct intervention.

The sheer variety of Olson's experiments - his show includes 34 paintings and sculptures from 2004 to 2017 - is striking.

In one small painting, he sketches a lattice in dark green on a sour yellow field that evokes a form of abstract musical notation. In another painting, luminous swaths of pale green paint glow on mysterious layers of brownish black. Yet another includes marks that evoke the stains left by a coffee mug or a paint can on a white surface.

The marks and gestures in these and other paintings don't have a telltale signature or a sense of the artist's ego yearning to burst out in full cry.

Both Olson and Birchfield are interested in creating works that have a sense of their own volition, as if they emerged as the outcome of a natural process, like moisture seeping through a plaster wall, or fall leaves settling randomly on sheets of shiny metal to create unusual patterns.

Part of a tradition

The work of each artist, in its own way, evokes the Leonardo treatise and the longstanding tradition in art inspired by it, from the 18th century inkblot drawings of Alexander Cozens to Dadaism, surrealism and Abstract Expressionism.

What differentiates Olson and Birchfield from earlier practitioners, especially the Surrealists and Abstract Expressionists, is that neither appear to be delving into the subconscious or dredging up extreme psychological states.

Theirs is not an art of weirdness or angst. It's about creating a state of wonder and an appreciation of the miracles that can happen in a studio when materials are approached in new and unusual ways, without preconceptions about what art is supposed to look like or how it's supposed to behave.

Birchfield is especially effective in his works on rectangular panels of plaster that have been stressed, scuffed, scratched, rubbed and excavated to produce surfaces of enormous textural complexity and tactile appeal.

Shades of gray

All are in shades of gray or black on white. The lack of color creates a sense of artlessness, as if Birchfield's creations were randomly chosen samples of an external reality that he discovered, rather than something he created out of his own will.

Olson's smaller paintings in oil on wood, with their fragmentary nature and sense of happy happenstance, also have this "bystander" effect.

But also on view are larger and more colorful abstract paintings by Olson that obviously were made with traditional materials and with brushes.

Consisting of curvy, colorful organic shapes that nestle or overlap one another, existing somewhere between still life and landscape, also feel as if they represent outcomes of an organic process presided over by the artist, but without a sense that he's guiding things in one direction or another.

Olson sets up the conditions for the emergence of the marvelous shapes and colors. The process has a natural, unforced ease and a quiet sense of the miraculous.

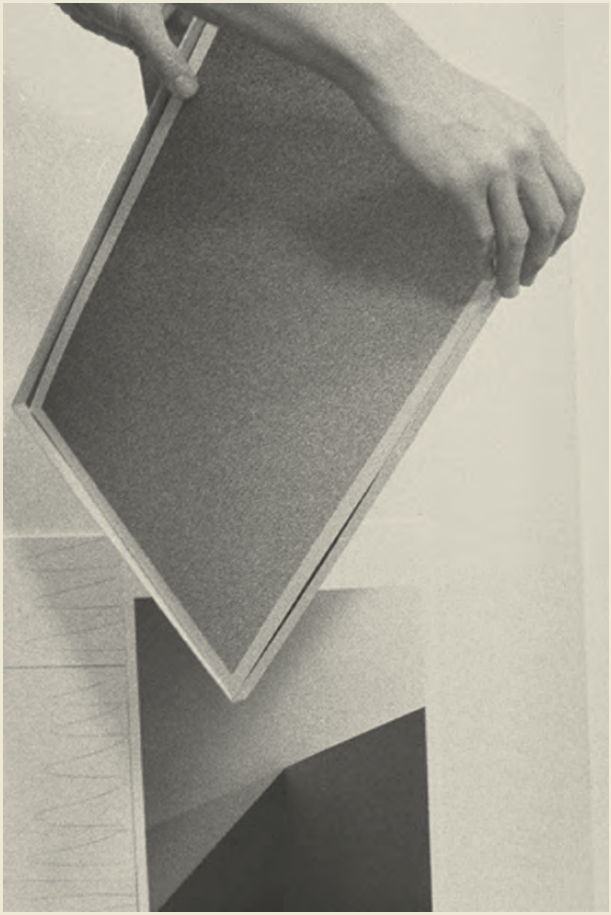
Any artist who can hit such notes is onto something.

The Cleveland Museum of Art is likewise demonstrating a special degree of alertness and attentiveness in the terrific Olson-Birchfield pairing.

Let's hope the museum - which decided only recently to take contemporary art and local contemporary art seriously - continues on the path it's taking now.

jerry
birchfield

mr.
in-
between



.mr. in-between

jerry birchfield

william busta gallery
02/06/15 - 03/07/15

reception:
02/06/15
5-9pm

An Inside for an Outside

The left overs of everyday circulate in and around a practice of looking and making. The two realms often overlap and merge. The things used, found, and discarded become the objects of central focus. Arrangements between happenstance and precision are recognized as an already active plate ready for registration within the frame. The objects reminisce of their quotidian function, but only partially and quietly. They were and are now more and less than that. The photograph allows them to be seen this way, as incapacitated and capable.

Debris, left overs, the aftermath of other efforts, materials only partially identifiable – like the scene after an accident or disaster – only too clean for that, too controlled. Not the kind of unidentifiable that happens in real life after the car crash or flood, not the kind with real loved ones and family, this is the kind that happens on a prime time drama – the kind where nothing graphic is ever shown or seen, nothing vulgar, and if it is, it is theatrical enough that we know it isn't real, it couldn't be, not like this. It is too clean because it is contained. We can see its edges, we can see where it ends.

This un-identification deals in senses, or things already known. Specificity without…. It doesn't matter that we don't have more, that we don't know. Broken pieces of wood and dust and dirt don't have much more to offer anyway. Here, they are the filler, the stand-in, and the placeholder. They are the articulation of their representation. An acknowledgment of what they do now rather than what they used to be. To know more about their past is pointless and besides this point.

