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Virtual Volume

curated by Patrick R. Crowley

ON VIEW

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EXHIBITION OPENING

December 2, 5–8pm

For Immediate Release

In the late 1950s or early 1960s, the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt famously defined sculpture as “something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.” Reinhardt’s quip keys into a long history of seeing sculpture as an intrusion or obstacle in space that unsettles the beholder because it gives too many views of itself. Relief has traditionally been seen as a kind of “solution” to this problem in that it uses the pictorial conventions of painting but deploys them in sculptural space, potentially establishing a privileged vantage point. One of the most celebrated accounts of the conception of relief sculpture remains that of Adolf Hildebrand, who as long ago as 1893 asserted that “The purpose of sculpture is not to put the spectator in a haphazard and troubled state regarding the three-dimensional or cubic aspect of things, leaving him to do the best he may in forming his visual ideas. The real aim is to give him instantly a perfectly clear visual idea and thus remove the disturbing problem of cubic form.” As a hybrid of painting and sculpture, relief hovers in a kind of metastable condition, mapping both optical and haptic values onto a virtual coordinate plane existing in both two and three dimensions, in both the virtual space of painting and the real space of sculpture. The artists in this show use relief, a form that harks back to antiquity, to explore the contemporary stakes of these spatial problems.

Brody Albert’s *Graybar Motel* presents a solitary window of a ruined building at 421 N Avenue 19 in the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. Cast in polymer gypsum and cut with a water jet that both reenacts and resembles the breaks in the glass, Albert’s window presents a ghostly shell of a melancholy monument: a building that served as a local jail from 1931-1965, after which it has been home to squatters, artists, and other itinerant communities. Over the years, passersby have thrown stones at

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the windows, blanketed in graffiti. The gestures of these collective forms of mark-making have produced a form of slow decay recalling Susan Stewart's observation that "Ruination happens at two speeds: furious and slow—that is, sudden and unbidden or inevitable and imperceptible. We do not have a sense of a moderate or proper pace for ruination precisely because it...would resemble, more than anything, a practice of torture." In Albert's window, the forms of relief achieve something quite different from Alberti's window that served as a metaphor of perspective in the Renaissance. The shattering of the window stages a concomitant shattering of perception that nullifies the "secondary plane" of relief that serves as the backplate, or the bedrock for the stratified, fretted layers of overlapping planes. Graffiti, rendered here in exceptionally low relief, appears on both the exterior and interior of the windows so that they become alternately legible on both sides. Through this spatial and temporal dialectic, the reliefs in Albert's window make visible the reversibility of perception that Maurice Merleau-Ponty described using the example of a glove turned inside out: "There is no need of a spectator who would be on each side. It suffices that I see the wrong side of the glove that is applied to the right side, that I touch the one through the other."

Coleman Collins's *Untitled (Concatenation)* presents the viewer with a nearly monochrome gray interior of a typically Parisian, bourgeois apartment complete with a chevron-patterned parquet floor and boiseries. The space closely resembles the cluster of rooms in the apartment used as a Maoist cell in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) whose central theme is the unity of art and politics. In the film, the West African philosopher, artist, and activist Omar Diop stands in front of a blackboard in front of the phrase "perspectives of the European Left" and gives an impassioned speech about how the road to socialism necessarily leads to revolution. The cell's motto, painted on the wall, doubles as an artistic imperative that likewise recalls Hildebrand's conception of relief: "it is necessary to confront vague ideas with clear images." Collins accepts this challenge head-on by combining a Western system of linear perspective—robotically executed with a CNC machine and inflected by the logic of cinematographic tracking shots—to construct a space that is highly racialized despite being depopulated and drained of color. On the left we find a meme of Mekhi Phifer that offers a visual analogue to the inscribed phrase below, "Les nerfs sont tendus," a reference to a viral video of a Senegalese man on a deportation flight driven to the brink of exhaustion and exasperation. A rotated still from Jim Jarmusch's *The Limits of Control* (2009), a film that elliptically traverses the haunted landscape of colonial Spain, lies at the end of the enfilade, a word which at once denotes "a suite of rooms with doorways in line with each other" and "a volley of gunfire directed along a line from end

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to end.” In his classic essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Erwin Panofsky defined the vanishing point of linear perspective as the place where appearance and reality coincide. In his relief, Collins turns the Western gaze back on itself so that we might, as Diop urges his fellow comrades, “recognize and know the existence of others outside of ourselves, and seeing this exterior begin to see ourselves better.”

Clementine Keith-Roach’s *earth mirrored sky mirrored earth (fragment)* is a ruin of a ruin—a cast section of a larger work that the artist evocatively describes as a sarcophagus whose empty interior is intended not for her own body, but the body of the whole world. As an empty vessel, that sarcophagus fits neatly within Keith-Roach’s interest in the conditions of possibility inherent in the womb-like matrix of negative space. Emptiness in this sense is neither a lack nor a mere epiphenomenon produced by the morphological structure of the bottom or wall of the vessel. Rather, as philosophers have shown using the example of a simple jug or container, emptiness itself is dynamic and constitutive of the capacity for holding, and it is no coincidence that so much of the artist’s work is preoccupied with this phenomenological question of what it means to hold or be held. For Bernhard Siegert, a vessel is “an ontic technique or technology that produces the ontological difference between emptiness and plenitude,” or between inside and outside. By transforming the quadrifacial relief of her sarcophagus into a standalone relief panel, Keith-Roach produces another kind of difference that gestures towards the spoliation or reuse of Roman sarcophagi as architectural ornament built into the fabric of the facades of Baroque palaces so that the building itself becomes an elaborate container of the life within. Transposed into a different viewing context, the materiality of the relief—cast plaster illusionistically painted to resemble terracotta with subtle plays of light and shadow—activates a different kinesthetic relationship with the body of the beholder. Hands (or even the glove that acts as its sculptural surrogate), as elsewhere in the artist’s body of work, steal the show. Whether grasping a breast or holding the edge of the relief itself, these hands model the affordances of the relief in space and balance the dominant opticality of the objects contained therein with their correspondingly haptic values.

