

ARTFORUM

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CRITICS' PICK

Los Angeles

Whitney Bedford

CHERRY AND MARTIN

12611 Venice Boulevard

September 12 - October 27

Geistige Körperlichkeit, the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's phrase, translates as "spiritual corporeality," bespeaking a seeming paradox that might be no contradiction at all. At least, it isn't when the condition manifests itself in the paintings of Whitney Bedford, a brilliant recent UCLA MFA graduate whose current obsession is the shackled body of Harry Houdini. Caught in a state of betwixt-and-between, not yet free of their chains but in performance mode, Bedford's Houdinis seem firmly planted on the launching pad to transcendence but haven't quite taken off. Most of her images are about the rubber-band tension between the Big Idea (an iconic Houdini gesture or attitude) and the arresting violence of the painting's surface (usually a danger zone of untreated paper). Smearly curved borders and blurs of gesticulation suggest the spazzy, aphasic quality of Francis Bacon's wrestling matches; each of Houdini's performances here seems perilously perched between the elusively spectral and the cold solidity of flesh. This spectral fleshiness is redoubled in an icily poised pair of shipwrecks hung in an antechamber of the gallery: eruptions of imminent disaster that morph, midcrash, into abstraction. It's ultimately a game of edges Bedford is playing, toying with the spectator's anxiety at being on the verge-any verge. Taken together, this body of work has a nervy, high-metabolism excitement.

- Matthew Wilder



Houdini (Upside Down), 2007,
Ink and oil on unprimed paper,
72 x 44 1/2"