The debris is real, and so is the space in which it occurred. It is perhaps as real as the sidewalks on location during the filming of a motion picture, or the scenery carried on and off stage between acts, or the fake fruit and thirty year old assortment of things

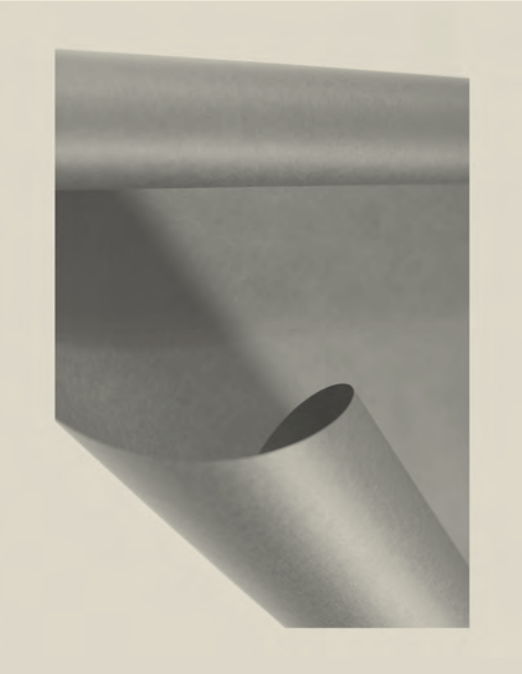
excavated from a storage closet for an *Intro to Drawing* still life assignment. It is real in that sense, but its purpose here is to be seen by the camera, as the photographic and nothing more.

A contamination between found and fabricated, and left over and central produces this subject matter – these works, these props, or these manifestations of my total commitment. Can you believe it? I don't, no one does. If the debris generated by the studio represents an attempt at making or the overly theatrical performance of it, or maybe the aftermath, or the leftover, then its representation turns into either documentation of such acts or the next iteration for which the material and performance was always intended.

The forged solarizations are citations or simply amazing effects. The images work to seduce and remain empty; the effect without the result. There is never no result. Is it a template, a placeholder, or the real thing? What is it dependent on, the frame? Please. How about the effect as effect and nothing more?

Then there is the wall, the perimeter, the frame – equally imaged, generic, and evasive – somehow more or less significant – supportive or central, or both. As peripheral, it emphasizes its center by disappearing – the space between its four sides, the picture, the work. As central, the frame dismisses the interior as a placeholder, but knows it is necessary if it is to uphold its form and function as frame, wall, or support.

Material constructions that question the intention of their construction. A material plane, which already supports a picture, is compressed in a shallow space with the image plane of the photograph. Once photographed, the wall, table, or ground, and the photograph for that matter, are illuminated as the thing they always were, the image of themself. The imagistic object that hovers over, lies upon, or just beneath its surface allows each plane to fulfill its supportive role.



We know that it is separate from us and somehow still the same, still present, parallel even. It doesn't need much space, perhaps the between space of Brassai's *Graffiti*, or the imagined depth of Fox Talbot's *Lace*. Can the depicted work take the fall and allow its external parallel to survive? Or are they attached and destined for the same fate – whether it be failure or greatness? Is the imagined space between them enough to parse that blame or that praise? On whom and what does it depend?

The exterior becomes the interior and gets trapped. It is trapped between the thing it prefers to ignore, the thing it is embarrassed to admit, and the position of critical austerity that it prefers. It is the thing it hates and spends its time trying to convince you otherwise.

Jerry Birchfield
Mr. In-Between

WBg
William Busta Gallery
Cleveland Ohio

Above:
Lonely Souls, 2014
inkjet print,
43 x 66.5 in.

Right:
One and Two (One), 2014
painted aluminum,
22.75 x 25.75 x 13.5 in.

Cover:
Does Anyone Else Have Any Bright Ideas, 2014
inkjet print,
55 x 40 in.

Jerry Birchfield
Mr. In-Between

Feb 6–Mar 7, 2015

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Jerry Birchfield: Nothing is as It Seems

Imagine a black box theater. Small, dimly lit with red velvet curtains drawn to a close. On the program for the evening are three small plays, each containing numerous actors who are not content to just entertain you, but strive to make you think as well. These plays examine our lives and the world around us, soliciting response not in their obscurity or with unfamiliar elements, but rather they try to explain what it means to be human by focusing on very basic things: social interaction, the way that we learn, and how we see. Tonight, Jerry Birchfield is directing the stage.

The magic of the camera. Similar to the stage, the camera is a directive for our eyes. We see only what the photographer or director desires us to see; there is no other point of view. Their choice greatly impacts our own experience. It becomes both the how, and the what of Birchfield's photographs. He is drawing attention to his own focus and decision making as the man behind the camera, and inviting us to question his choice. This is not the only way that he breaks the fourth wall. Filling the room with stark and almost clinical photographs, we are given glimpses of stories that so obviously do not reside within each box of dust and debris.

Finally It Has Happened to Me Right In Front of My Face is one such work that uses the minute displays of tension to pull a thread of poetic narrative out of the stark contrast of a minimalist image. He focuses his lens not on what we see, but how we see. Even his sculptures are built on a foundation of contradiction. They are three-dimensional objects that are framed by two-dimensional images, and are designed with a single frame of reference in mind where they blur the very space they occupy. *One and Two (One)* is one such play on physical perspective.

Mr. In-Between is the final performer. It is participatory theater, where viewers find themselves on the stage, looking at nothing less than Looking. We are asked to question why the camera documents, and what it documents. We catch a glimpse back at the previous stages of the artist in the studio, and can follow the process and difficulty of framing and organizing a show. Birchfield is a magician who wants us to learn all the tricks. He pulls back his sleeves, smiles, and voila... Nothing is as It Seems, it's never that simple.

—Karl Anderson

Top:
Finally It Has Happened to Me Right In Front of My Face, 2014
inkjet print; 78 x 43 in.

Bottom:
Prop, 2014
inkjet print,
14 x 11.2 in

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REVIEWS

Jerry Birchfield: Mr. In-Between

March 12, 2015 by Rose Bouthillier

Jerry Birchfield, Mr. In-Between. Installation view. All works 2014. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.

There is a strange, dissolving feeling, hard to describe, when one thing turns out to be another—a space floating between definitions. It is precisely this feeling that Jerry Birchfield crafts so well, and which pervades *Mr. In-Between*, his second solo show at William Busta Gallery in Cleveland. With sleight of hand, Birchfield mines the tension between two and three dimensions, creating works that quietly confound and playfully dodge.

Mr. In-Between includes a new series of images and sculptures; I say “images” with purpose, because the word “photographs” or even “photo-based works” seems in this case disingenuous, maybe even cliché. Certainly, the camera has a role; it imbues these images with flatness. The pictures appear to need this flatness desperately, uninterested in how they acquired it. Here “photography” is like a load-bearing column, essential, but standing awkwardly in the middle of a room.