Oliver Laric’s *Hunter and Dog* reprises a series that the artist undertook nearly a decade ago. Over the years, Laric has produced several versions of the work at a variety of scales and in a variety of media, most recently as here with pigment that flows in aleatory streams of resin that render some areas shadowy and opaque and others glasslike and transparent. The work derives from a digital scan of a marble sculpture by the Welsh neoclassical sculptor John Gibson who himself produced several versions of the work

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for various clients. But perhaps the most salient feature of Laric's work is the one that is most difficult to register photographically, namely its execution in the form of a relief. When viewed from an axis of direct observation, the sculpture looks as though it could be in the round. Yet from an axially oblique perspective, or when viewed rotationally in the round, it rapidly suffers an optical flattening that highlights various moments of intense foreshortening (most unusually in the extension of the tree trunk against the left leg that at first looks like merely negative space). What's so unusual about the work is the way in which it renders visible what is, almost stipulatively, invisible or hidden in relief: the back of the backplate, the uttermost plane that is typically placed against a smooth surface or is otherwise continuous with it. Prized from this support surface and pulled into the space of the beholder, the backplate can be grasped here as the dorsal side of a freestanding sculpture that is perfectly planar, glassy, and smooth. One of the distinctive characteristics of relief is its formal capacity to render the phenomenology of freestanding sculpture in a more planar spatial extension. For a mobile viewer, the complexity of the formal recursions that sustain *Hunter and Dog* toggle between the frontal and oblique views that correspond to both relief and freestanding sculpture and the bivirtuality of the spaces they inhabit.

Nicolas G. Miller's trio of hosiery gift boxes derive from three different department stores that occupied the same address in downtown L.A. (3050 Wilshire Blvd.) at different points in time: Bullocks, Bullocks Wilshire, and I. Magnin. At first glance, the work reads as a straightforward, if elaborately executed consumer fetish that partakes in systems of circulation and exchange. But if the rhythms of fashion ultimately index not merely seasonal cycles but forms of historical self-consciousness, Miller's interest in how this unfolds in Los Angeles—a place that has long been unjustly maligned as "post-historical," it becomes clear that the real stakes of the work lie elsewhere. In an important metaphysical sense, Miller's works are not boxes but sculptures of boxes that are (to use a term favored by Charles Ray) embedded in space and time in such a way that has both everything and nothing to do with the specific location of 3050 Wilshire Blvd. Although the sculptures are self-contained monads, we are invited to enter them kines-thetically through sculptural passages of startling complexity like the edge of a lotus petal or the canyon of elevated letters in a logo. Relief plays a key role in shaping this dynamic, translating the two-dimensional, graphic intensity of the iconography and text on the original boxes into three-dimensional, digitally modeled forms. Color, although applied with a matte finish resembling the fondant decoration of a cake, is hardly a secondary skin of the work but creates subtle contrasts of light and shadow that shape our perception of space. By displaying his reliefs on a pedestal, Miller blurs the

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distinction between the furniture of the gallery and the department store, and in turn the philosophical distinction between things and objects. For Miller, thinking sculpturally means thinking inside the box.

Lin May Saeed's *Teneen Albaher Relief III* presents a moving example of the artist's abiding interest in, and ethical commitments to, non-human animals and interspecies relationships in the age of the Anthropocene. Styrofoam, or expanded polystyrene, plays a pervasive and critical role as a medium in Saeed's work. Lightweight, rigid, versatile, and inexpensive, it is extremely well-suited to the subtractive procedures of sculptural carving. At the same time, as a notoriously nonbiodegradable material, it contributes to the cascading events of ecocide in terminal capitalism. The relief depicts a leafy seadragon, a marine fish related to seahorses that lives on the southern and western coasts of Australia. Constructed separately and affixed to the backplate, the Styrofoam seadragon appears as airy, light, and evanescent as its organic counterpart. The protruding leaf-like lobes on its skin function as camouflage that resembles seaweed. Painted spots simultaneously resemble the animal's mottled leaves and the pebble-like texture of Styrofoam, gesturing towards the heartbreaking capacity of nature to adapt to the ruinous lifeworlds of its toxic ecosystems. Unlike terrestrial animals or insects whose camouflage typically depends on stillness in order to seamlessly blend into its surroundings, the seadragon can adjust the pressure in its bladder to change its elevation, allowing it to mimic the undulating motion of seaweed as it languidly rocks back and forth in its aquatic environment. In the language of Kantian aesthetics, one might say that the mobile mosaic of quanta is apprehended but, if the illusion is successful, not comprehended according to the transcendental schemata that organize the manifold of perception. As Roger Caillois suggested in his surrealist text on mimicry, relief offers an evocative model for thinking about the way we perceive the world around us: "Morphological mimicry could then be, after the fashion of chromatic mimicry, an actual photography, but of the form and the relief, a photography on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or better teleplasty, if one strips the word of any metapsychical content." Relief, then, might be the perfect medium for the transmission of form across vast distances of space and time.

—Patrick R. Crowley