

Paul Lee

Michael Lett
312 Karangahape Road
Cnr K Rd & East St
PO Box 68287 Victoria St West
Auckland 1145
New Zealand
P+ 64 9 309 7848
contact@michaellett.com
www.michaellett.com



Paul Lee
Desert Flower
2021
washcloth, ink, staples, aluminium screen, spray paint, tambourine
380 x 270 x 254mm



Paul Lee
Desert Flowers
Installation view
Michael Lett, 2022



Paul Lee
Desert Flowers
Installation view
Michael Lett, 2022



Paul Lee
Solar
2021
washcloth, ink, staples, aluminium screen, spray paint,
tambourine, soda can
380 x 270 x 254mm



Paul Lee
Squint
2020

tambourine (wood, steel), canvas, towel, spray paint, acrylic
paint, soda can, wire, aluminum screen, staples
380 x 255 x 230mm



Paul Lee
Together is an Old Picture
2018
bath towel, washcloth, brass rods, aluminium rods, acrylic clear finish,
ink, wire hoops cotton thread, acrylic paint
2800 x 3700mm
PL5382



Paul Lee
Sunlight Somewhere Reflecting (Self Portrait)
2018
soda can, printed image on paper, printed image on canvas, spray paint
wire monofilament, tambourine, lightbulbs, acrylic medium, aluminium
pipe, pastel
405 x 205 x 305mm
PL5381



Paul Lee
On My Way To You Now
Installation view
Modern Art, March 2018



Paul Lee
Started Somewhere
2017
wood, woodglue, screws, acrylic, acrylic spray paint, glass, canvas,
tambourine
508 x 457 x 89mm



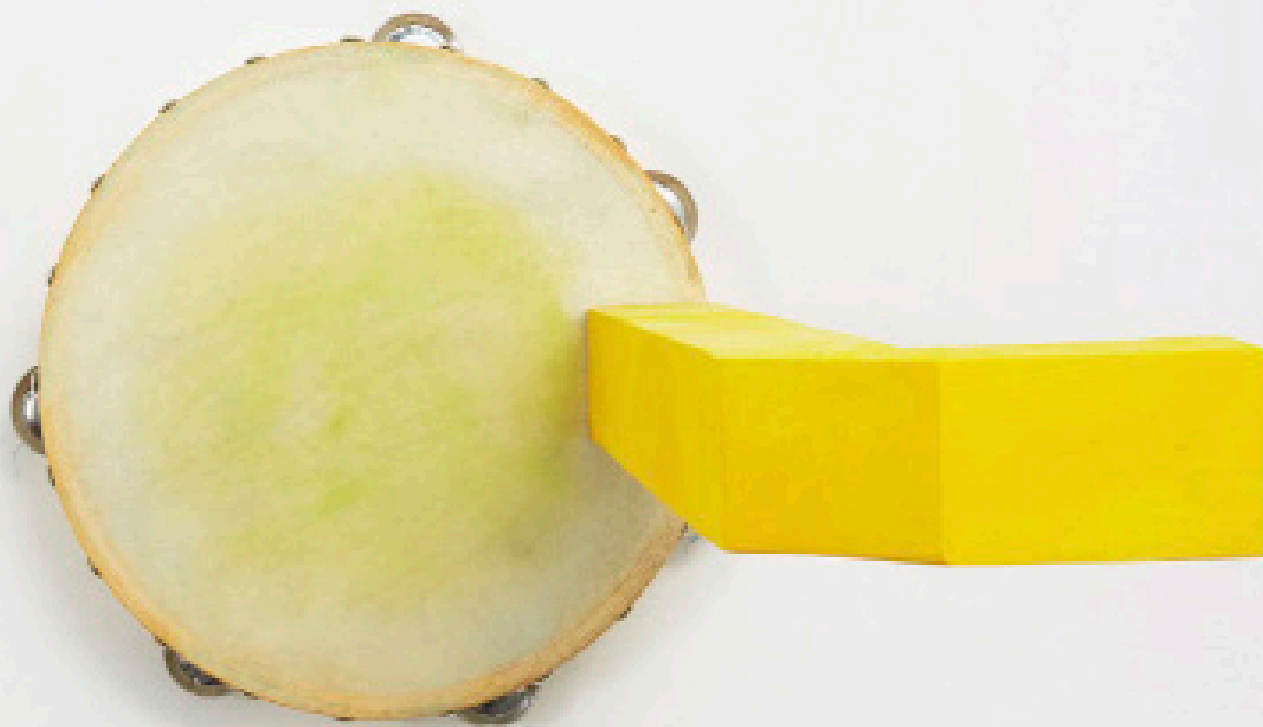
Paul Lee
Pestle
Installation view
Michael Lett
April 2017



Paul Lee
Away
2016
tambourine, acrylic, and canvas
521 x 521 x 51mm
PL4872



Paul Lee
At First Stationed in the Eye Then...
2016
tambourine, acrylic, and canvas
572 x 305 x 51 mm
PL4868



Paul Lee
Beyond the fence
2015

tambourine, acrylic, pastel, wood glue, birch plywood, screws
260 x 260 x 550mm



Paul Lee

Untitled (hand towels with bulbs)