Birchfield’s images consist of vertical surfaces littered with debris from the studio—wires, paper, shims—which appear to be covered with sprayed power and paint in shades of black and grey. From afar they read as *trompe-l’oeil* paintings, tricking the eye into perceiving volume; up close, their flat paper surfaces and iridescent tinges reveal them as inkjet prints. Photographs are habitually read as representations: their “realism” lies in indexicality as opposed to verisimilitude.

Today, it would be extremely odd to hear someone remark on how life-like a photograph appears. Birchfield cleverly subverts this: rendered monochrome, shallow, and unfamiliar, the images cling to the “thingness” of his subjects. Further, he aligns the qualities of his subjects and media; the soft, dull coating of the objects echo in the matte paper, inks, and dusty particles fragmented along the lines of pixels. Some of the shapes are traced by very fine, bright, craggy outlines and slightly-off solarization. Birchfield employs a variety of analog and digital tools in his work. I’m not

certain exactly how these are made, and not knowing seems important to the act of looking; there's a theatre to being in the dark.

Art historically, the images call up cubist collage, supremacist compositions, and cluttered rayographs (all of which engage in questioning vision and making strange). Louise Nevelson's sculptures are another visual referent, everyday objects puzzled together and all coated in leveling black. *It's Never Too Late for a Kind Gesture* and *Does Anyone Else Have Any Bright Ideas*, two of Birchfield's works in lighter shades of grey, evoke other feelings and scenes: lunar artifacts, a post-apocalyptic desktop covered with ash, the strange appearance of greatly magnified fibers. While most of the objects are vague in their purpose, *Finally It Has Happened to Me Right In Front of My Face*, features a large floppy bow. In many ways this was the focal point of the show, a pantomime gesture, fluid and presenting. The title is drawn from the early 90s dance anthem *Finally* by CeCe Peniston, a celebratory ode to meeting "Mr. Right." At this point in the exhibition, I let the phrase "falling for" turn over a few times in my mind.

The show's odd one out, *You Scared Me, but I Didn't Scream*, consists of an inkjet print with plaster and graphite affixed to the surface, in peeling layers and Rorschach-like shapes. Next to the perceptual shifts of the other prints, this work felt somewhat blunt, a peek behind the curtain you regret taking. But the affect of its inclusion plays out after you leave the room; this one can be recalled more distinctly, as multiple modes of perception (pictorial, textural, and spatial) and activated. While every piece is still, this one is not frozen. The eye moves over it in a certain way, it can grab onto ridges, rest (while the others are somewhat slippery).

Basic Figure (Two). Jerry Birchfield. 2014. painted aluminum, 78 x 38 x 8.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.

You Scared Me, but I Didn't Scream. Jerry Birchfield. 2014, inkjet print, plaster, graphite, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.

While Birchfield's three-dimensional pieces are tethered in varying degrees to the picture or frame, the sculptures assert their independence from the wall. Made with aluminum sheeting, cut out to approximately 1 1/2" bands and folded, they are poised and skeletal, ready to flex or fall over. The surfaces are covered with a milky, pooling paint that resembles the appearance of sketched-in marker. *One and Two (One)* is an austere, standing L-shaped form with three portrait windows atop a wide, unbroken horizontal band and three short legs. *Basic Figure (Two)* is more complex, an unfolding accordion screen. The simple pleasure of these pieces is walking around them and experiencing their structures morph through perspective; lines snapping into place, others disappearing. *If I Must… If I Must… and I Must (Three)* lies on the ground like a curled up version of *(Two)*, with the addition of a blobby spider web. This gag is a difficult read. Combined with the compulsion of the title, maybe it's simply "I couldn't resist!" Thinking about the minimalist quotations, maybe more along the lines of "This never gets old."

Smartly installed in a single room, *Mr. In-Between* was a show to pace and linger. A detail in one piece sent you back to all of the others; you were pulled in, sent back. Inflections shift, punch lines are delayed. In this way Birchfield's work has a durational quality, a sense of timing—things are not quite, or not only, as they first appear.

Mr. In-Between is on view at the William Busta Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio from February 6, 105 to March 7,2015.

Jerry Birchfield was included in the group exhibition *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013) at MOCA Cleveland, co-curated by Rose Bouthillier and Megan Lykins Reich.

Rose Bouthillier is Associate Curator and Publications Manager at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. Her writing has been published in *C magazine*, *frieze*, *esse*, and *Art Criticism & Other Short Stories*.

REALIZATION IS BETTER THAN ANTICIPATION

REALIZATION IS BETTER THAN ANTICIPATION

ONE THING, THEN ANOTHER, AND:

AN INTERVIEW WITH JERRY BIRCHFIELD

ROSE BOUTHILLIER

Jerry Birchfield creates complex images of simple materials using a variety of approaches and techniques, including sculpture, film photography, and digital manipulation. Birchfield's works bring these mediums together in equilibrium and overlap. I sat down with Birchfield on June 10, 2013 to discuss the underlying concerns of his image-making process.

Rose Bouthillier: *I'm curious if you can describe how an image begins for you. Is it something that's envisioned in your mind? Or, is it sparked by an object? Or, does it only begin to take shape in the frame?*

Jerry Birchfield: I'd say the latter. I've been thinking of photographs as being built, and not necessarily taken. So, a lot of the recent photographs have been constructed in front of the lens, like a sculpture or a collage built-up on the surface of the negative.

RB: *What led you to produce images this way?*

JB: In my undergraduate studies at the Cleveland Institute of Art, I was in the photo department. But I always had one foot in photography and one outside. For some reason, it felt right to be working from a photographic point outwards. As I was making sculptures and drawings, I was thinking of them as being part of some sort of photographic practice. I'm still making sculptures, still making drawings, and marks on paper, but the final work is a photograph.

RB: *In terms of the sculptural aspect of your work, can you talk a bit about your installation strategies? For instance, your photographs for* Realization is Better than Anticipation *are arranged at various heights, some stacked, and with different distances in-between. This seems sculptural, and structural, even though the pieces are arranged on the wall, something that is habitually read as a flat 2D surface.*

JB: I'm interested in all the elements of a photograph being at an equivalent level. The pictorial, the material, the perceptual, and the durational, all occupying the same space. The installation becomes part of that. Simple gestures, like varying the viewing height, or acknowledging a standardized viewing height, give the impression that the photograph is an object that's capable of moving in space, and, even more so, that there are conventions for how this object is moved through space.

