

Sean Paul's Every Hair of the Bear

From the Press Release

The camera, with its strong moral claims to truth and objectivity now over a century old [c.1953], has established its manner of seeing as the common visual currency of our time, and we come to think of photographic experience as the equivalent of personal participation. But we should ask ourselves who would be truly richer – one who possessed photographs of every surviving building of the classical world, or Sir John Soane, who had measured every stone of the Coliseum and could quote its intercolumniation even in his old age.

— Reyner Banham, “Parallel of Life and Art”

The creative dimension of taking photographs consists in its being handed over to fashion. “The world is beautiful” – that is its motto, precisely. In it stands revealed the attitude of a kind of photography that is able to make any tin of food look as if it is floating in space but cannot grasp a single one of the human contexts in which that tin features. It is a kind of photography that, however dreamy the subject, heralds more of the marketability of that subject than its apprehension. But since the true face of this photographic creativity is advertising or association, for the same reason its proper counterpart is exposure or construction.

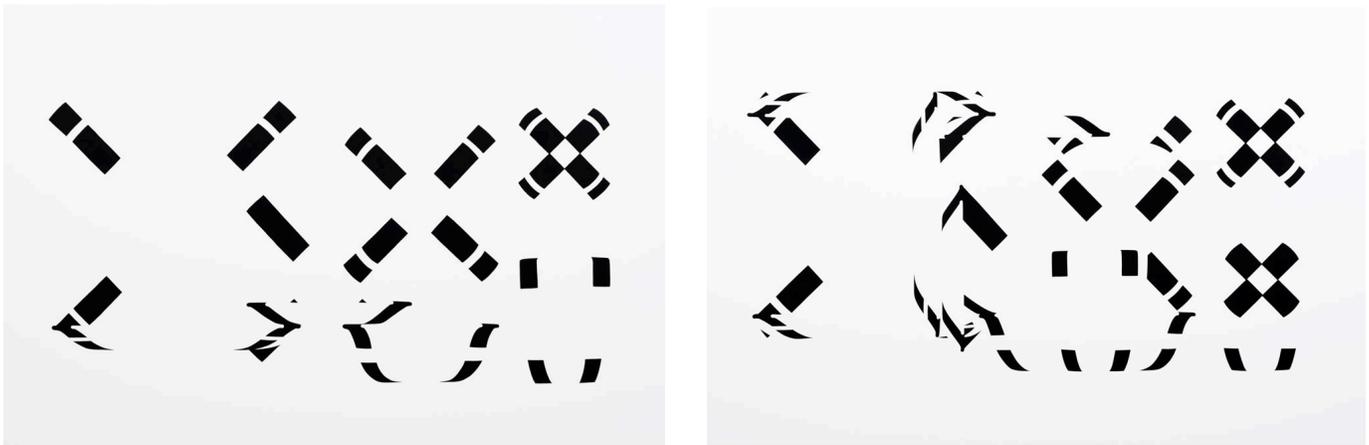
— Walter Benjamin, from A Brief History of Photography

A still life assembled from domestic products (cup, bowl, saucer, and plate) is marked with black squares of tape, and pictured from six perpendicular angles (front, back, left, right, top, bottom). The black squares function as tokens, which allow the spatial geometry of the still life to be discerned. This is done in first angle Mongean space (standard fare for the industrial engineer). An ideational six-sided planar box is then constructed around the set, from which perpendicular linear projectors are extended, forming a trace upon each of the six receiving planes of the box. This box of traces is opened and then refolded in a systematized way so that multiple views may fold together simultaneously. A system for folding the tokens of the four objects is developed, in multiples of two/four. Objects become views; four items presented in distinct cases as one, two, four, or six views are folded into a single plane. This plane then becomes the array, which informs the material images' unfolding into lived space, or a domestic scene. At which point one could pose the Herzogian question (while considering the entirety of the phone book), "Yes, but do they dream?"