2013

towels, lightbulbs, spray paint, monofilament, hoops, stainless steel,

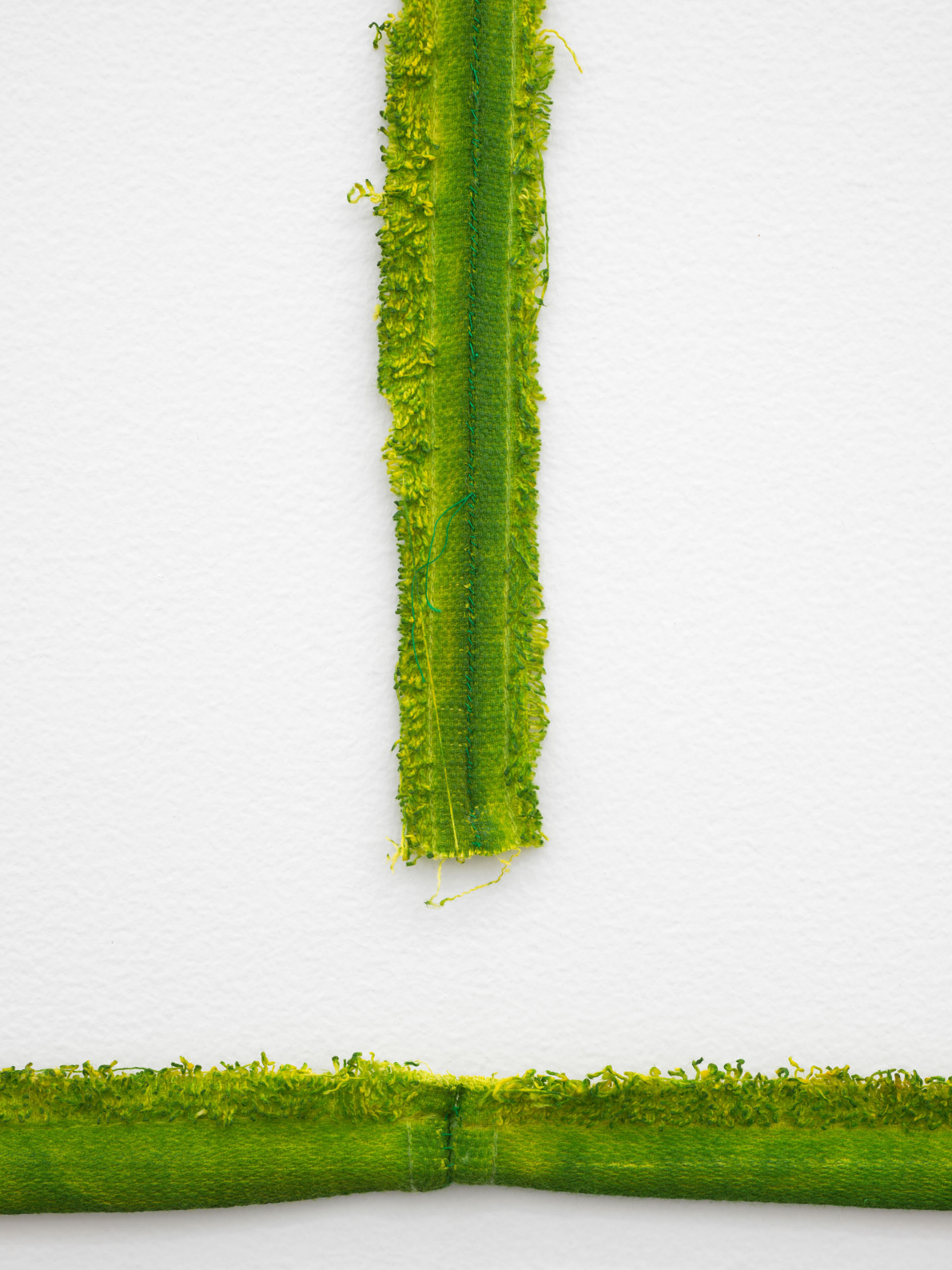
thread, pigment based ink

1956 x 1270mm

PL3471

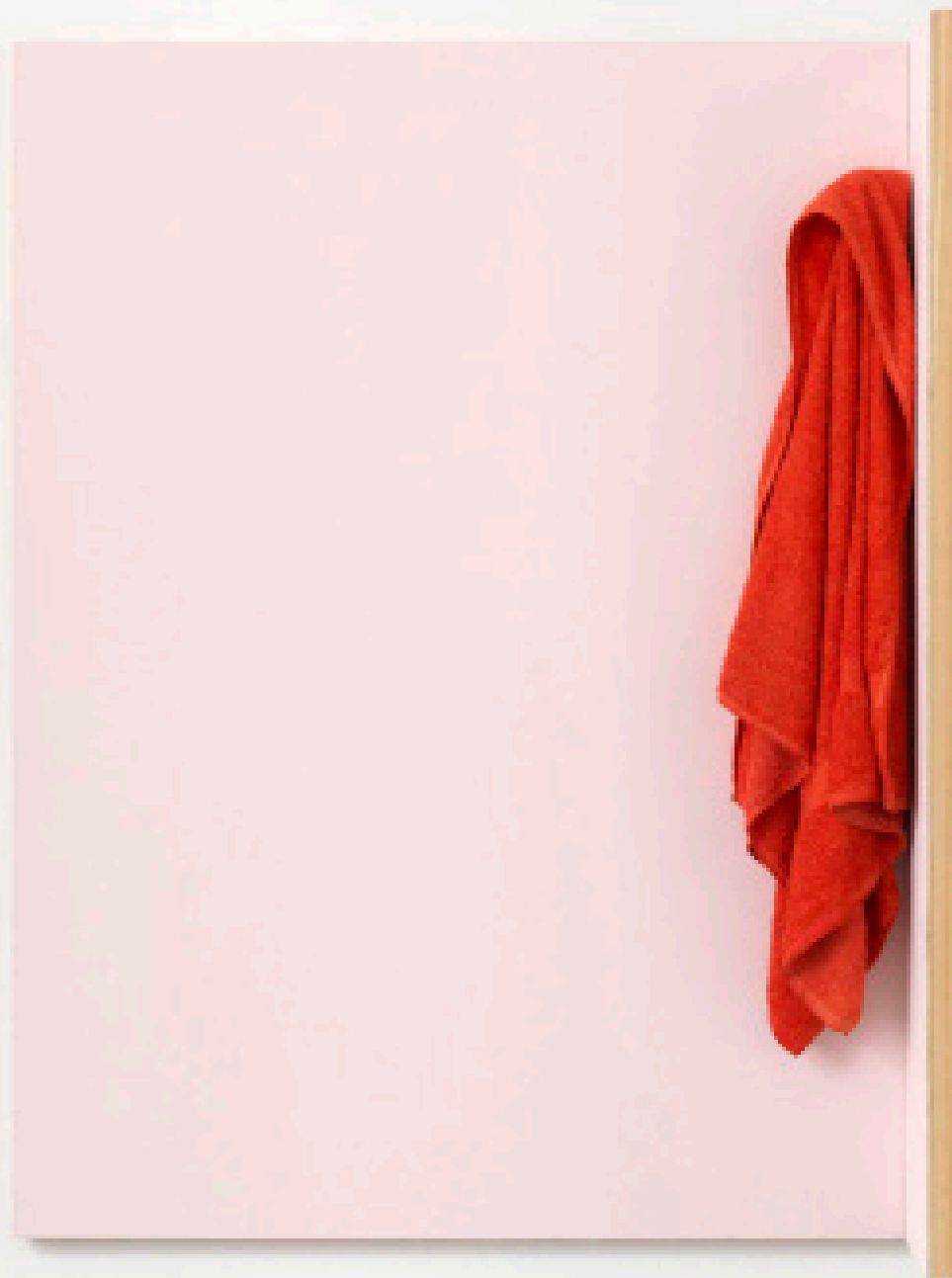


Paul Lee
Negative (screen, green)
2013
towels, hoops stainless steel, thread, pigment based ink
1270 x 3467mm
PL3468



Michael Lett

Paul Lee
Negative (screen, green) (detail)
2013
towels, hoops stainless steel, thread, pigment based ink
1270 x 3467mm
PL3468



Paul Lee
Towel panel corner (red, pink)
2010
hand dyed cotton towel, acrylic and wood
1029 x 787 x 216mm

Paul Lee

Born 1974, London
Lives and works in New York, USA

EDUCATION

1997
Winchester School of Art, Southampton

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2022
Desert Flowers, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
The Grid and the Curve, JTT Gallery, New York (group)
Body Root, Sarah Brook Gallery, Los Angeles (group)

2021
Tambourine Heart, Adams and Ollman, Portland, Oregon (solo)
Just Above My Head, JTT Gallery, New York (group)

2020
Divided, David Shelton Gallery, Houston (solo)
Woof of the Sun, Ethereal Gauze, Halsey McKay Gallery, East Hampton (group)
Kips Bay Decorator Show House, Dallas (group)

2019
I see with my body now, Karma, New York (solo)
Duck or Doorknob, Ratio 3, San Francisco (group)
Project 19: Cut - Copy - Paste – Part II, OV Project, Brussels (group)
Modern Nature, Michael Lett Gallery, Auckland (group)
Think of Me, Adams and Ollman, Portland (group)

2018
In My Room, David Shelton Gallery, Houston (solo)
On My Way To You Now, Stuart Shave Modern Art, London (solo)
Strange Attractors – The Anthology of Interplanetary Folk Art Vol. 2: The Rings of Saturn, organized by Bob Nickas Kerry Schuss, New York (group)
Summer Exhibition, Modern Art, London (group)
Project 09: Etienne Courtois, Paul Lee & Richard Nonas, OV Project, Brussels (group)
Peter, Paul and Mary, Adrian Rosenfeld Gallery, San Francisco (group)

2017
Pestle, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Marching to the Beat, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco (group)
Le Coup de Soleil, untilthen, Grand Marché Stalingrad, Paris (group)
TOUCHPIECE, Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles (group)

2016
Layers for a Brain Corner, Maccarone Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA (solo)
Home Improvements, Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, CA (group)
Theories of Modern Art, Modern Art, London (group)

2015
On The Beach In The Dark, Untilthen Gallery, Paris, France (solo)
Nocturnal, seeing in the dark, a path of light that does not cross others, Stuart Shave / Modern Art, London (solo)
Paul Lee, Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery of the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA (solo)
Marlborough Lights, Marlborough Broome Street, New York, NY (group)
Love for Three Oranges, Karma at Gladstone Gallery, Brussels, Belgium (group)
Teeth Gnash Tennessee, Invisible Exports, New York, NY (group)
Partial Presence, Zabłudowicz Collection, London, United Kingdom (group)
Embracing Modernism: Ten Years of Drawings Acquisitions, Morgan Library and Museum, New York, NY (group)

2014
Matinee, Maccarone, New York, NY (solo)
Paul Lee, 39 Great Jones, New York, NY (solo)
Collective III, Galerie Guy Bärtschi, Geneva, Switzerland (group)

2013
Emerald, Maccarone, New York, NY (solo)
Active Light, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo)
Within and Throughout, JTT, New York, NY (group)
Notes on Neo-Camp, curated by Chris Sharp, Office Baroque Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium (group)
Notes on Neo-Camp, Curated by Chris Sharp, Studio Voltaire, London, United Kingdom (group)
UIA (Unlikely Interactions of the Abstract), curated by Bill Arning, Valerie Cassel Oliver, and Dean Daderko, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, TX (group)
Eugene Von Bruechenhein, Felipe Jesus Consalvos, Paul Lee, Adams and Ollman, Portland, OR (group)