The installations always begin with a consideration of contingent elements. For MOCA Cleveland, we [the artist and the curators] decided which images we were going to work with, and in which space. Within that, I wanted the images to develop relationships with one another, and to the wall that they were on. It is sort of arbitrary, in the way that the first becomes related to the second, and the second to the third, but then the fourth is related to the tenth, and the eighth is related to the second. So, all of the photographs together are dependent on each other as a whole.

I'm also interested in the viewer's navigation of the work, particularly with images hung together. From one image to the next, there is an entrance and exit to each work, into and out of pictorial space, through the material conditions of the space in-between. The viewer's eye and body activate those pathways.

RB: *How do you choose the objects in your photographs?*

JB: I'm interested in how the objects build the photograph, not in a representation of the object itself, per se. The objects are chosen based on how they can appear within a photograph. Sometimes they are really ephemeral, built in the studio, and sometimes they are part of my daily life, find a way into the photograph, and then go back to their daily use. The choice of whether the object is included or not can be made only after the photograph exists, and either works or doesn't. I'm really interested in how the traditions and genres of photographic practice, such as documentary, theatrical, or commercial, influence the work. Choices like lighting refer to those things—they become as much of a referent as the object being photographed.

RB: *Some of the objects you use appear in multiple images, or as you say, come from your daily life. Do you find that you develop some sort of pictorial attachment to them, something like an affection that develops through making the image?*

JB: I do have a special place in my studio for the things that are made to be photographed. And some stuff I just can't throw away, because it exists in a photograph and it seems so important. But, the object can't do the same thing in real life as it does in the photograph. So, it's really just for me, it's not for showing. The objects that are part of daily life just go back. One of our rugs was recently part of a photograph. I'm interested in how things like that, that I use daily, can come together with those I produce in the studio, in a way that has an equalizing effect.

RB: *In addition to pictorial and sculptural concerns, a decidedly photographic concern pervades much of your work: original and copy, indexical or virtual. How do those distinctions shape your images?*

JB: I feel like I've had these rules in place for a while that I'm now shedding. Shooting film, or digital, or 4x5, or medium format, printing on certain paper, no digital manipulation, or, if something needs to be fixed, then I can digitally manipulate it, but nothing more. But those rules and choices are starting to feel arbitrary; I can construct an entire image in the camera, or I can do it entirely digitally. Lately I've been experimenting more with multiple images in the frame, images stuck onto other images, so the photographs, materially, are becoming very related to collage. It's all part of a pretty fluid process. Because I'm making inkjet prints that are generated by a computer, they have a very material form. Then they're in the studio and become part of a new photograph, which goes through the whole process again.

RB: *Your works are editioned, and exist as individual prints, yet in the installations you place them in particular relationships to one another, through arrangement. I'm curious as to how you navigate them as singular entities with what seem to be multiple identities.*

JB: I'm interested in things being very clear, physically, about what they are. Although there is abstraction and un-identifiability in the images, I am interested in the medium acknowledging itself to the viewer. Inkjet prints are inkjet prints, and the reality of them is that you can print many very easily. As installations on a wall, they become objects that are affected by the space they are in, and by the viewer navigating that space. So, regardless of their ability to be printed, theoretically endlessly, they become a unique experience within the framework of the installation.

RB: *One thing that we've discussed before is the way an object can oscillate between appearing very simple, or "dumb," and very complex. And it seems to me that potential, that flip, is really tied to indexicality in photography. It's dependent on some kernel of the "real" being transferred/transformed in the image. Based on your growing ambivalence towards the film/digital divide, and manipulation, I'm curious as to how you approach that spark of the index in your work. Is it something that is consciously preserved, or yet another convention to be mimicked and shadowed?*

JB: I'm more concerned with the condition of the photograph at the end. There are varying degrees of abstraction and representation within singular works. Certain areas flatten out, become completely graphic, and present in that way, and then all of a sudden there's a very photographic or depictive moment with light and shadow. I'm interested in the play between those things, and one basically emphasizing the other. So there's a continual shift between entering the pictorial, or even identifying the referent, and then the next thing that your eyes move past pushes you back to the surface of the print, and back into the space that you are standing in. There's a constant oscillation, and that's the goal with most of my work, to find the spaces in-between, like awkward moments, awkward compositions, even awkward tonal ranges. In traditional photography, you want your maximum black with detail, and your maximum white with detail, you follow the Zone System, so that black, white, and nine shades of gray in between are perfectly depicted. I'm interested in what happens when those things are slightly off.

RB: *I've been thinking about your work in terms of Venn diagrams, as if there are circles or zones of qualities or concerns, Abstract/Representational/Material. Within each image there are areas where two, or all three, of those zones overlap. The distribution of information among the zones make for interesting tensions.*

JB: Those areas of overlap are what make the works humorous, or tricky, or self-referential. If it's too depictive, or too abstract, the image just becomes really poetic in a way that I don't like. I'm interested in the thing that stops viewers, the thing that falls, that forces vision to fall back into the present space. Certain decisions, like the matte paper, varying scales, are all part of that.

RB: This idea of visual navigation reminds me of the work you recently showed in New York, Back and Fill *(2013); the title is a sailing term for a series of small maneuvers. It seemed to fit very eloquently with your work as a whole.*

JB: When I came across that term, I knew it was just perfect. I had a lot of trouble making that work. I kept making minute shifts. Looking at it, going home, looking at it again, and then changing everything, but just by a few degrees. And in the end, those are really the simplest works I've made, visually. Plain grey prints in plain white frames. But the decision making process was always shifting. So *Back and Fill* seemed like a totally appropriate title for that work. And it seems to be the way that a lot of things are going in my studio. Some things happen very easily, but most things are continually changing, that's just the way my process is. I also like the other meaning of the word: "back and fill" can mean taking back, or reneging, on a previous statement or promise. I like the idea of the work proposing something, and then immediately changing its proposal to be something else, so that it's continually oscillating back and forth. Or, telling you the exact opposite of what you thought it just said.

