



## NEW WORK FROM KANSAS CITY AT CARRIE SECRIST GALLERY

By Stephanie Cristillo

25 June 2013

An effort to define “Midwestern Painting” has been a major topic of discussion lately – not a quite debate, but definitely an inquiry. Carrie Secrist’s recent exhibition *New Work from Kansas City*, featuring work by Anne Lindberg, Kent Michael Smith, and Paul Anthony Smith, foregrounds an emphasis on site and contemporary practice in the Midwest. While the press release pushes against a read of “regionalism”, the exhibition suggests otherwise – though perhaps this ever-present theme of region is symptomatic of a larger condition concerning a rise in questioning Midwestern “standards” for a definition toward “painting,” the term. Strung together by a loose thread of abstraction, the exhibition features the artists’ differences as opposed to their similarities. Far from being a negative thing, *New Work from Kansas City* highlights some very prevalent issues in what it means to put together exhibitions with a Midwestern slant today in Chicago.

While the exhibition speaks to themes of regionalism, the experience of looking at the three very distinct bodies of work, by three very conceptually and formally different artists, is varied and refreshing. Contrary to my expectations, the visual gaps between the bodies of work are celebrated in the gallery space in terms of installation, and are perhaps the exhibition’s greatest strength. The collection of predominantly large to medium scale works also propose a reversal to what one might expect – monumental sized drawings by Lindberg that are anything but preparatory, Kent Michael Smith’s deeply layered resin cast paintings that at first appear flat and graphic, and Paul Anthony Smith’s altered photographs that seem to be covered in glitter, though the effect is merely a simple material treatment of little tears in the surface of the paper. Spanning across three different mediums alone causes the exhibition to resist a coherent aesthetic that would flatten the concept of the show, which is after all to feature the work. The exhibition is not “easy” in that regard – not easy to talk about, because the artist’s trajectories appear oppositional, but also because the very foundation of the premise takes the concept of regional site, often treated a unifying factor, to displace an inherent connection in favor of something more autonomous.

Although the works are flat, Lindberg’s drawings feel sculptural in their slow and carefully mediated graphite lines – somewhere between a more visually kinetic Agnes Martin and the interference on a TV screen. Capturing what resemble subtle moirés of light, there is something familiar, though pointedly not domestic, about the images on the surface of the pristine white paper – like the effect that occurs when two semi-transparent scrims of fabric alter their visual patterns in passing, sheer curtains in a motel.

The drawings reference an installation that also took place at the gallery in 2012, where threads of aqua, green, and pale blue Egyptian cotton were diagonally stretched across the corner of a wall, occupying space in a similarly elusive manner. Equally as tactile, Lindberg's drawings elaborate on her ability to create fragile circumstances out of commonplace materials. The effect of the many clustered lines that make up the final pattern of the "image" is like a textile, perhaps as much as the actual thread piece itself. Lindberg's lines weave a cloth out of pencil – a drapery that could at any moment unweave at the delicate touch of an eraser.

Staging a similar material circumstance is Paul Anthony Smith's photographs, treated with a term coined "picotage," in which the surface layer of the paper that holds the ink is lifted up and partially torn away by a sharp ceramics tool. While the surface treatment slightly obscures the image, the picture remains – resembling instead a luminescent overlay, or a glittering interference of light more so than an actual intervention of the image. The imagery appears to take advantage of this partially masking context; Smith applies the picotage directly and noticeably as a pop outline in the photographs, which exclusively picture African-American figures against non-descript vernacular or domestic backdrops. Every surface of the bodies within the pictures are torn away, with the exception of the eyes and mouth, and the surroundings are left untouched, like theatrical backdrops. While the masking effort is made to reference sacrificial masks and African ancestry, it more poignantly speaks to the subjective material treatment of the figures within the portraits themselves. One cannot help but question why the figure is forced into such a dual context, which is both violent and shimmering, depending on your distance.

Kent Michael Smith's multi-layered combinations of graphic forms against gestural abstract planes offer a stark difference in volume, both visually and physically. Like looking into a shadow box, the process of the painting literally exposes itself through its depth; each film of paint is visibly suspended in resin at the location of when that mark was made. The bold colors of the implacable stacked forms clash with more sketchy backgrounds that look as though they have been buried under panes of glass, the last layers often framing a border of what resembles sparkled custom car paint – essentially functioning on the level of a monochrome, in excess. The paintings offer a counterpoint to how we can read the regional slant of this collection of work, where site is just one process in a system of many, and each artist exists autonomously within a deeper layered system of exchange.

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