2011

Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London (solo)
Moon River, Modern Art, London, United Kingdom (solo)
THE MEDICINE BAG, Maccarone, New York, NY, USA (group)
Flaca, curated by Tom Humphreys, Portikus, Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany (group)
Absentee Landlord, curated by John Waters, Walker Art Center, MN, USA (group)
Robert Mapplethorpe: Night Work, curated by Scissor Sisters, Alison Jacques Gallery, London (group)
Absentee Landlord, curated by John Waters, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN (group)

2010

Paul Lee, Modern Art, London, United Kingdom (solo)
Lavender, Maccarone, New York, NY, USA (solo)
Every night I go to sleep, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London (group)
Summer Camp, Exile Galerie, Berlin, Germany (group)

2009

Abstract America: New Painting and Sculpture, Saatchi Gallery, London (group)
Minneapolis, Peres Projects, Los Angeles, CA, USA (group)
Parallel, Bortolami Gallery, New York, NY, USA (group)
Between Beach Ball and Rubber Raft, curated by William Gass, Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, USA
Mary's Mary's Choice, curated by Mary Heilmann, 303 Gallery, New York, NY, USA (group)

2008

Arm's Length, Peres Projects, Los Angeles, CA, USA (solo)
The Station, curated by Shamim Momin and Nate Lowman, Miami, USA (group)
The Dulcet Clime of the Bedchamber, curated by Nicolas Weist, Goff + Rosenthal, Berlin, Germany (group)
Shape of Things to Come, Saatchi Gallery, London (group)
Jesuvian Process, Elizabeth Dee, New York, NY, USA (group)

2007

Harbour, Peres Projects, Berlin (solo)
Paul Lee, Chinati Foundation, Marfa (solo)
Jesuvian Process, Elizabeth Dee, New York (group)
Ready-Made, Yvon Lambert Project Space, New York, NY, USA (group)
NeolIntegrity, curated by Keith Mayerson, Derek Eller Gallery, New York, NY, USA (group)
Substance & Surface, Bortolami, New York, NY, USA (group)
Eliminate, curated by John Waters, Albert Merola Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA

(group)

Big and Small, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA (group)

2006

Reservoir, Massimo Audiello, New York, NY, USA (solo)
Paul Lee, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (solo)
Postcards from the edge, Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York, NY, USA (group)
Table, curated by Kathleen White and Rafael Sanchez, (reading), Gene Frankel Theatre, New York, NY, USA (group)
Open Network, curated by Patricia Maloney, Ampersand International, San Francisco, CA, USA (group)
This is Not Called Gay Art Now, curated by Jack Pierson, Paul Kasmin, New York, NY, USA (group)
New Beginnings, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (group)
Christening a Cabin, curated by Chris Viet, High Desert Test Sites, 29 Palms, CA, USA (group)

2005

Olympus, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (solo)
Drawing Show, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (group)
Certain People I Know, Margaret Thatcher Gallery, New York, NY, USA
All in the Family, Texas Gallery, Houston, TX, USA
Disco Hospital, Coleman Projects, London (group)

2004

New Work, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (solo)
Hung, Drawn, and Quartered, Team Gallery, New York, NY (group)
2003 John Waters Curatorial Choice, Scope Art Fair, New York, NY (group)

2003

The dead birds of W28th St, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (solo)
Dislocation, K3 Gallery, Zürich, Switzerland (group)

2002

Books, Paintings, Drawings, Schoolhouse Gallery, Provincetown, MA, USA (solo)
Paul Lee at the Chelsea Hotel, Chelsea Hotel, New York, NY, USA (solo)

1997

Emerging Artists, curated by Jack Pierson, Against the Grain Gallery, Nanton, Alberta, Canada (group)

PUBLICATIONS

2018

Paul Lee, Karma, New York

Paul Lee, Special Edition Karma, New York

2016

Carousel, Karma, New York

Carousel, Special Edition Karma, New York

Touch Paintings, New York

2010

Paul Lee: Stills, An Art Service, New York

SELECTED ESSAYS, REVIEWS AND ARTICLES

2022

Paul Lee, "Squint" in Art Paper 02 LIGHT, April–June, 2022

2016

Larry Wilcox, "Paul Lee: Layers for a Brain Corner" in Art Review 68, September 2016, p. 137

2013

David Herkt, "Boys of Summer in their Ruin: Paul Lee's Ghosts" in VAULT, Issue 4, pp. 116–118

2012

Chris Sharp, 'Camp + Dandyism', Kaleidoscope, Spring 2012, pp. 46-57

2011

Paul Lee "Moon River" at Modern Art, London, mousseMagazine.it/paul-lee-moon-river, MousseMagazine.it, 19 December

Matalon, Rebecca. Paul Lee, Kaleidoscope, Spring 2011, p. 107

Doubal. Rosalie. TimeOut.com, May

2010

Rosenberg, Karen. Paul Lee, New York Times, 19 November 2010. p. 28

Waters, John. Role Models, Published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 2010, pp. 267-270

2009

Myles, Eileen. The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art, published by Semiotext(e), pg. 74 - 77

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Government Art Collection (GAC), United Kingdom

The Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas

La Colección Jumex, Mexico City

Dallas Museum of Art, Texas

Outset Contemporary Art Fund, London

Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence

Rubell Family Collection, Miami

San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas

Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore

Chartwell Project, Auckland, New Zealand

Paul Lee, *Squint*, 2020, tambourine (wood, steel), canvas, towel, spray paint, acrylic paint, soda can, wire, aluminium screen, staples, 38 x 25.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett. Photo: Sam Hartnett



Paul Lee:

The surface of the tambourine is made from a towel, dyed yellow with ink. It's like a picture of a sun that could be used to dry, traversing the space between image, object, function and futility. There's also a piece of canvas that feels to me like a shadow. I like creating and confusing desire within space, implicating the viewer within this. It's called *Squint* because I have a wonky eye but now I think of it, the idea of looking toward the sun and squinting seems more appropriate. The silver soda can is sanded down and reflects the light, the other can is painted yellow like it fell out of the sun.

Paul Lee *Layers for a Brain Corner*
Maccarone, Los Angeles 21 May – 12 August

Maccarone's enormous Los Angeles space is a strange place in which to encounter the work of Paul Lee. Working at human scale, Lee has made a career of humbling the familiar tropes of Minimalism, transforming hard lines, weighty volumes and large scales into objects saturated with the light from naked bulbs or made entirely of bath towels.

His towels have functioned as plinths, as monochromes, as Robert Morris-like wall hangings; they have been stacked in corners, stripped down into Fred Sandback strips and, channelling Robert Smithson, intermixed with rocks. Lee has much in common with Felix Gonzalez-Torres or Jim Hodges, who use devices from Minimalism to conjure memory, eroticism and even a votive, reverential air in their work.

However, Lee's new exhibition seems less personal and more like a perceptual game, using a number of preset building blocks (tambourines, washcloths, large towels and canvases of variable sizes) to deploy sequences of paintings

and wall works that are uniform in effect but can be broken down and examined in their local details. The basic units remain the same, but colours shift, shapes expand and contract, and the thickness of canvas varies. Objects double, map onto each other and interact.

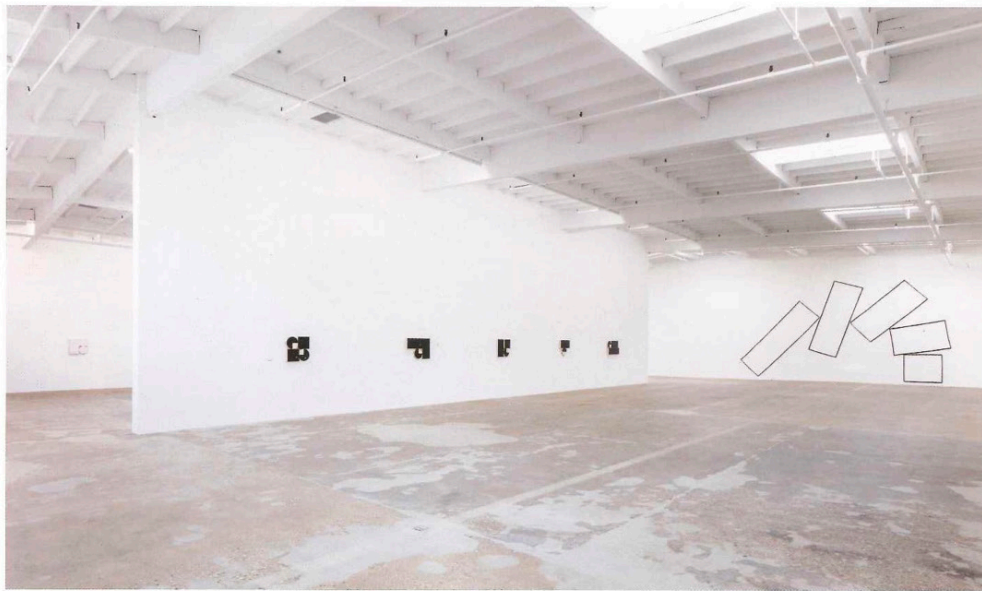
The paintings work wonderfully in groups, communicating with each other, celebrating their small differences. A wall of predominantly black works meditate on a single theme: *Thinking About It Then Knowing Now* (all works 2016) and *Corner* could be two ways of saying the same thing, as both feature a tambourine pinned in the corner made by two black rectangles. Yet neither of these works is far from the yin and yang balance of *Either Side of the Night*, or of *Touch Painting*. The paintings communicate so well with one another that it is difficult to know if any individual work on its own would have much purpose or effect at all.

