



New American Paintings

JURIED EXHIBITIONS-IN-PRINT

113

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Spotlight

Scott Wolniak (Edition #107) Speaks to Michael Wilson

"I try to avoid making work that is clearly 'about' something, or that can easily be explained."



In 2010, Scott Wolniak made an irresistible video, *The Ratio of Effort to Effect*, which tends to strike a particular chord with artists, gallerists, fabricators, architects—and insurers. Drawing on Wolniak's professional experience as a truck-driving art handler, it catalogues the many and varied ways in which the art objects can be treated with something less than the loving care and attention that its makers and custodians expect. A frequently alarming but still highly entertaining watch, the work also lives on as a series of performances in which the artist delivers oversized canvases to galleries, attempting in vain to squeeze them undamaged through too-small doorways. "I hope to continue this project for many years to come," says Wolniak. "It's very cathartic." The slapstick quality of *The Ratio* also reflects the artist's awareness of just how strange it is to do what he does: "Making art," he remarks, "with all of its esoteric, devotional tendencies, is pretty absurd."

While Chicago-based Wolniak's practice is reflective of his amused self-awareness, it is also, by his own admission, extremely hard to pin down. "I try to avoid



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*The Ratio of Effort
 to Effect*
 2010
 video 1:15 minutes

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Ether Geode
 2010
 bleach and ink on paper
 19.5 x 25 inches

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Chopstick Pencil
 2010
 acrylic, spray paint,
 collage, chop stick, and
 pencil on canvas, wood
 stretcher bars, steel
 hardware
 21 x 20 x 14.5 inches

making work that is clearly 'about' something," he writes, "or that can easily be explained." He has also characterized his process as "essentially one of action and reaction, like I am always cleaning up my own messes." These "messes" have taken the form of drawings, installations, paintings, performances, prints, sculptures, and videos, so it makes sense that what ties this oeuvre together is less an aesthetic per se than an attitude toward making and materials. Wolniak is compelled by intricacy, but never at the cost of introducing an oppressively "expressive" hand, preferring to avoid the possibility of self-indulgence by first establishing a conceptual framework for any given project. This disciplined but heterogeneous approach spills over into other activities: between 1999 and 2004, the garage that currently houses





his studio served as an alternative exhibition space, Sutable Gallery, which the artist ran with his friend Derek Fansler. He is also a committed teacher.

The contents of two exhibitions in Chicago of Wolniak's work from 2010—*You Can Lose Your Balance* at 65GRAND and *Afterimage* at Andrew Rafacz Gallery—demonstrate something of the artist's recent range. The former featured five small monochrome paintings that had seemingly been subjected to violent assault. The canvas of *Composition in Red and White* (2010), for example, which is hung with its front surface to the wall, appears to have been penetrated by a brick that remains embedded in its center, while in *Chopstick to Pencil* (2010), it is the titular dining utensil that looks to have done some damage. Yet both works, while dosed with the artist's knockabout wit, are careful contrivances, exploratory probes launched toward

the traditional format's outer limits. There was an element of visual trickery to *Afterimage* too, which featured entries in the series *Simulated Sunprints* that Wolniak began in 2008. These works on paper resemble photograms, but their multicolored splatters, folds, and geometric shapes are in fact made using bleach, ink, and other everyday materials, and record only their own making, not any external object.

In 2012, Wolniak began work on a series of finely worked graphite drawings and a set of carved plaster "tablet" paintings, parallel bodies of work that were both represented in *Fields*, his 2014 exhibition at Chicago's Valerie Carberry Gallery. While their formats differ, both paintings and drawings are derived from repetitive mark making, and are distinguished by densely layered surfaces that stimulate an immersive perceptual experience. The drawings

are derived from landscape and interior photographs that have been “degraded” through repeated printing and cropping; these source images are then subject to further manipulation via the artist’s hand, the resultant compositions emphasizing texture and atmosphere over identifiable imagery. “The drawings frame time for me in interesting ways,” observes the artist. “Because they take so long to make, a lot of thinking happens along the way.” But however heady they may become, the works remain rooted in the continuing possibilities of a simple and familiar material: “I like using pencil in part because it is so humble.”

The tablet paintings take the form of cast plaster slabs with internal support structures of burlap, plywood, and wire that Wolniak stains and carves in a sequence of improvised gestures to produce a strikingly timeless effect (curator Eric Crosby, who named Wolniak his Juror’s Pick in *New American Paintings* #107, described them as feeling not sculpted so much as “evolved, even fossilized”).

The series has its origins in cast models of humble found objects, such as bricks and twigs, that the artist produced both to “memorialize” the artifacts and to explore the idea of laboriously remaking

something of no apparent value. Later, he began casting box-shaped forms to produce white blocks, tinting them with ink and watercolor and using simple tools to etch



deeply into them, working quickly and spontaneously to establish what he describes as “topographic space that eludes scale and is simultaneously violent and beautiful.”

<
Fields
2014
installation at
Valerie Carberry Gallery

>
Face
2014
acrylic, ink, watercolor
on plaster, and wire,
burlap
13.5 x 10.5 inches

"I think of the drawings as air and the tablets as earth," Wolniak remarks, concluding that the two bodies of work nevertheless end up in a similar place: "Reaching for the ethereal, both deceive technical and material identity through rigorous, transformative process." They are also consistent with the artist's interest in applying "a kind of spastic technique" to balance the planned with the chaotic. In something of a break from his characteristic restlessness, Wolniak is currently refining the two series for a two-person exhibition with Jeremy Coleman Smith next fall at Hap Gallery in Portland, Oregon. Yet while he is clearly enjoying the concentrated focus that this

prospect entails, his exploratory spirit persists. Asked about artists he admires in the context of the de-skilled or "wrong" aesthetic to which he often subscribes, Wolniak names—for reasons entirely consistent with his creative persona—Bruce Conner: "His early combine works were completely nuts materially, toying with illusory and actual space, and his later drawings had transcendent beauty and meditative subtlety. I love his range." ■

—Michael Wilson



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Field
2014
graphite on paper
29 x 39 inches