

## Skin Deep

by William Corwin

PERLE FINE: WIDE TO THE WIND  
MCCORMICK GALLERY, CHICAGO | MAY 2 - JUNE 14, 2014

PAUL ANTHONY SMITH: MANGOS AND CRAB  
CARRIE SECRIST GALLERY, CHICAGO | MAY 3 – JUNE 28, 2014

Perle Fine was a great but under-recognized Abstract Expressionist painter; Paul Anthony Smith is a painter, originally from Jamaica, who recently moved from Kansas City to Bushwick. Their innovations in the art of manipulating the form and surface of paper make them odd but not unwilling bedfellows.

The epithet “work on paper” has come to represent a catch-all phrase, one which spans the vast continent of “prints and drawings” and just about any of the small, hard-to-pin-down islands that resist traditional ideas of drawing but are definitely paper-related. Both of these artists draw, but in their strongest works, they assemble or deconstruct form via the material of paper itself.

Fine’s swirling, folded, and laminated collages exude a desire to amp-up painting just a notch—not to mid-career Stella—but to a point where the illusion of shadow and thickness achieves a marginal reality and literal presence. Similarly, but inversely, Smith’s self-styled *Picotage* technique of working into the surface of large format photographic prints yields a blurred, abstract, and symbolist re-reading of what might be considered the incontrovertible authenticity of a photograph.

Picotage is a method of pricking a surface in order to create pattern. It generally applies to fabric but by applying it to photographs, Smith applies the technique metaphorically to his subjects as well as his images, moving beyond merely scoring the surface for highlighting purposes. His portraits, taken at home in Port Antonio, Jamaica, one year ago are, for the most part, chest level photographs of men. The glossy pigmented surface of the paper has been torn into, turning up countless little flayed chads and creating a field of tiny delicate fingers of paper. The surface intervention is largely consistent over the surface of the image yielding an impression of static; the artist has set up a barrier between the viewer and his subjects. In “Untitled 01” (2014), Smith creates great effect

with slight gestures: rubbing away small sections of the print; highlighting the silhouette of a shoulder; delineating the top of a head by doing nothing at all. Smith similarly emphasizes the eyes and mouth of his main subject, a man, by leaving his eye-sockets and lips dark, transmogrifying him into a mask. “Untitled 07” (2014), adjacent to 01, is the reverse, with bulging eyes and whited-out mouth—a vaguely threatening cartoon-like figure. Smith makes the men, who are black, white, superficially painting them with white dots and forcing us to register both readings simultaneously. Picotage becomes the spell of the magician and the historian in the same stroke—resurfacing the reality of the photograph with a colonial patina that is both stereotypical and stereotyper.

Perle Fine situated her jumping-off point as a re-reading and re-imagining of the major art innovations of the first half of the 20th century, which, when the works in this exhibition were originally made in the late '50s, was a personal reassessment, rather than an academic or historicist exercise. Fine's etchings present themselves as an over-dinner conversation with Klee, Miro, and Kandinsky: “Weather Vane” (1944) is a work of dramatic contrasts wherein the fragile lines of the drawing are almost overpowered by the sheer absence of ink, while shadowy clouds of residual darkness around the edges and corners have a menacing effect. Later drawings, on the other hand, seem to be a discussion over digestifs with de Kooning and the early work of Guston, among other AbEx artists—her then contemporaries. “Wide to the Wind” (1955), Fine's woodcut from which the show draws its name, utilizes the swooping cyclical motion of the etchings and also points towards the open topographical quality of the drawings from the 1957–58, but its use of irregular and interlocking forms demonstrates the artist's place as an abstract Expressionist innovator. The various forms of “Wide to the Wind” weave and navigate around each other, casting shadows and leaving outlines of themselves in their muted colors—form and void become interchangeable.

“Encounter aka Brouhaha 3” (1959) presents these forms liberated while pasted to a blue paper background. The appliqué method here is not merely a trite means of generating false volume—the cutouts are avowedly flat—but the collage has given them the opportunity to react and critique their surroundings. They leave imprints on the blue field like snow angels, referencing themselves, refusing to engage in pattern or repetition. The blue cut-outs of “Brouhaha” fold and flip-over, revealing a white background and mocking the act of painting itself. In “Curses” (1959), a looming black form like the shape of a bomber or destroyer sits uncomfortable on a bed of writing. Sharp white tooth-like paper cutouts are accentuated by black charcoal lines, but for the most part, Fine relies on the thickness of the paper to define her shifting forms.

Despite their extensive use of paper, both Fine and Smith consider(ed) painting to be their primary medium, as much based on artificial art hierarchies as an artist's aspirations. The institution of painting no longer outranks drawing and paper based works, especially in the face of conceptual art and the delegated fabrication of work taking place in the contemporary artists practice. This added wiggle room, afforded when an artist doesn't feel the world is looking over her/his shoulder, often allows for production that rivals more serious and finished work in its innovative capabilities. As a

result, the works in these two exhibitions equally contends with each artist's larger painted canvases, both in their originality and execution.

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