In addition to the paintings, the space is filled by giant works made of bath towels,

like *Lung* and *Mind Mountain*, which feature the towels stripped down to their edges and dyed in black ink, and occupy the walls like early Hélio Oiticica geometries writ large. As with the paintings, measurement and balance are central. These works are intent on finding a resolved equilibrium among what can at first look like a random scatter. It is with a certain amount of deadpan humour that one work, titled *Washcloth Weight*, suggests that a single black washcloth serves to counterbalance a large grouping of stacked cantilevered frames (themselves made of bath towels).

Human associations are not nearly as easy to find in this show as in Lee's early work, but perhaps that is a good thing. One wonders why Lee's proceedings are now so earnest, so rigorous and balanced. It is as though his world is tightening, the air growing thinner. Something new is definitely at work here; it will be fascinating to see it evolve further.

Larry Wilcox



Layers for a Brain Corner, 2016 (installation view).
Courtesy the artist and Maccarone, Los Angeles

Paul Lee: Between Mind and Body, Art at Different Speeds

Robert Hobbs

Does the body rule the mind?
Or does the mind rule the body?
I dunno.

Stephen Patrick Morrissey and Johnny Marr
The Smiths, "Still Ill," 1984

The "blanks," [in "A Throw of Dice"] in effect, assume importance and are what is immediately most striking: versification always demanded them as a surrounding silence.... This copied distance, which mentally separates words or groups of words from one another, has the literary advantage, if I may say so, of seeming to speed up and slow down the movement of scanning it, and even of intimating it through a simultaneous vision of the Page.

Stéphane Mallarmé,
Preface, "A Throw of the Dice," 1897

In an extended interview held on April 2008, polymath collagist, sculptor, and video artist Paul Lee acknowledged the challenges to his work and thought that Morrissey's inquiring lyrics in "Still Ill" [cited above] continue to pose. "For me," he explained, "art is concerned with the idea of the human condition, which I see as the space between the body and the mind." Then, he pointed out, "the body is known by its physical presence, and the mind is a space inhibitor, since it is an imagined reality. I find myself trying to find a meeting place or truth of existence between an object-body and an image-mind."¹

In his work of the past three years that focuses on the mind-body dyad, Lee employs cast-off and second-hand materials to query intimate, yet different ways of relating to the world. These materials include most notably empty soda cans as well as frayed, dyed terry cloth washcloths and towels that refer to such basic human acts as drinking, bathing, and drying off the body. According to Lee,

There's something about towels as I use them—they absorb something of the person who uses them. They're like a portrait of the person that used them, an abstract portrait. And so they're these things that retain something—I guess that implies a certain eroticism or whatever—they're holding something.²

Once they appear in Lee's art, towels and other everyday objects are doubly referenced to set up different subject positions for his audience, not unlike the white paper which functions as both subject and object in Mallarmé's "A Throw of Dice" (referenced in the epigraph above). Viewers can look at towels in Lee's work as signs of everyday activities at the same time that they are able to view them as art. These two-subject position establish different velocities for seeing and reacting: identification with everyday use is immediate, and considering the towels as art is a slower process. The reason for this difference is because reconfiguring everyday objects as art necessitates dialectical responses. These include rethinking the overall category of art in order to consider the possible metaphoric, metonymic, and synecdochic references that ordinary towels can assume when they are viewed as artistic components. In this situation there is an idealist-materialist divide similar to the mind-body one described by both Morrissey and Lee. In consideration of these essential differences between objects in life and in art, we are able to conclude that the towels in Lee's art refer to themselves, their daily use, and the absence of the person once utilizing them at the same that they fold back on themselves as art, with quotation marks around them so to speak. In this way they establish a continuum across different realms and various references that advance

and recede, thereby vivifying the work by preventing the everyday objects Lee uses from being reified.

The surrogate human accouterments, which the cans and terycloth towels represent in Lee's work, are combined with string, light bulbs, and coal to indicate, respectively, loose connections between these elements that set up different velocities of viewers' responses (as noted above), the art's metaphorical potential to illuminate, and the idea of heat and energy as potentially analgesic. In addition to these materials Lee includes Xeroxed images of a "very classical, but very anonymous" head that he found in a 1970s naturalist magazine,³ plus a picture of a clutching hand. Implicit references to hand-held objects abound in Lee's work, and these include the drink cans, towels, and more recently tambourines. In consideration of the grasping, clutching, washing, drying, and shaking movements that these implements suggest and the omnipresent question regarding the superiority of the body or the mind that these works pose, one might ask if Lee's prominent use of the cans in his work is intended to be a visual pun on the auxiliary verb "can," which connotes physical and mental abilities and, more specifically, the art's potential for facilitating understanding. The towels and photographs also point to a homoerotic subtext in Lee's art, particularly the subject of gay baths, which enjoyed their greatest popularity from the 1960s until the 1980s, when outbreaks of H.I.V. among members of the gay population threatened their closure. For Lee the world of gay bathhouses is intriguing because of its unfamiliarity; even though he is gay, he has never visited them.⁴

In his collages featuring his appropriated male head, Lee divides the image into separate components. His earliest collages to fracture the figure is a group of works from 1999, focusing on a picture of actor Matt Damon that Lee cut up so that light could enter into the works; he then chose a series of hyperbolic fluorescent colors as the medium for connoting this metaphoric illumination. Lee's decision to break up an image of Damon has a literary source in his remarkable undergraduate thesis on Jack Pierson that he completed in early 1996. In this thesis, Lee views stardom as far less attributable to an individual's charisma and luck and much more a function of a set of social and historical conditions that enable certain personalities and appearances to be conceived and ratified as stars. Lee consequently views mass-media icons semiologically as sets of signs pertaining "to certain ideological issues such as issues of class, gender or race."⁵ Relying on Richard Dyer's Foucaultian-based book *Stars*, which examines mass-media luminaries as texts, Lee cites in his thesis a relevant passage on the historical situatedness of Marilyn Monroe who "seemed [according to Dyer] to 'be' the very tensions that ran through the ideological life of fifties

America.⁶

In his more recent collages Lee frequently includes in each work a small Plexiglas sphere at a major nodal point so that the fractured image at close range is transformed into sets of pixels, thereby undermining the picture's overall "degraded" analogue status and ontological condition as a copy by making it appear to be digitally constructed and thus as original.

Most of Lee's collages appear to be self-conscious reconsiderations of formal strategies developed by early-twentieth-century Russian constructivists, and he readily acknowledged this connection as an intended effect of this work. He has mentioned his great delight in constructivism's "transcending beauty, resulting from working people overcoming great obstacles"; his profound interest in "its working-class romances"; and his enormous respect for Malevich's formal restraint and dedicated utopianism.⁷ Constructivism's working-class idealism correlates well with Lee's transformation of himself in the 1990s from a neophyte, growing up in a modest working-class neighborhood, into a sophisticated and thoughtful artist through his studies first at Saint Martin College of Art & Design in London and then at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, where he received a B.F.A. Honors in Fine Art. This transformation is particularly impressive when one considers Lee's childhood and adolescence in East London's Ilford suburb as the son of expatriate Irish parents, who are factory and service-industry workers.

The Irish connection may be one reason why Lee has felt so strongly connected to The Smiths' star performer Stephen Patrick Morrissey, who was also the son of working-class Irish immigrants, living in England. But there are other reasons for his feelings of kinship with this well-known performer and lyricist, including, in particular, Morrissey's persona that mixes a gritty streetwise bluster and aesthetic-era sensitivity directly relatable to the following unlikely pair of role models: James Dean, because of his adolescent intransigence in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Oscar Wilde for the perversity of his infamous wit and for privileging art over life in his statement, "Life imitates art."