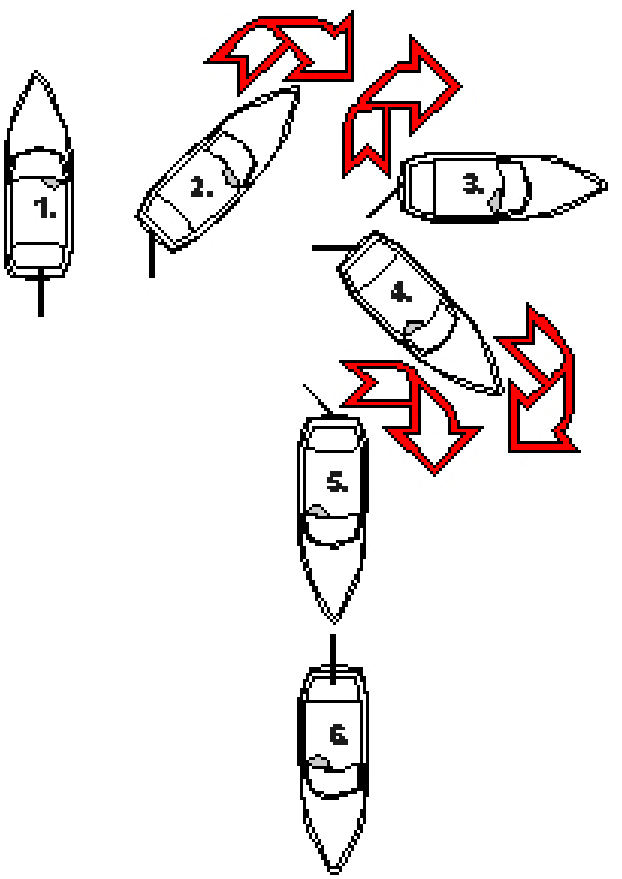
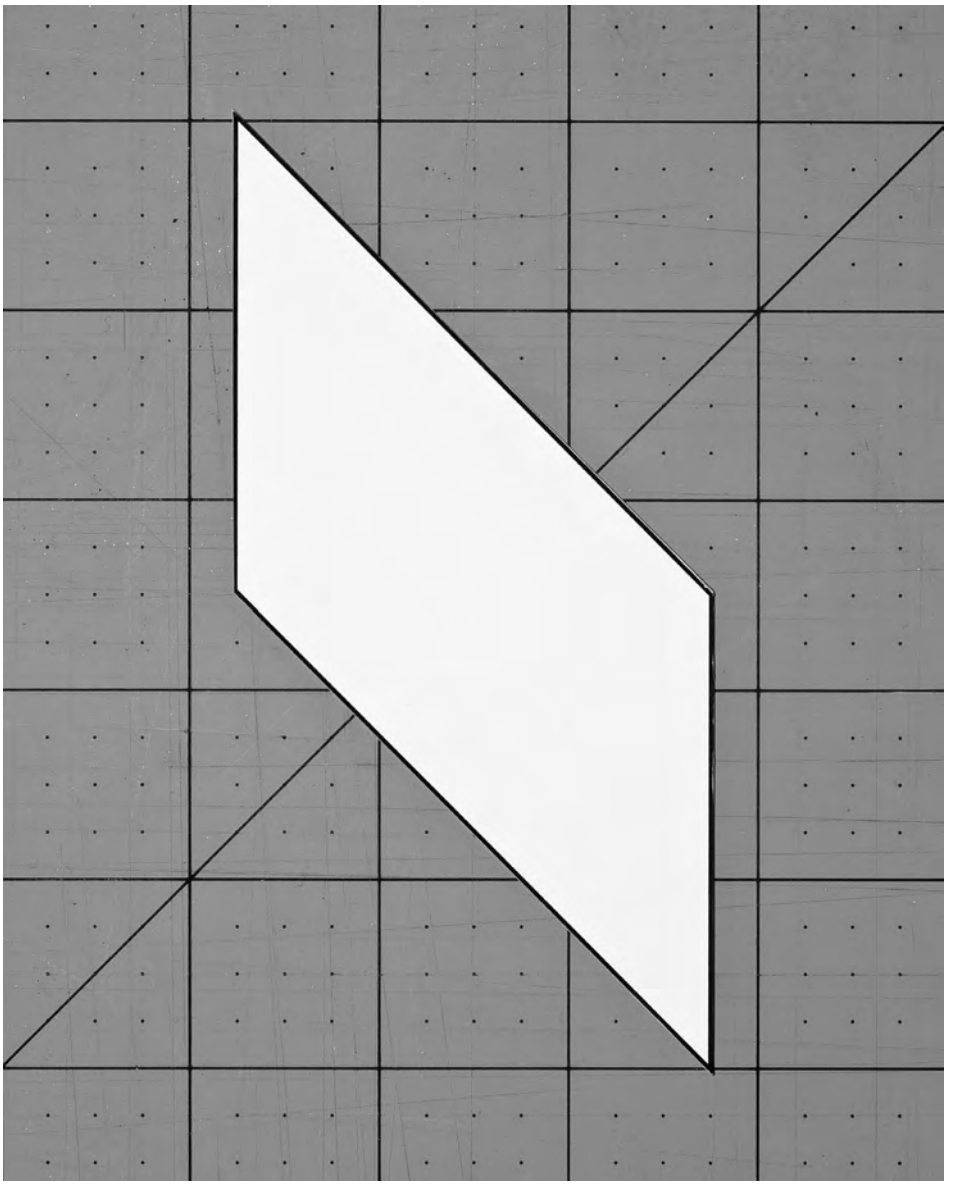