Critical Analysis

Sean Paul's work is as engaging as it is furtive in its coded and understated modes of analytical reduction and critical abstraction. I'm delighted to find an artist dealing with the consequences of photography, historicity, and the domestication of our gaze in a cogent yet witty manner. Of important note is a specific play with formal logic, veiling a predominantly sociological undercurrent; purposely reducing the empirical world, in this case a still life, to simple tokens using black tape. This efficiently helps the viewer discern and measure the

movement signified by the topological changes made visible on the paintings' surfaces. Paul simply catalogues these sets by describing them as *arrangements*. With the use of a makeshift contraption of Paul's own invention and the spacial variability of photographic representation, the artist translates the multidimensional phenomenology of particular domestic objects into attractive, two-dimensional, and nonobjective forms enslaved to the modernist flat surface.



This stasis is a humorous and progressive take on both analytical cubism and constructivist inspired abstraction, adding a new emphasis on photography and engineering methodology to effectively create a mechanical way of serializing abstract paintings out of one ironic still life tableau. Other referenced movements, equally as calculating, such as Neoclassicism, Monochromatic painting, and Art Deco make an appearance in the exhibition as well – possibly as parodies of taste or at least ironic tropes of history now deemed conservative, executed with austerity to clearly analyze their socio-aesthetic equivalences. The peripheral and performative gesture of the apparatus-contraption remains only an idea iterated in the press release, a kind of black box, leaving the show's origin a vague mental abstraction and recalling

certain exhibition hierarchies which favor product, withdrawing any reminder of the studio to further enhance its mystification.



Humor and History are two devices Paul is using in an acute and subtle manner, nearly annihilating their conspicuous presence altogether. Along with these graphically complex paintings dispersed throughout the gallery and office, equally important elements, both added and already there, further complicate and complete the parallaxic synecdoche that is *Every Hair of The Bear*: a quaint and decorative vase, a site-specific and rectangular mirror leaning on the ornamental mantle of the gallery's fireplace, an added wall that partitions the room, and two digital photolithographic prints. One of the prints, slightly bordered yet unframed, is a reproduction of the verbosely titled, *Portrait of Princesse Albert de Broglie, née Joséphine-*

Eléonore-Marie-Pauline de Galard de Brassac de Béarn, by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres.

The other print is a sharp close-up of what looks to be a luxurious carnelian-colored towel, mounted on the wall, acting as a small and nuanced monochrome painting. The relationship of the two prints can be acknowledged through the hyperrealist reproduction of lavish cloth in all its affected allusions to opulence, desire, and bodily comfort. This quality goes hand in hand with the exhibition's overall motif of abstracted domesticity and the latent consumerism of photography. The last and most elusive element of the show is the announcement of it being presented in collaboration with a well-known Art Advisory group. While seemingly superfluous, I interpret this as an acknowledgement of economic dependence, meritocracy, and network transparency; Every Hair of The Bear indeed.



The Ingres print is bisected around the edge of the freestanding partition, becoming sculptural in its new angular form. One can either walk around the partition to see the rest of the print or locate its other half by peering into the nearby mirror, creating multiple views of entry and doubling the architectural geometry of the room as well as the viewer. Along with the mirror on the mantel, the vase sits with quiet nonchalance. However, this empty vase and its mirrored reflection powerfully reminds us of both our spectatorial presence and our disappearance into the work itself. Paul has created a constellational scene that mimics the analytics of his paintings. An *arrangement* of domestic objects and now viewer, specifically art-objects and art-viewer, have been abstracted using spacial, reflective, and photographic techniques in a domestic space. The ideal viewer, or perhaps the projected viewer, seems to be the collector, a connoisseur, well acquainted with luxurious towels, historical painting, and the domestic confluence of decor and art.



I think Paul reaches a rhetorical limit here, of both form and content. Problematizing any notion of critique, it is my opinion that he comes to terms with the inevitable class relations and civility which Art is bound to, and the multifarious abstractions that develop because of this knot. It is not so much this thesis that is important, but the trenchant and restrained methods executed in the forms themselves, which may point to this conclusion. He creates a poignant tension by subduing sensual materiality, verging on libidinal collapse, and pushes the space and even collectorship to the fore, rejecting neutrality to reveal the sublimated ideology of the gallery itself. Most likely doubting the possibility of being subversive, there is no liberating pretense here, but both a denial and an inquiry of the possibilities outside of representation, outside of the domestic, and if there is anything external to the textual, technical, and historical image whatsoever other than its own interminable *mise en abyme*.