In addition to puzzling over Morrissey's question about the mind-body duality in "Still Ill," Lee delighted in the period, circumspect gay sensibility evidenced by the song "This Charming Man" that Morrissey and Marr co-authored and that was released by The Smiths as a single in October 1983. This piece revolves around the narrative of a male cyclist with a punctured tire who is offered a lift by a "charming man" in a luxurious automobile. It revels in such period language as "hillside desolate," "charming," "pamper life's complexities," and "haven't got

a stitch to wear” that radiates a genteel Edwardian-type of mindset so different from the early ‘80s, pre-H.I.V. British gay hedonism, which Morrissey disdained. The period quality of “The Charming Man,” which was reinforced by a still of the French actor Jean Marais from Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1949) on the record cover, encouraged Lee to “locate gay desire in history”⁸ and in a mindset similar to Morrissey’s that is both precious and working-class, pre-and post-industrial, and also rarefied and yet so ubiquitous that it might not be noticed by those who are less discerning.

Guardian critic Tim Lott connects Morrissey to distinctly English national sentiments that may have resonated with Lee, but this musician’s decided preference for the ubiquitous and unassuming also correlate well with the urban blight and suburban sprawl that American earth-artist Robert Smithson—one of Lee’s favorite artists—referred to as “Nonsites.” Lott writes:

[T]he sentiments of Morrissey . . . were English sentiments. This poet—for it was clear that he was a poet—had the knack of taking the national experience as well as the national mindset and rendering it both visible and valuable. Until Morrissey wrote about fairgrounds, and Shelagh Delaney, and grey provincial towns, they were just there, part of the background hum (drum), hardly to be treasured or noticed at all.⁹

In his art, Lee mines this urban grittiness and joins it with a delicate sensitivity that for all intensive purposes appears to be at odds with it, except for the striking fact that his seemingly contradictory mode of handling cast offs with great subtlety makes the commonplace precious and the omnipresent poignantly contemporary. Although Lee’s preference for working with found objects has been compared to the combines of Rauschenberg and other mid-twentieth assemblagists, his precision and tact have more affinities with Joseph Cornell’s rarefied work, without, however, succumbing to the Surrealist and *recherché* overlays this twentieth-century artist preferred. Lee has explained his approach to everyday materials in the following manner:

Sometimes you have to slow yourself down to make art; otherwise you are in the world and not trying to transcend your world . . . I like how the reference to history [in my work] does this: there is a primary towel piece I made recently, and I felt it was like Barnett Newman, but it was made from towels.¹⁰

In addition to finding irresistible Morrissey’s highly original hybrid

of working-class “tough,” who incredibly enough, flourishes a gladius in his performances, Lee regarded a particular scene in Jean Genet’s only film, *Un Chant D’Amour* (Song of Love) (1950) that joins themes of incarceration with homoeroticism as being so hauntingly memorable that it became a prototype for the cans wrapped in images of his appropriated classical head. The scene that moved him is the one that occurs when a middle-age prisoner in one cell and a younger man in the next share a cigarette by blowing smoke into one another’s mouths through a glass straw, which has been inserted through a hole in the thick brick wall separating them. In his work Lee substitutes a can for the straw and wraps either whole or abbreviated images of his classical-looking figure around it to parallel the frustration of Genet’s prisoners who were trying to break through rigid barriers in order to communicate with one another. In some works Lee joins aspects of this head with a hand, which was inspired by sculptor Richard Serra’s 1968 video *Hand Catching Lead* that features a hand attempting to catch lead dropped from above. Similar to the scene in the Genet film and the overall action of the Serra video, Lee’s work is concerned with a concomitant need to connect and a desire to break through the image to come to terms with its essence, a modernist idea, that is shown to be frustrated by the empty can and grainy Xeroxed face. This combined focus on forging connections while confronting barriers is the basis for the 2006 press release announcing Lee’s first New York show, which his dealer Massimo Audiello interpreted in terms of live and which he approved, even though he believes desire and longing¹¹ to be more in turn with his overall approach:

Love is an endless natural reservoir, which we should be able to access freely and abundantly. Unfortunately what should be given to us as freely as milk to a child becomes regulated by the rules of society, morality, and cultural differences. These devices fracture the natural flow of love and set up an endless variety of obstacles and interruptions.¹²

Beginning as a critique of discriminatory practices against gays and the resultant barrier to connect, the tone of the press release changes when it begins to describe works of art on exhibit. The soda-can sculptures with their abstracted facial elements are characterized as “fractured body” parts, that are linked together to form a new type of “daisy chain,” and the terrycloth washcloths and towels are portrayed “as hang[ing] naked on the wall like flags of a ‘poetic battle’ or a ‘love boat’” since their “rawness” serves as “a metaphor of the existential weight and pathos of our struggles with desire and seduction.” The

press release concludes by connecting the towels with “the sweat and tears that make up our lives, even in the most pleasurable moments,” thus framing them as elegiac metonyms that by association refer to the missing bodies that once used them and also setting them up as synecdoches that represent or stand in place of these missing figures.

In consideration of the deep pathos that Lee admits finding in these pieces, it helps to return to the conundrum, posited at the beginning of this essay, between the body’s and the mind’s apportioned roles that the artist has acknowledged as one of the primary concerns of his work. The most famous and important philosophic resolution of this dilemma is the twentieth-century one undertaken by French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Beginning with his *Phenomenology of Perception*,¹³ Merleau-Ponty found a way to rethink the enormous divide between Kant’s noumenon (thing in itself, which can never be known) and phenomenon (reconfiguration or translation of this thing into a comprehensible impression) by focusing on the very concrete perspectives of distinct human bodies. For Merleau-Ponty these bodies constitute a primary and preeminent basis for understanding, thus resolving the mind-body paradox by synthesizing the two into embodied awareness.

In the years after his first major tome on the subject, Merleau-Ponty continued to develop his approach to phenomenology in terms of a Gestaltist—and therefore unifying—reality. Late in life he began referring to this unity as the world’s “flesh.” In light of the homoerotic bent of both Morrissey’s and Lee’s work, this concept would appear to have a special resonance, which would enable them to resolve the mind-body dichotomy, but such was not the case with Lee, as we will see. To understand why, it is first necessary to look briefly at Merleau-Ponty’s theory. His concept of the flesh of the world underscores the fact that a viewer’s actual vantage point affects the contents of the resultant view, and the image [or thing] seen in turn has an effect on the viewer, almost as if it were looking at the observer, even though the two are ostensibly separate and independent entities. Merleau-Ponty describes this type of cohesion and division in terms of a resultant dehiscence in which viewers’ bodies open up to touch and consequently can be touched by the scenes before them, even though both they and the incarnated scene remain separate elements. To analogize this condition, Merleau-Ponty utilizes the image of transparent water in a swimming pool:

When through the water’s thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it despite the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the

geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is in space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialized there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence. This inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beyond the words depth, space, and color.¹⁴

In this statement Merleau-Ponty employs the word “flesh” to refer to his basically ontological approach toward perception, predicated on the belief that seeing involves a permeable Gestalt-type structure, which is part of the vital ambiance that individuals project around them. It is also an intertwined chiasm, involving touching and being touched / seeing and being seen / subject and object / self and world, in other words, the reciprocal ways that an embodied subjectivity is physically immersed in its environment.

Although Merleau-Ponty’s resolution would appear to settle Lee’s concern about the preeminence of the mind or body by the transformations enacted by the world’s flesh, it creates a situation of equivalency in situations where Lee discerns essential differences, based on the symbolic transposition in his art of the human body into sculpture and its mind into his two-dimensional equivalent for painting, i.e., his wash clothes and towels. Thus, through his choice of materials, different artistic genres, and the symbolic roles assigned to them, Lee appears to be returning to the essential split between mind and body that the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes had resolved in favor of the mind when he concluded, “Cogito, ergo sum” or “I think, therefore I am” in his *Second Meditation* in which he doubted everything but his ability to reason, thus concluding that the mind is the major organizing force and the body must be subsumed under it.