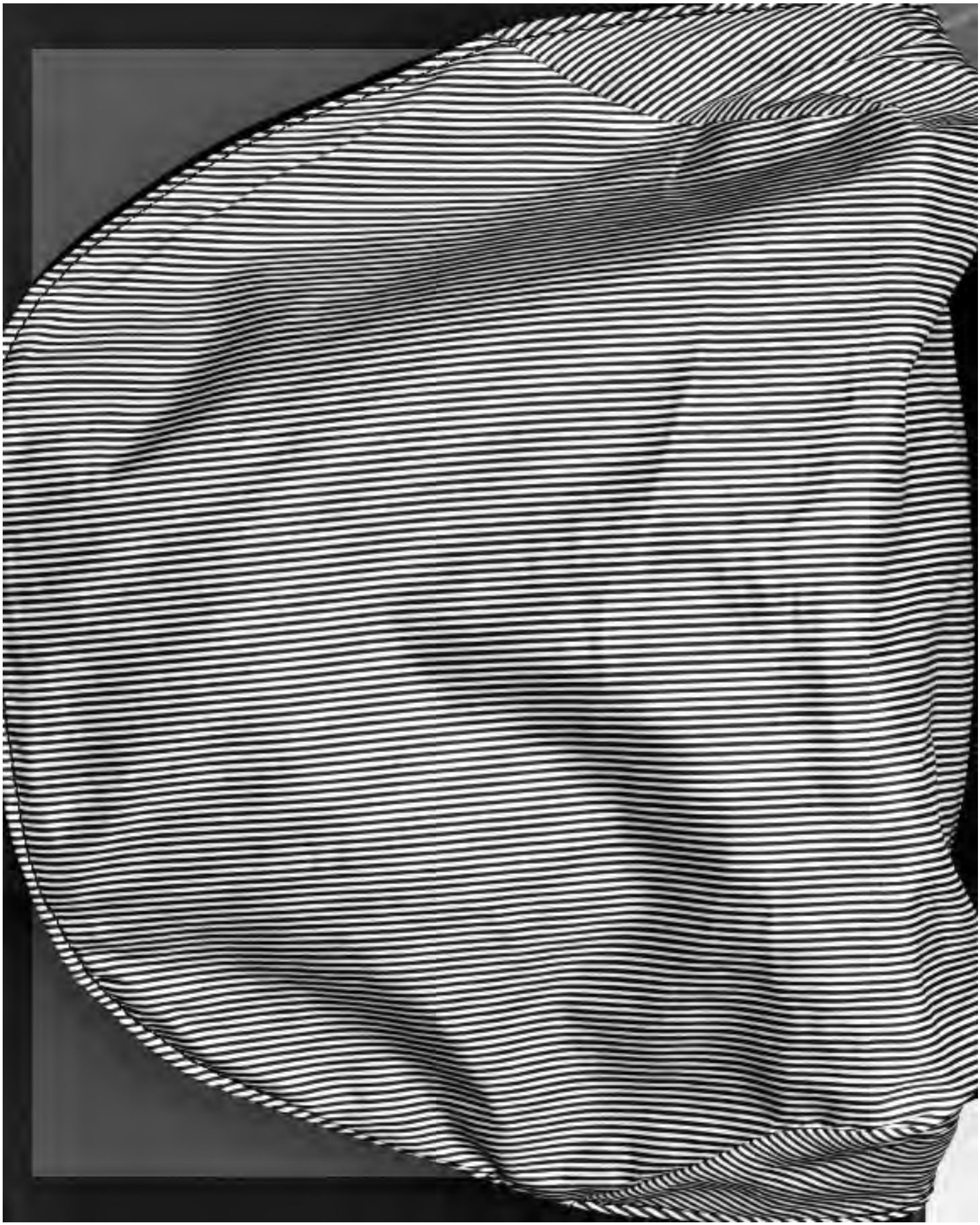
Diagram of the nautical “back and fill” maneuver. Taken from boatsafe.com/nauticalknowhow/backfill.htm.

JERRY BIRCHFIELD



ABOVE: Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 15 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

RIGHT: Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 25 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



JERRY BIRCHFIELD: ON LEVITY, BAD CAMOUFLAGE, AND MUTUAL SEEING

SARAH DEMEUSE

**Studio*

The studio.
A place of repetition.
A place for intermediary processes.
Here, objects are built, staged, shot, and reshot.
The images of these scenarios are then belabored (both digitally and physically)—they are hung, folded, shot, and reshot.
The cycle can continue, and what may have appeared as singular endings open for other beginnings. Overall, these actions give for *built photographs*, and for images of specific constellations in time that generally don't exist beyond the studio or the moment of the shoot.

[As a place capturing a special moment in time occurring in a separate environment, Jerry Birchfield's studio still echoes the transformative, event-oriented experience of early photographic space—where people and objects could be transported to magical places, and where this *faux* traveling was fixed in time. As a place where building and photography meet up, this studio also resembles the studios of other contemporaries. Consider, for instance, Erin Shirreff's work with photographic representations of Tony Smith sculptures for which she builds new sculptural maquettes that then serve as temporary models for photographs. Or think about Elad Lassry's colorful stagings of consumer goods into sculptural combinations that echo a modernist formal legacy as well as glossy commercial pop photography.]

** Weird Object*

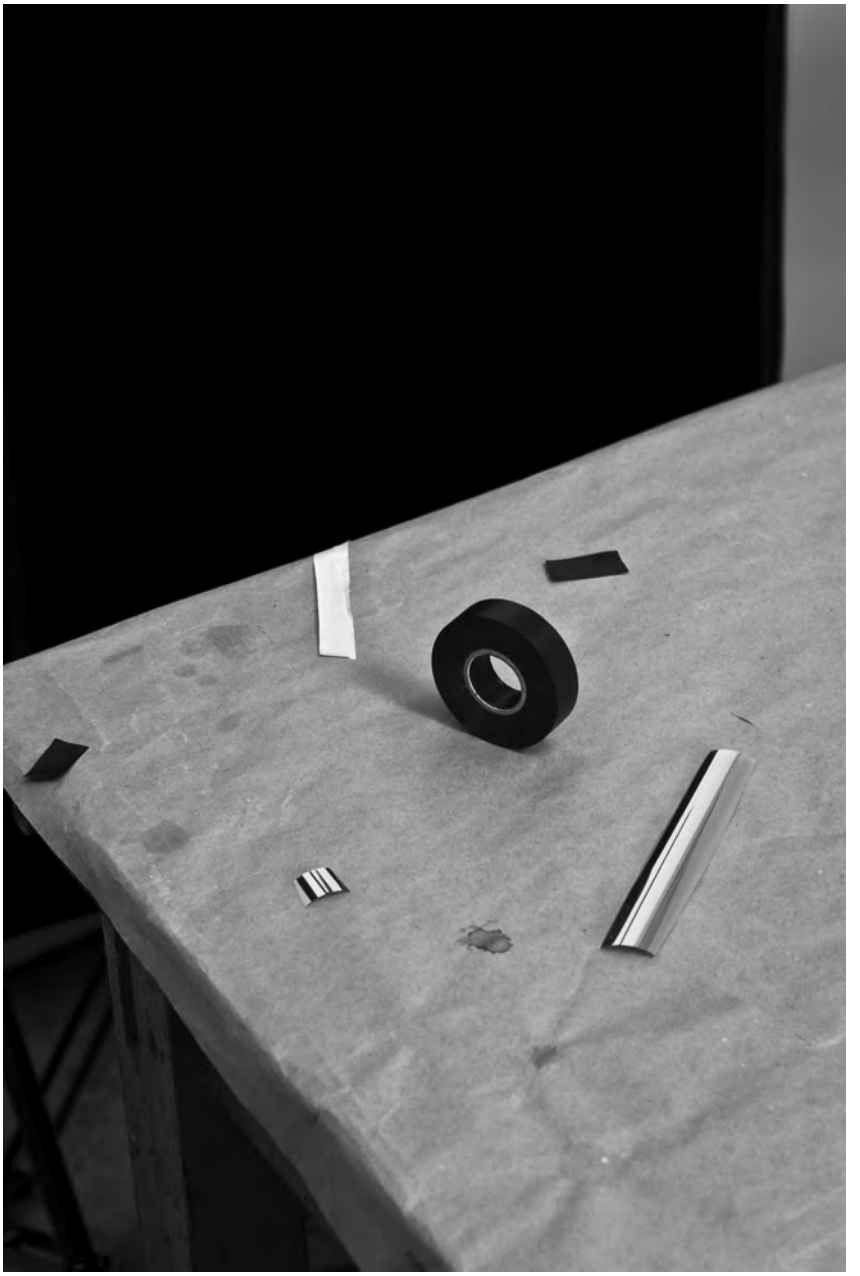
The elements that conform to what eventually appears as a quiet black and white syntactical whole are, in fact, samples of a murmuring universe peopled with *weird objects*. And it is these intermediary *weird objects* that call my attention in Birchfield's work: they float, curl, levitate and have an ambivalent relation to pattern and camouflage.

