

“Living in a Material World”

by James D Campbell

From the moment I entered the Centre PHI exhibition space, I was drawn into the web of an unlikely but edifying dialogue between two artists whose practices, at least upon first inspection, seemed diametrically opposed. The brilliant and gregarious chromatic inventions of Paul Bureau met their match in the subversive monochromal works of Valérie Kolakis. And yet, it was not long before recognizing just how dovetailed the pieces in the exhibition really were: the chromatic integer and the restless object shared conceptual rigour and material force.

Paul Bureau's paintings, eloquent in their materiality, staked their claim on both body image and optic from the get-go. Paintings like *Emergence (P)*, 2008, and *Thrust*, 2012, and *One on One (B)*, 2009, possess real somatic weight and presence. The intrinsically tiered construction of colour fields was a processual entity, a congeries of intertwined, labour-leavened strata.

This was particularly true when the artist incised his surfaces, Fontana-like, in order to reveal the secret history of a painting's nurturing and growth. But whereas Fontana left the flaps of the wound open, inviting the void into painting, Bureau stitched it shut again like a surgeon, only now showing the slow chronology of layer upon layer of applied oil paint in the cicatrices that remained. These excavated layers formed a stratigraphy which unfolded in vertical depth or horizontal distension as each previous layer of the artist's paint application was revealed.

Bureau's paintings have little in common with abstract expressionist painting, but one thing they do share with artists like



Installation view “Living in a Material World.” Front: Valérie Kolakis, *Untitled (Chairs)*, 2012, 8 chairs and plastic sheet. Back from left to right: Paul Bureau, *Emergence (P)*, 2008, oil on canvas, 160 x 142 cm. Paul Bureau, *Surfaces 10-11*, 2001, oil on wood, 91 x 122 cm. Paul Bureau, *Surfaces*, 2001, oil on wood, 91 x 122 cm. Photograph: Guy L’Heureux, courtesy Donald Browne Gallery.

Milton Resnick and Eugène Leroy is a licentious materiality, and the hegemony achieved by the hedonistic act of painting in and through it. The materiality is sensuous and tactual, and in most of the works presented, Bureau makes the process of painting evident, exposing the painterly acts sealed under the final surface. He wants to share stages of painting's labour, effectively turning his work inside out and securing it as a teaching story.

In a recent monograph on the artist, I wrote that his oil paintings are finally, provocations. They incite questioning, self-reflection—and contemplation. Kolakis's works are also provocative and disruptive. She explodes the assumptive contexts that surround seemingly ordinary objects with conceptual TNT, élan and understatement. Mounting the staircase into the exhibition space, I noted the wall directly in front of the staircase had a mirror on it. An iron rope hanging from the ceiling bifurcated the mirror. The reflection in the mirror made the making of Lacanian meaning complicit with the viewer. Her work is rife with such seamless binaries.

Whereas Bureau digs out test pits in his paintings to open

an archaeological window on their making, Kolakis works the conceptual flip side, offering up enigmatic objects that seem to be artefacts secured from such sites and preserved intact.

Consider, in this regard, the stack of wooden chairs covered in plastic in the middle of the exhibition space entitled *Untitled (Chairs)*, 2012. At first, I was convinced that here was the seating for an upcoming artist's talk. Instead, the utilitarian chair became a sculptural icon. She slyly, shyly and even subversively upended all assumptions, offering a replete sounding board for Bureau's chromatic range with her own consummately fey object/sculptural/invention/intervention.

In *Untitled (Rug)*, 2012, a set of variously sized, concrete-covered rolled rugs were leaned against the wall, reading as rolled-up grisaille canvasses. Then I recognized that this was sculpture, not support. The concrete hearkened back to minimalist practices—and beyond. While Kolakis's displayed works were largely monochromatic, Bureau's were chromatically robust. These bodies of work riffed on one another with rhythmic persistence. Both artists are canny inhabitants of the material

Jack Goldstein

by Milena Tomic

world. As George Harrison once sang: "Senses never gratified/Only swelling like a tide/That could drown me in the material world."

The dovetailing I spoke of earlier between disparate bodies of work here took its cue from the materiality itself. Gallery owner Donald Browne, who represents both artists, deserves kudos for presenting them in lively, unlikely but unavoidably engaging conversation. Their works were installed with immense sensitivity, and the Centre PHI, a comparatively recent exhibition space in Montreal, has never looked better. ■

"Living in a Material World" was exhibited at Centre PHI, Montreal, from September 7 to September 28, 2013.

James D Campbell is a writer and curator living in Montreal who contributes regularly to Border Crossings.

For his 1972 thesis show at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), where he studied with conceptual pioneer John Baldessari along with several other members of the Pictures Generation, Jack Goldstein equated the disappearance of his body with the appearance of a mental image. While this early work never offered up any "pictures" as such—to use the term coined by Douglas Crimp in his eponymous 1977 exhibition at New York's Artists Space, featuring the work of Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Philip Smith, Troy Brauntuch and Robert Longo—the conceptual groundwork was already laid. Buried for the duration of the performance, the artist breathed through a plastic tube; his presence above ground was only registered by a blinking light synched to his heartbeat and placed some distance away. It is this same psychological distance and self-effacement that defined how pictures appropriated material from advertisements, Hollywood cinema and other shared cultural properties.

Goldstein's pictures are paradigmatic in this regard, despite being less immediately recognizable than Longo's falling figures or Cindy Sherman's noirish film stills. Organized by guest curator Philipp Kaiser at the Orange County Museum of Art before coming to The Jewish Museum in New York, "Jack Goldstein x 10,000" capitalized on the curiosity surrounding the reclusive Montreal-born artist who largely disappeared from the art world in the 1990s, committing suicide in 2003 while living in an obscure part of Los Angeles. Modest in scale, Goldstein's first American retrospective had a thematic cohesiveness that belied the variety of media on display: 16mm film (black-and-white and colour, silent

and sound), vinyl records, photography, sculpture, performance posters, painting, installation and writing. With a name so apparently unremarkable that it might appear 10 thousand times in a phonebook, Goldstein is best known for a series of 16mm colour films that evoke the sublime and the generic in equal measure. In *Shane*, 1975 (3 min), a Hollywood-trained German shepherd barks repeatedly on cue. In *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, 1975 (3 min), the MGM lion roars against a monochromatic red background. *The Jump*, 1978 (26 sec), swaps the red background for black, using rotoscope to transform a diver into a figure of red-golden light. Installed separately near the exhibition entrance, *The Jump* was projected onto a red wall in a space barely illuminated by two fluorescent sticks. The same whirling projector has become a symbol of technological obsolescence in recent work by Tacita Dean, Rodney Graham or Elad Lassry. Lassry is a 2003 CalArts graduate whose films, photographs and performances bear the influence of Goldstein's manipulation of cinematic clichés.

Historical yet somehow contemporary, Goldstein's work often feels disorienting, leaving viewers unsure about where they stand vis-à-vis inside and outside. *Burning Window*, 1977, dramatizes this uncertainty. With nothing more than a vinyl window, electric lights and red film, the installation simulates the feeling of watching an outdoor blaze from the safety of a house interior—or is the fire inside? *Portfolio Performance*, 1976–85/2001, presents a series of posters describing live pictures like *Two Boxers*, 1979, for example, which calls for a stage, red and white lights, professional boxers and "heroic" music. The performance