Differing, however, from both Descartes and also Merleau-Ponty, Lee does not think of mind-body connections in terms of either the preeminent role of the mind or in terms of a holistic continuum between the self and the world in which the self is an embodied mind. In his work such two-dimensional genres as painting or photography and three-dimensional ones as sculpture belong to entirely different dimensions that he sees as connected at “a point in space.” Lee explains this idea in the following way:

[How] to make an object that straddles itself between [the] different

disciplines painting or sculpture? Photo or sculpture? Two different realities each denying each other . . . What is created is a point in space where a denial of the truth is turned on its head: the imagined accepts the physical. The imagined ideal becomes the physical truth.¹⁵

Rather than “a point in space,” Lee might be well advised to think about positing the space separating two- and three-dimensional work as an irreconcilable break or fissure whereby a leap is required in order to finesse the differences between these basically different artistic modes of seeing and conceptualizing that are crucial to his work. This break can be analogized in terms of Mallarmé’s white sheet of paper (referred to in the above epigraph) that is both one of the poem’s subjects and an object on which it is printed.

Instead of thinking about his work in Merleau-Pontian terms, Lee has preferred to couch his ideas in a Lacanian manner. In the same email in which he laid out the remarkable statement, regarding an inversion and “a point of space” separating reality and imagination (cited in the above paragraph), Lee makes the following observation:

Dorothy, when she heads to her imagined destination, Emerald City [in *The Wizard of Oz*] is also heading to her real destination home, the imagined and the real are together, her home is her imagination because she does not accept her dull reality.¹⁶

Lee’s metaphor here is very revealing for its use of all three Laconia registers—the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real—that he conflates into two categories: the Symbolic “Emerald City” and Imaginary-Real home that indicates an opening in his work to an uncontainable element that he glosses over with his use of the adjective “dull.” If we dispense with this prosaic adjective and replace the word “reality” with the concept of the Lacanian Real, we can begin to see how this contradiction that at first focuses on the mind-body split becomes the basis for another type of contradiction that enables us to discern a profoundly important aspect of Lee’s art. And this aspect that he circumscribes in his art without being able to harness and represent it is the uncontainable, unknown or unrepresentable contents of the world as a thing in itself that the French poststructuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who appreciated the inaccessibility of the Lacanian Real, calls the “figural.”

As different from the figurative as Kant’s noumenon is from the phenomenon, the figural focuses on the unconscious’s primary processes that Freud spatialized as the id. Lyotard connects it with

the negative capability—the uncertainties, ambiguities, incommensurabilities that the poet John Keats once described as the artist’s prerogative—which gives rise to the Kantian sublime, since it is a disruptive, immanent force closer to the discernment of unprocessed and unencoded sensations, which attend frustrated and ultimately futile attempts to apperceive the noumenon.¹⁷ Or, considered from a different perspective, the figural opposes and deregulates all systems of discourse and rational thought since it remains unknown and unknowable. In his essay “Painting as a Libidinal Set-up,” Lyotard concluded:

Our hypothesis (and our conviction) here, based on the movement of polymorphism in contemporary painting and economy, has been that the force of what is painting does not reside in its referential power, in its seduction, its “difference,” in its status as signifier (or signified), and that is to say, in its lack, but in its plentitude of switchable libido.”¹⁸

In contradistinction to the figural with its connotations of excessiveness that can also be reinterpreted in terms of a break or gap in a work of art, the figurative can be equated with both Kant’s phenomenon and Lacan’s Symbolic because both focus on the way that the thing in itself (the Real) can be framed and channeled so that it accords with historical realities and predominate ideologies. Lyotard’s figural is far removed from Merleau-Ponty’s view of art as capable of restoring viewers to a primary, Edenic condition in childhood before separation occurs between subjects and objects. It also differs from this phenomenologist’s comforting theory of the flesh of the world, which intercedes in perception to create imbricated and reciprocal situations between people and art objects in which seeing also implicates one in being seen by the art. In this situation that Merleau-Ponty theorizes, thinking attempts to forge a phenomenological view of the noumenon, while acknowledging the impossibility of doing so; it does this in order to theorize an existent reciprocity in the space (the flesh) between subject and object and thus define them in terms of this cohering element. According to this view of the world’s flesh, considering subjects and objects as well as the mind and the body as isolated and self-sufficient would lead to a false understanding of the self as autonomous. For these reasons Lyotard does not accept the cohesiveness necessitated by Merleau-Ponty’s flesh because he (Lyotard) believes that art permits breaches within itself in which the figural can erupt.

In his thesis on Jack Pierson, Lee referred to the condition known as the figural without citing it by name. Writing about the constant need for new art to escape containment, Lee points to the art world’s

ongoing colonization of new work. He belabors the art world's ability to colonize most innovations, extols work that "looks less and less like art," and champions the merits of camouflaged art or barely undetectable work as viable alternates for avoiding cooption.¹⁹ Then Lee cites critic and curator Ralph Rugoff's concept of pathetic art, which undermines expectations and self-consciously demeans itself, as if art-making were lowball poker so that the losing hand wins by breaking out of inhibiting strictures in order to open up new possibilities.²⁰ In my opinion, Rugoff's pathetic can be productively rethought in terms of G.W.F. Hegel's symbolic art as a development in which an inadequately understood content (the Idea incarnate) distorts and misrepresents the forms that the art is manifesting, so that a differential results between a given work's form and content. Hegel describes symbolic art as constituting:

In general a battle between the content which still resists true art and the form which is not homogeneous with that content either. For both sides [content and form as well as meaning and shape], although bound into an identity, still coincide neither with one another nor with the true nature of art, and therefore they struggle none the less to escape from its defective unification.²¹

Instead of regarding this differential as a loss, pathetic art and the figural revel in it, and Hegel's symbolic differential provides an opportunity for the figural to emerge.

Considered in terms of Lee's art, the figural can be understood as the separation or glitch between two- and three-dimensional components that re-contextualizes the mind and body split so that power and meaning are attributed to the libidinal, overwhelming, and irrational force of the noumenon as opposed to the discursive containment of colonized phenomena. Thus, the figural in Lee's work is to be found in the disruptive force blocking connections between mind and body and the different velocities that ensue when he attempts, as he does in most of his recent work, to put a series of absences together to create between them the cathected space that I am calling "figural." These absences can be re-construed as references to different realities, and Lee has described this situation in terms of "different languages [coming] together in the same piece." He explains:

It gives the work a kind of elusive quality like you do not know how to look at it. [Take], for instance, a yellow towel. A towel is for drying, a physical fact; the yellow is the idea of sun using the idea of colour: these two things together give an object that has a space in it between two realities, the physical and the pictorial. It acts

like an affirmation of the presence of a figure [and] a space where the figure can be missing . . . one moment moving at two different speeds . . . if things can enter your brain at different speeds at once, perhaps you are closer to experiencing something of depth.²²

The heightened feelings this split has for Paul Lee might be better understood if we consider it in terms of the group of sculptures of cameras that he made and exhibited at Provincetown's Schoolhouse Gallery in 2005. Titled "Olympus" after the camera that belonged to his brother, who had recently died of cancer, Lee has opined, "I don't know how strong [my] cameras are a response to his death." His doubt may come from the fact that his hometown of Ilford was the home of the Ilford Camera Factory, which then closed and later reopened as a supermarket. "I used to work at that supermarket in the butchers' [department] chopping meat," Lee has related, before adding, "I think that is an interesting metaphorical situation, something about meat and photos." He then mused about Ilford and its connections in his mind with photography:

I always liked [the fact that] Ilford was the name of the camera factory whenever I would see it[s name] around at photo shoots cause I used to work on props. It was funny: Ilford became a kind of Oz; the photograph became a metaphor for an alternate reality. I took a picture once of some boxes of camera film in grass; I think in retrospect it was like turning the camera boxes into seeds. A sort of reversal process or something. I think this relates to the can sculptures: how I put light bulbs in front of the faces. I think by putting something in front of the image of the face you block it, but you see through it also. By exposing the lie of the image—a print made from a reaction of light—you are actually moving closer to it again [as] a marker on a journey.²³

Whatever Lee's reasons for focusing on cameras for his exhibition, he did start making them soon after his brother died, and he reflected on the fact that when his brother was alive, he had borrowed his brother's camera. If we consider cameras as hand-held mechanical implements for seeing and for recording what one sees, one can regard them in Merleau-Pontian terms. However, the cameras that Lee made in clay and allowed to air-dry before decorating them exhibit a wry absurdity that opens them up to disruptive figural associations rather than the phenomenological ones. No doubt tacitly referring to the clichéd metaphor of humans as earthly vessels, these customarily closed entombments of vision in the form of the shooting of pictures and exposure of film serve in Lee's work as the basis for a series of festive, wonderfully

ridiculous, and not clearly understood incarnations, including being festooned with feathers, enclosed with eyeglasses, assuming the form of an elephant, being enveloped in string, taking on the shape of an erect penis, and being encased in band-aids.