While commercial product photography puts a shiny object against a rolling white backdrop, producing the illusion of context-less-ness to direct the viewer's attention to the surface of the consumer good, Birchfield's objects have an oxymoronic, confused relation with their environment. At times, they echo their backdrop, while at others, they seem to be in conflict with it—like a case of misplaced camouflage, a failed attempt to disappear. In other instances, Birchfield repeats an object in the same print to lift the veil, to show that what may have looked like an object set against a backdrop is, in fact, but another image that can be easily reproduced and displayed differently. Despite the contagion between object and field in Birchfield's images, most objects in his digital prints lack shadows; in this way, they do relate to the glitzy object surfaces of commercial photography. The things posing for Birchfield's camera seem to have successfully freed themselves of this worldly attachment that indicates their position *vis à vis* the sun, viewer, or even other objects. In the ecosystem of Birchfield's studio, relations between the built elements seem to happen without the burden of perspective. If 16th-century illusionistic art intensified the work of shadows and perspective to create a feeling of reality, Birchfield's near-to cancelation of such elements in the pictorial plane transport us to a place of levity that's most commonly associated with the aesthetics of the virtual (understood as opposed to the "gravitas" of the material). Yet such similarity is only partial: the toned-down black and whiteness of the prints, as well as a gallery display reminiscent of an elegantly dancing sentence, contradict the paratactical or screaming chromatics associated with the digital experience.

** Triad No More*

These unmoored objects, frequently of rectangular shape or set in a stage with rectangular motifs, paradoxically call the viewer's awareness back to the photographic frame. And, hence, to the anchoring force at work in the photographic image; what happens within the pictorial plane narrowly prescribes the act of looking. It's a compositional effect as old as the window frame. Yet, these rectangular shapes or motifs have a trigger-like agency: through a simple doubling of the frame-within-the-frame trope, they remind the viewer that there's a subject staring back. And that is when these *weird objects*, whose life cycle is limited to events in the studio, show us their actual agency. Not only do they exist for the built compositions: they have an impact a posteriori, when the image is viewed. In that moment, the binary setup of an active subject facing a passive object is interrupted. This interruption consists of two active partners affecting each other. I'm tempted to believe that this two-directional dynamic can happen precisely because Birchfield's process in the sheltered studio almost effaces the indexical moment of photography (which tells us that the thing within the picture refers to something in the real world, of which the photographer and viewer are part). In Birchfield's *built photographs*, the real world is the picture, granting full agency (instead of mere representational power) to what is featured in it.

And so, the traditional triad seeing --> ~~s~~een --> ~~r~~eferent makes space for a two-way street proposing the momentary encounter of two seeing beings: seeing--> ~~s~~eeing and seeing <---seeing.



Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 15 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Jerry Birchfield, *Untitled*, inkjet print, 2013, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

A

PHOTOGRAPHY'S ABSENCES AND THE PRESENCE OF ANOTHER

Jerry Birchfield's images and pictures put into the place of things the representation of their absences—nonexistent qualities and features accrue to them by the media of their recording. Birchfield's photographs are specters—apparitions that impersonate the real and as such represent existence without substance. What Birchfield presents us with has no actual or essential meaning outside of their ability to describe or depict. These works emphasize that the photograph exists as a physical reality whose referent can never be touched but only sensed. Subsequently, photography dematerializes the world of things. Though this is generally true of all photography, and particularly true of its digital simulacra, Birchfield, by emphasizing this immateriality, seeks to deny it—so as to make present what is there. This results in a negation in which there is "no absence." By these means he appears intent on articulating the unchanging essence of photography as always already a *false truth*.

The question of what a photograph is not, seemingly is important to Birchfield—and it is this that leads him to challenge what might be thought to be the empirical certainty of photography—the content of appearances. As such, his intent to avoid metaphor is the associative means by which images come to have symbolic meaning. Instead, he privileges metonymy—a system that relies on the literal transferal of a thing's qualities to a new domain. By means of the differentiations he makes, Birchfield reminds us that the construction of sense within a photographic image is in all ways a product of the substitution of qualities. Birchfield engages these aspects in two projects, one that describes the real and another that produces a semblance of it. In both cases he gives us things that are alike in appearance to something we know. In a series of photographs from 2013, he does this by producing images of things that may be encountered in the world. These works appear to be installations shots and details of still other works. In a recent series from 2014, the images appear to be photographs of gray monochrome, low-reliefs made of found materials. These are images consisting of things that are possible in the physical world. The paradoxical nature of both series is that all that we see we will not encounter by any other means than Birchfield's digitally produced photographic images.

What he presents us with is a series of fragments—notations rendered—printed to be larger than life size, patterns and texture that have no scale other than that of their making, and then, a series of compositions of things—various debris

A *Idiom 2* (2013), inkjet prints, 43" × 33-$\frac{1}{2}$".

B *A Well-Intended Misunderstanding* (2014), detail, inkjet prints, 43" × 30" each.

C Back and Fill exhibition installation view (2014), John Hartell Gallery, Sibley Hall. *A Well-Intended Misunderstanding* (2014), inkjet prints, 43" × 30" each.

D Back and Fill exhibition installation view (2014), John Hartell Gallery, Sibley Hall.

rendered in what one can only imagine to be their actual size. The notations purport to be images of things taken from the world—the compositions purport to be pictures of self-contained arrangements. Note that I make a distinction between an *image*, which describes or portrays something, and a *picture*, which is a likeness of something produced or formed in the mind and given physical representation.

