

ARTFORUM

“Needles in the Camel’s Eye”

by Natilee Harren
October 2012



Charles Mayton, *for the painter of unknown languages*, 2012, oil and gouache on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. From “Needles in the Camel’s Eye.”

As is well known, artists such as Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler emerged in the late 1970s with work that effected a critique of representation through the *détournement* of photographic and filmic tropes. This unusually tight summer show proposed an innovation of that older critical strategy, wherein “pictures” have been superseded by multiplatform and thoroughly transmutable “images.” Most of the fourteen artists featured here were born during the years when the Pictures generation was first being identified as such; they make work in which images are submitted to a state of continuous transmission between digital and analog formats, bringing to light the visual and material conditions of twenty-first-century representation and viewing. However, rather than accommodating to the screen completely, their works subject photographic imagery to painterly treatment, in ways that deliberately fool the digital eye.

A case in point is Carter Mull’s *Beat*, 2011, which began as an abstract drawing and was subsequently scanned, digitally manipulated, printed out, and then further altered with a top layer of actual paint and collage. Though

the work as featured on the gallery website appears resolutely flat, the item, in real life, reveals tactile nuance: What had seemed to exist on a single plane, was, in fact, a magazine clipping of a woman's face painted over with angular numbers in white gouache and collaged over yet again. While it has become all too commonplace to encounter artworks in JPEG form, Mull, through these subtle layers, deliberately reserves an aspect of the work for his in-the-flesh audience. In a similar vein, Lucas Knipscher's *Untitled*, 2012, takes as its base layer a close-up of a Gauguin landscape that the artist laced with a vintage *Garfield* cartoon and sealed with a thin white gouache (calling to mind the continuing functionality of that old technology wheat paste). This palimpsest is anchored with a swatch of printed gingham overlaid with scanned brushstroke graphics, one corner of the fabric dramatically buckling up from the paper support as if to performatively occupy three-dimensional space. Meanwhile, Anri Sala's C-print *Airport*, 2005, appropriates the visual noise of a low-resolution image depicting a misty runway as an ersatz painterly gesture.

The connection between the digital image and abstract painting was a surprising and constant refrain in this show; images passed through or evoked the digital, but nearly every piece ultimately came back to reference its painterly support. In Charles Mayton's *for the painter of unknown languages*, 2012, three precise white shapes—two keyholes and a bow-tie-like polygon—call attention to the white gessoed canvas beneath the riotous surface of synthetic hues laid down in oil and gouache. Though the precise shapes evoke computer-aided design (indeed, the dominant “bow tie” reads as a perspectival rendering of a white cube gallery), they were, in fact, achieved by hand. Two 2012 paintings by Jesse Willenbring, *Living Room* and *Travel Poster*, the latter an example of direct-jet printing on primed plywood, were hung on walls covered in a pattern of lightbulb icons that, while hand-drawn in oil pastel, mimicked off-register printing.

Meanwhile, the photomontage ink-jet prints of Asha Schechter, *Picture 31* and *Picture 45*, both 2012, did not engage painting techniques but were still in conversation with that preeminent category of art through their titles and stretcherlike wooden frames. In these compositions, graphic icons and newspaper photos severed from their original context float against a hyperenlarged found image, rendered abstract by its exaggerated scale. As the size of the piece challenged the capabilities of digital production, the background was textured by gradient banding. In effect, Schechter conflated the horizontal plane of the analog editing table with that of the desktop computer's vertical screen. Ultimately, the connections made between abstract painting and representational imagery have pointed to the central critique posited by this new image work: Figurative images unmoored by digital technologies have, paradoxically, led to an altogether new register of abstraction.