Functioning very much like Jacques Derrida's purposefully unresolved dialectic Glas in which G.W.F. Hegel's text about family and home is played against a homoerotic one by Genet so that the logic of each column of prose contradicts the other, Lee plays off the body in terms of the different subject positions of drinking clutching, bathing, drying off one's skin, and shaking a tambourine that his materials presume and the mind in terms of an image of a handsome young man, who is intended to instate in the work and the viewer the theme of desire and affect that this homoerotic subtext connotes. Thus Lee sets up different sets of expectations that recall self-gratifyingly physical memories even as they point to unresolved emotional feelings. Significantly, the point where they might connect is an absence and impossibility. As Lyotard remarks

Thought [in the form of the figural] cannot want its house. But the house haunts. The house does not haunt contemporary thought in the way that it once pierced the untamable, forcing it into the tragic mode. The untamable was tragic because it was lodged in the heart of the domus. The domestic schema resisted the violence of a timbre that was nonetheless irresistible.²⁴

In Paul Lee's work Dorothy never reaches home; perpetually en route to Oz, she never comes to terms with the Real, since it always evades her Imaginary Emerald City and Symbolic Kansas. Although the figural in Lee's work does not erupt with the presence of the tornado that threatened Dorothy's home, thereby setting up the conditions for the tragedy Lyotard describes, it does work its extraordinary force in the space between the everyday use of the items in his art and the daisy chain of new associations and different velocities they are capable of provoking in viewers. Even though it is not tragic in the terms Lyotard outlines above, the figural in Lee's art remains the troubling and yet fecund hiatus between the physical and the mental on which his art is predicated.

Endnotes

- 1 Paul Lee, Interview with author, Brooklyn, New York, 10 April 2008.
- 2 Paul Lee, Interview with Mary Blair Taylor, New York City, 3 August 2008.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lee, Interview with author.
- 5 Paul Lee, "On the Road with Jack Pierson," B.F. A. Thesis, Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester (February, 1996).
- 6 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publisher, 1979), p. 36.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Tim Lott, "Morrissey: the Great Grumpy Young Man," *The Guardian* (Monday, June 23, 2008), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jun/23/popandrock.culture2/print>, consulted 10/4/08.
- 10 Paul Lee, Email to Author, 1 August 2008.
- 11 Paul Lee, Email to Author, 14, October 2008.
- 12 "Paul Lee, Reservoir," Press Release, Massimo Audiello, New York (November 2—December 16, 2006). In an email of 14 October 2008, Lee confirmed the authorship of this press release and his role in it: "Massimo did not interview me, but his press release was beautiful.... I was a little shy of it at first because of the mention of love, I thought it should have been less emotional, I was wrong because it all makes sense...."
- 13 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1962). This book was originally published in France in 1945.
- 14 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, *Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 142.
- 15 Paul Lee, Email to Author, 18 June 2008.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The figural's connection with the noumenon recalls Mallarmé's effort to present the void, resulting from his agnosticism, in poetry, which he continued to regard as a premier vehicle of the spiritual. Mallarmé scholar Henry Weinfield has described this contradiction in his discussion of the poem entitled "The Azure":

[T]he word Azure, is a metonymy that swerves away from Ciel, which in French means both sky and heaven. The inability of the French language to say sky without simultaneously saying heaven is precisely what motivates—indeed necessitates—the use of the term Azure.... Thus, the Azure as a symbol is, for Mallarmé, a way of avoiding religious assumptions that can no longer be assumed and simultaneously, of concretizing the void that has interpolated itself in the space formerly occupied by those assumptions. The Azure, then represents an absolute that is simultaneously perfection

and nothingness—a perfection for which the poet strives in vain, a nothingness against which he beats his fists in impotent frustration.

In this situation, Azure could be regarded as a vehicle for alluding to the figural as a concretized void. Cf. Henry Weinfield, "Commentary" in Henry Weinfield, *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press:1994), p. 163

- 18 Jean-François Lyotard, "Painting as a Libidinal Set-up" in Keith Crome and James Williams, eds., *The Lyotard Reader & Guide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 329.
- 19 Paul Lee, Thesis, p. 22.
- 20 Ibid. Cf. Ralph Rugoff, *Just Pathetic*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, 1990).
- 21 G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T.M. Knox, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 300.
- 22 Lee, Email to Author, 1 August 2008.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 202

PART A

In the taut and subtly
mannered work of a
group of young artists,

CAMP + DANDYISM

the notions of dandyism
and Victorianism come
into play

= NEO-CAMP?

as clues to the origin
of the domestication
of camp.

Soft, pure and uninflected colors. Lavender, yellow, baby blue. Peaceful interiors and the decorative accoutrements that populate them. Everything sharply delineated against unified grounds. Distinguishable. Whole. Complete unto itself. Despite the sense that palpable integers abound, an air of euphemism lingers over it all, which is perhaps why the serenity found here feels less like the byproduct of wholesome living than a beguiling ruse, a highly stylized wish fulfillment, or, say, the complete and total domestication of camp.

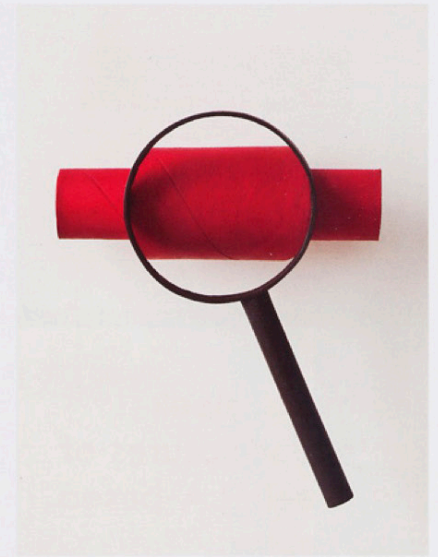
What I have just evoked applies, in differing degrees, to the work of a group of young artists working today. It just so happens that all of these artists are men and they all either work in or are linked to major western art capitals. (Neither fact can, of course, be taken for granted.) Whatever the sexual orientation of these artists might be, their work is conspicuously of the order of what is generally perceived to be a gay cultural heritage, camp. I am thinking of the flagrantly homoerotic, neo-classic-ish paintings and bronze sculptures of the English, London-based Daniel Sinsel; the discreetly homoerotic, hand towel assemblages of the English, New York-based Paul Lee; the hyper-sleek cabinet sculptures of the Israeli, LA-based Elad Lassry; Australian, LA-based Ricky Swallow's small, faux-cardboard, decorative bronze sculptures, full of French curves; the women's undergarment assemblages of Mexican, Mexico City-based Martin Soto Climent; the recent paintings of serene, idealized, middle-class domestic interiors by the American, New York-based Mathew Cerletty; and finally, the dark, Martini-addled, mid-century style graphic design prints and narrative scenarios of the New York-based, American artist Matthew Brannon. While there are perhaps just as many differences as there are similarities among these heterogeneous bodies of work, it cannot be denied that they share a distinctly plastic sensibility: a propensity toward whole colors; an intimacy of scale; a shamelessly manufactured sense of facture and, at times, finish. For all its would-be sensuality, there is virtually nothing natural about this work. It tends to be subtly mannered, taut and perfectly mastered, closer in symbolic filiation to the preternatural precision of Ingres' drawings than, say, the explosive aesthetic incontinence of Gustave Moreau (both of whom are distant and not-so-distant forerunners, incidentally, of camp sensibility).