Why do I focus on such a seemingly obscure or esoteric point concerning Birchfield's work and the nature of photography, rather than the conceptual content he has worked on so diligently to embed in the configurations/compositions that operate as a type of picture puzzle? Principally, because I am interested in identifying how photography as a thing and a discipline continues—how it stimulates the artist's experiments—and Birchfield's contingent interpretations of his disciplinary objectives. In dividing photography between the production of images and pictures, Birchfield formulates in an overdetermined manner the part that convention plays in his response to those forms of negation where nothing remains but the gesture—those acts intended to communicate. By these means Birchfield attempts to make visible the relationship of a rule to its enactment. The paradoxical nature of this process lies in Birchfield always seeming to want back—always wanting to sublimate some knowledge into some other form. Subsequently, each series, in its complexity and simplicity, simultaneously demonstrates the opposition between obsession and displacement, diversion and denial, and compensation and recuperation as they play out to differing ends. This results in our sense of the work as never simply being a confirmation of "what is" or what is already known but as implying that the discovery of the unknown takes place somewhere beside the literal and the literary.

Saul Ostrow
Founder and President of Critical Practices, Inc.
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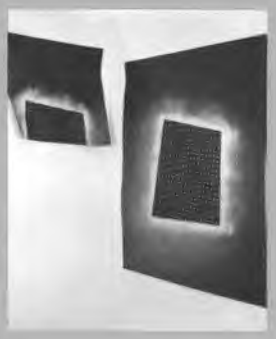
BIRCHFIELD



A

A *DISPOSITIF* ENGAGED

The peculiar mysteries of Jerry Birchfield's work offer plenty to speculate about. The individual objects and images reveal a fluency in photography, with substantive elements of drawing and sculpture. These forms take on ephemeral relationships within the gallery space. Such installations elicit tensions manifest in an art of similar or concordant designs and materially diverse elements that run up against nonart entities—a *dispositif* or "plan of action" based on an intersection of aesthetic systems that characterizes much current practice in art today.[1]

Birchfield's untitled (01) is a digital pigment print that appears to be a documentary photograph of a corner of the studio, on whose walls are mounted two adjacent images on paper. The latter display dark free-floating rectangles set off by intense coronas against a blackened ground, one a partial variant of the other. Perceived as a double installation—the studio and the exhibition space—the internal coherency and received understanding of the discrete photograph as record is destabilized as one puzzles over such encounters with the world of art phenomena, history, and experience. Confusion ensues as we ponder how the image-forms are fabricated. Thus we are introduced to a varied system that suggests a kind of alchemy, a process in which discoveries of certain significance will be made, the ultimate outcome of which will always be out of reach.

What broader associations are elicited by the shifts between the ambiguous images depicted within each photograph and their situation in actual space? Birchfield creates kinships or correspondences of semblance, perceptual conditions, and analogous structures whose material properties evade immediate identification. In untitled (03), a wittily conceived picture of a geometric construction rewards closer scrutiny, as we learn that it is comprised of black velvet, Plexiglas, mat board and address labels, among other materials. A narrative is suggested, like an act of determination to engage the observing subject in a game of aesthetic links and ruptures. Critical writing with regard to the integration of graphic, commercial, or documentary photographs and visual information in architectural space has been fraught with anxiety over the potential loss of authentic experience, and a marking of the specter of capitalism overwhelming the individual subject.[2] In Birchfield's particular economy of signs, we may be stretching the symbolic import of his work to make such a declaration, yet one cannot help but get caught up in the skillful production

A untitled (2012), archival pigment print, 32" × 40".

B untitled (2012), archival pigment print, 24" × 30".

C untitled (2012), archival pigment print, 10" × 15".

D untitled (2012), archival pigment print, 24" × 30".

of illusionistic and materially obscure forms that reveal themselves on careful reading as found objects of a humble, utilitarian nature. The selections as encountered in the temporal space of the installation yield a significance beyond their localized presence, a strange allegory of larger forces at work in the networked world that causes uncertainty in the trustworthiness of images and their sources.

The materialization of the diverse forms displayed here reminds us of the consequences of light acting on objects to render them visible. This is an homage of sorts to the seminal properties of black-and-white analog photography, but it also deliberately obfuscates distinctions between the latter and digital processes. Attention to contrast is a consistent in Birchfield's work—as in untitled (02), with its bold black "X" on paper against velvet, photographed in 4 × 5 film before being committed to the digital pigment print. Here Birchfield teases the subject with his ease of "slippage" (his word) between media and genres of mark-making, recursive actions, and combinations: drawing and illusionistic effects, abstract and conceptual propositions in line, geometries, chiaroscuro and gray values, the occasional introduction of color.

Birchfield's curious adaptations of forms such as perforated paper, sheet metal, tape, and other workaday materials manipulated into sculpture have an odd utopian legacy in the early-20th-century avant-garde—one thinks of the Russian El Lissitzky's *Proun* Room at the 1923 Berlin Art Exhibition.[3] More recently, the critic Daniel Birnbaum has commented on the tension between the phenomenological engagement of the subject in the abstract and social realms comprising the photographic imagery and installations of Wolfgang Tillmans. Birnbaum's statement about experiencing Tillmans's photography as "a *living present* that always implies the embodied nature of the perceiving subject"[4] seems right for the present artist. Birchfield's shifts between abstractions and real things in space, made over and recombined, make us mindful not only of Tillmans's sense of photography's "transformation from three dimensions to two,"[5] but also of the converse. Even the humorous particulars of fingers poking through holes or a pair of hands and arms in a photogram-like display alert us to this theoretical connection.

Thus, Birchfield engages us in an aesthetic and sensorial dialectic of the way things come into existence as we perceive them and sort them out; as perhaps a metaphor for the way we negotiate our lives without being cognizant of all the minute changes that occur in a space at any given moment. There emerges a personal exploration of expressive and theoretical ambition that, in its open delight of ready shifts from one mode to another, points to larger meaning that remains tantalizingly elusive.

Gary D. Sampson
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The Cleveland Institute of Art

1 See Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), translator's note.

2 Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2002), 23–25.

3 See especially, Claire Bishop's discussion on El Lissitzky and contemporary installation in her book, *Installation Art. A Critical History* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 80–81.

4 Daniel Birnbaum, "At that point . . . ," in *Wolfgang Tillmans: Lighter* (Ostfidern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 8.

5 Ibid. Tillmans's own words to refer to his process.