The Space Between That Information and Me: A Conversation With Kyle Thurman

by Zak Kitnick
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In 2010 I met Kyle at West Street Gallery in New York. It was an apartment gallery run by Alex Gartenfeld, who is now chief curator at the ICA Miami, and Matt Moravec, who now owns Off Vendome. At the time, they had the artists involved with the program photograph the documentation for each others’ shows. Kyle photographed my show there, and we have been in and out of touch since then. Currently we are in touch—and friends—and collaborated last month on an exhibition at Parapet Real Humans in St. Louis that is open through January 25. Thurman’s recent exhibition at Off Vendome, “A Lonely Butcher,” consisted of more framed pastel drawings on seamless paper than anything else. The images for these drawings come from news articles. There were also two paintings drawn with yarn and two sculptural works. One glass sculpture is derived from an antique picture frame and a stage-like platform takes from the existing interior architecture of the space. Despite this recycling, it seemed to me like a heartfelt exhibition.

ZAK: I wrote a few sentences about your show for a kind of short-form review on this same website recently, but now that the dust has settled a bit, I wanted to elaborate. I was drawn into the open spaces you created, within the sculptures, within the outlines of the figures, and also in the staggered hanging of the works. I guess the most obvious place to start would be a picture frame without pictures. As a kind of image holder without images, the frame seemed like it could hold two smartphones. It looked like it could be the logo of a dating app.

KYLE: I like your reading of the heart sculpture as a reference to online dating apps. As the press release suggests, much of the work in the show was made out of an interest or concern with the distancing we are experiencing by digesting information without any immediate physical encounter. We experience the public more and more privately. The original frame that was 3-D scanned, digitally enlarged, 3-D printed, and finally cast in glass was made

Installation view of “Kyle Thurman: A Lonely Butcher” at Off Vendome in New York in 2016 with matches, 2016, on view. COURTESY OFF VENDOME
by a migrant worker in the early 1900s. Presumably the two places for photographs within the heart form were meant to hold individual photos of a couple. I don’t know any of the people in the drawings that make up the bulk of show—I wasn’t physically present for any of the events that the drawings depict. They are all drawn from news images I see. I’m curious about the feelings we are capable of developing through images or textual information about someone or some event we only know digitally. There’s clearly a lot of space between that information and me. One friend commented that the cobalt blue color of my glass sculpture reminded them of the blue that highlights outgoing text messages on our iPhones.

Z: Yes, the space between you and the content. I often think about the incredible distance between producer and consumer, in this case content producers and content consumers. Here you are consuming, digesting, and reproducing. The processes involved in making the frame kind of speak to that. If you were a company, that number of steps would result in a thousand pieces. But here there was one.
There were a lot of translations or transformations involved with making the glass frame. I had become interested in Tramp Art—a sub-genre of American folk art—and was lucky to talk with a few historians in that field. I was curious why so many Tramp Art pieces are picture frames. I was able to get the original heart frame in my studio and rather than simply re-present it, I wanted to translate it through a series of more modern technologies—ultimately to return to another craft form, glass casting. I guess there was a lot of research and development, as you say, but if I were a company producing thousands I think I would then be making souvenirs of a specific era of production, or replicas of some thing. That’s not something I’d be interested in doing. I wanted to put the original through a series of transformations that would make something new to possibly raise questions that relate to an experience today.

But with the drawings, it did become a serial project. So you made one a day? I guess the project can continue as long as there’s news. It feels like almost an update on, or a reversal of, an On Kawara work. You’re giving the headline image without the date. But you’ve worked serially before, so was this something that made sense for you?

The drawings have become a daily project. I’m not sure I would call that serial. The individual drawings make up the body of an ongoing project. I have worked on other projects that I would more comfortably define as serial.

I think subtleties become prominent in serial projects and having daily routine activities in the studio is good for me. Most of my time in the studio is spent reading or watching movies or making sketches for projects. I’m curious about the results of repetition. In this case repetition would be to isolate one news image per day and to start one drawing from that image, the figures always being scaled to approximate a realistic relationship with a viewer’s body. On Kawara’s Today paintings are certainly something I have thought about in relation to these new drawings. I guess in my drawings, as you mention, most of the context of the original image is being removed—date, caption, etc. Backgrounds are not articulated—it’s just the figure or figures. They are drawn on seamless photo paper, which reinforces the isolation of the figure. The situations and sense of time become ambiguous, which allows different narratives to emerge. In some drawings there are signifiers that can help locate the viewer—earbuds, watches, tattoos...