How do we account for this? What is it? Where does it come from? In an attempt to solve this mys-

tery, I found myself dutifully, if a little predictably, turning back to Susan Sontag's justly celebrated "Notes on Camp" (1964). I was immediately struck by how simultaneously irrelevant and relevant it was to the work in question. In many cases, the essence of her claims could have been simply reversed, or turned inside out. For instance, and perhaps most importantly, consider her characterization of camp as "Dandyism in the age of mass culture": "The old style dandy hated vulgarity. The new-style dandy, the lover of camp, appreciates vulgarity." In the case of the work in question, vulgarity seems to have yielded to a marked preciousness, while nevertheless maintaining its link to the everyday (e.g., Paul Lee's towels, Sinsel's chocolate bars, Soto Climent's high heels, etc.); this shift gestures not so much toward a reversal, as a perfect fusion of camp and dandyism. This fusion can account for the discrepancies that arise when comparing the work of these artists to other parts of her text. For example, when she writes, "The essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration," the infidelity, through comparative understatement, to the latter could be attributed to the resurgence of dandyism, despite this new work's affinity for the artificial. Similarly, a re-emphasis of beauty on the part of these artists could be said to complicate the following statement: "... the way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization..." Again, an arguably seamless fusion of the camp and dandy sensibility seems to be at stake here. Meanwhile, other statements can be simply cut and pasted, intact: "Camp taste has an affinity for certain arts rather than others. Clothes, furniture, all elements of visual décor ..." And not forgetting: "To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respects to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical." Soon thereafter: "Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy." And crucially: "Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the *psychopathology of affluence*." (Emphasis mine.) If this last, highly fraught claim, which Sontag cavalierly disdains to gloss, does not exactly explain the privileged nature of the artists in question (primarily white men), it manages, at least in part, to situate it. That said, just such a psychopathology of affluence can be descried in-

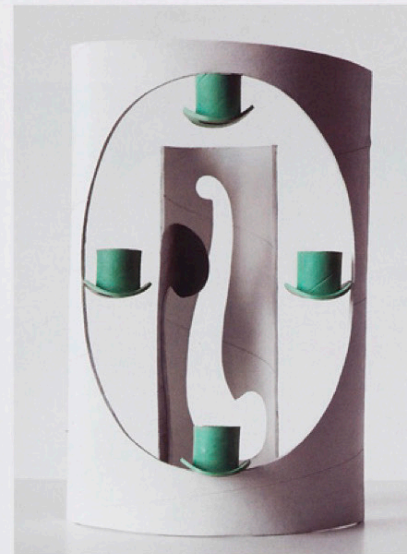


the discreetly
homoerotic, hand-
towel assemblages of
the English, New York-
based Paul Lee;



5

6



Australian, LA-based
Ricky Swallow's
small, faux-cardboard,
decorative bronze
sculptures, full of
French curves;

the materialistic and detail obsessive fetishism that drives a lot of this work. From, say, the slick, seamless surfaces of Lassry's sculptures to the patrician opulence of Daniel Sinsel's fluidly draped fabrics, a kind of subtly perverse tendency toward cathexis seems to run throughout all of it.

So what then are we dealing with here? Neo-camp? Is it that simple? Can it be reduced to a kind of retrogressive formula, in which camp appeals to its origins in dandyism? In other words: Camp + Dandyism = Neo-Camp? Perhaps in part, but if not why, then how?

First of all, both camp and dandyism are ultimately Victorian, an adjective so simultaneously buttoned-up and bloated that it is continually on the brink of bursting. At once repressive and puritanical, the adjective and the era to which it refers can also be characterized as an emblem and an age of euphemism. Sublimation, both willful and unwillful, becomes the order of the day. Not only was it responsible, as Foucault claims in *The History of Sexuality*, for manufacturing our current conception of sexual identity and the "discursive formation" of homosexuality as a human category, but it also, consequently, bears within it a halcyon notion of purity so specious and fabricated that it essentially precludes any possibility of purity. Everything about the Victorian era, from its epigrammatic wit to the creation of fake grottos, seems contrived, constructed, artificial. (It is no small coincidence that the novel, which is the ultimate imposition of linear narrative form onto the comparative chaos of reality, was forged in and by this era.) It is an era that, in short, was fundamentally artful, which is to say, artistic. Little is left to chance or casually allowed to happen—everything is created and highly controlled. This being the case, Victorianism realized, at least to a certain degree, if only unconsciously, one of the avant-garde's most fervent ideals *avant la lettre*: the fusion between art(fulness) and life. This perhaps accounts for Wilde's condemnation of nature and naturalism in favor of artifice in his celebrated "The Decay of Lying" (1891), which could be considered both the distillation of the Victorian era's cultural mores as well as their death knell. By identifying and seeking to reverse a process, he seems to have only midwived it along. Granted, the cultural disenfranchisement of Victorianism and its aftermath was not destined to happen overnight. Its decline and fall would be stretched out over several decades. The importance of Freud here, of course, cannot be discounted. But it was French structural-

ism and its scrupulous decoding of culture, as well as its promulgation by American intellectuals, that administered an admittedly elaborate *coup de grace*. (Curiously, Sontag herself, who, like Wilde, is a transitional figure, can be seen, with her invocation of an "erotics of interpretation," as one of the last true Victorians.) After structuralism, codes and the euphemisms that accompanied them were no longer tolerated, or, rather, if they were tolerated, it was precisely by virtue of the volumes of criticism their intolerability was liable to engender. Seen through structuralism's lens, culture became little more than a collectively sanctioned act of concealment, of self-reflexive subterfuge. It would be going a bit too far to refer to structuralism as a cultural witch hunt, but such a characterization would not be entirely inappropriate.

Dandyism and camp play important, albeit different roles in the perpetuation of the codification of culture. Interestingly, while Sontag perceives the dandy as the aristocrat of culture, a protector of high culture *vis-à-vis* the cultural enfranchisement of the bourgeoisie, Benjamin, in his essay, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" (1937), identifies the origin of the dandy in the English stock exchange. According to Benjamin, that ethos which Baudelaire sought and ultimately failed to embody, issued from the brokers' sudden shifts of fortune on the trading floor and the cool-blooded dissimulation of their impact. Thus are the affectations of the dandy equivalent to that of poker face—as if he, the dandy, were magisterially unaffected by the vulgar vicissitudes of the world. Camp is perhaps even less affected by those vicissitudes, but more importantly, is a fully coded—and therefore Victorian—cultural phenomenon, carrying out its legacy in an ironically self-aware, pseudo-sublimated fashion. Acknowledging the necessity of post-Victorian de-sublimation, it also recognizes the importance of sublimation, and the codes by which it operates, in the formation and perpetuation of culture. After all, if we learned anything from structuralism, it is that culture is essentially a coded affair. And yet, the question we have been obliged to ask in our long, increasingly discursive, post-post-structural hangover is: can we have culture without codes? And the sublimation that accompanies them? I would argue—along with, I suspect, the artists discussed throughout this article—emphatically, no. (What is more, the so-called threat of the centrifugal dissolution of art into pure discourse conceivably justifies a reactionary, or better yet, protective, seemingly

superficial, centripetal dandified stance). But, by the same token, it is impossible to pretend that structuralism never happened. This is why neo-camp becomes such a compelling alternative and serviceable post-homosexual mode and metaphor for art, in the sense that Victorianism can now be seen as a metaphor for art—it unmoors camp from its provenance in homosexual culture, while nevertheless exploiting its bond to artifice and artificiality. Indeed, this is primarily why so much of this work seems so ambiguously ironic: not due to ambivalence, but to a certain tendency toward creating deliberate compounds of sublimation and de-sublimation (e.g., Daniel Sinsel's highly suggestive depictions of flutes, Martin Soto Climent's cross-dressing sculptures, or Matthew Brannon's wryly interpretable send-ups of mid-century advertising). Both pre- and post-structuralist, these works seek to affirm a fully self-aware "erotics of interpretation."

- 1 Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2011
Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
- 2 Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2011
Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
- 3 Daniel Sinsel, *Untitled*, 2009
Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Sadie Coles HQ, London and the artist
- 4 Paul Lee, *Towel Panel Corner (Orange, Pink)*, 2010
Courtesy of Maccarone, New York
- 5 Ricky Swallow, *Magnifying Glass with Pipe*, 2011, Courtesy of Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
Courtesy of Maccarone, New York
- 6 Ricky Swallow, *Hat Clock/Open Study*, 2011
Courtesy of Marc Foxx, Los Angeles, and Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London
- 7 Elad Lassry, *Untitled (Red Cabinet)*, 2011
Photography by Stefan Altenburger, Collection Thomas and Cristina Bechtler, Courtesy of Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich
- 8 Elad Lassry, *Untitled (Zebrawood Rack)*, 2011
Photography by Fredrik Nilsen, Courtesy of White Cube, London and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles © Elad Lassry
- 9 Mathew Cerletty, *Ring*, 2011
Courtesy of Office Baroque, Antwerp, Albus Greenspon, New York and the artist
- 10 & 11 Martin Soto Climent, *Mármoles Oníricos*, 2009, Installation view at T293, Naples, 2009. Photography by Danilo Donzelli
Courtesy of T293, Naples/Rome
- 12 Matthew Brannon, *Early Retirement*, 2011
Photography by Cathy Carver, Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York
- 13 Matthew Brannon, *Previous Owners*, 2011
Photography by Cathy Carver, Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York