So the news is always figurative? It’s the human side of the news? It’s not buildings or objects. It’s the human interest story.

I don’t know what figurative news would be. No news is truly representative and most art is inherently derivative. I just Googled “figurative news” and the second result—after a Huffington Post filtered search on figurative art—was...
an article headlined “Jackson Pollock Explores His Figurative Side.” In the last few weeks a phrase came to mind that I thought could be a good title for an exhibition—Tell Me a True Story. A few search results down from the Pollock story was an article headlined “Stanford Psychology Research Probes Figurative Language.” It talks about how we often use metaphor or hyperbole to relay meaning—and that often this is more effective than attempting to employ literal language. I think a lot about storytelling. This certainly has to do with my background in studying film and screenwriting—my shows are often compromised of various seemingly disjointed elements.

Z: I didn’t know about this film background. Makes me think of all the works as “negatives” even more, from blank spaces to film negatives or inverts. But what do you mean, what about film and screenwriting makes the shows seem disjointed?

K: “Negatives” as in something to then be exposed to produce another thing. Screenwriting is a very structured medium. It involves many different activities—developing characters, staging, and dialogue. I imagine the individual works in my shows as components contributing to a potential narrative.

Z: I think the stage in the show plays a big part in producing a sense of narrative—it’s such a specific shape.

K: It appears very specific, but maybe it isn’t that specific. Its context has just been shifted—giving it more personality. I’m watching Transformers right now :). It was an addition built to the stairwell of the building—extending the existing stairwell into the gallery space. I removed it from its intended position and placed it more or less in the center of the exhibition.

Z: It’s a footprint or a placeholder. It’s not the floor plan of the gallery, is it? Carpeted in black carpet, it’s very present but feels like a void. The architecture of the gallery lends itself well to the show. As you ascend the stairs you’re kind of greeted by the heart. It seems to say, You are here. The space feels both residential and commercial, and the work mirrors this in slightly different terms, both private and public. There are windows and nooks. Then the heart again on the way out, as if to say, Thanks for coming.
K: The carpet of the platform just follows the logic of the existing carpet in the stairwell since it was initially an addition, creating another physical displacement within the show. I don’t think of it as a void—it’s more of a construction or disruption, or a site suggesting potential action. I wanted to bring viewers’ attention to their own bodies and their relationship with the works through the installation. The platform is kind of in the way but it could also be something to step on or sit on. The drawings are hung to approximate the locations of the figures that are being depicted in real space. Some drawings are very close to the floor, some high, some in an awkward middle point. The gallery is a strange place—it feels like a residential space converted to serve a business or something public.

Z: I noticed that the giant pink Off Vendome flag that hangs on the exterior of the building is a similar color to the pink of seamless photographic paper you used. Standing on the right side of the gallery you can see the flag outside and the work inside at the same time. But beyond the richness of the color, I was thinking that the use of this special type of paper used in photographic production was important. You had mentioned a sort of saturation of images—the insane amount of images we see or scroll through each day—and how you thought of these images as an intentional slowing of that consumption, at least for you to spend more time with them, and how the work also engaged a lot of the materials of advertising, prop styling, and commercial image production. These types of papers are used to isolate objects, to create a background for the commodity in the foreground, but in your work, with outline and line, the background color is very much part of the image.

K: Matt and I didn’t realize the similarity between that color of seamless paper and the Off Vendome pink until installing. In the last year I have been traveling a lot and working in many different places. At one point I came across rolls of seamless paper at a photo store, all different colors—I left them in the places I was spending time so that I could always have materials to at least draw. I began my art practice through photography and drawing. In high school I would copy comic books. In college spent a lot of time studying photography and thinking about the implications of both portraiture and still-life photography—both modes of photography typically which typically isolate and employ a figure or object. By allowing the figure and ground to occupy the same space, or field of color, I simply hoped to exaggerate this.

Z: Seamless paper also makes me think of scale. The rolls are quite wide and the length is seemingly endless. There is a sort of infinity to the seamless backdrop. It lends itself to enlargement. Things can also get lost there. But in all your pictures, the figure almost goes edge to edge, off the page, sometimes appearing as a partial image, as if it had been edited, cutting the composition for maximum concentration or saturation. I kind of like to imagine that these were part of larger images and you just cut out the good parts.

K: I think a lot about the relationship to the edge with painting and drawing, the limits of medium. This is definitely informed from a formal education in photography and filmmaking—the frame. With these drawings, the references are always digital images, often submitted by amateur photojournalists to whatever source. The way the drawings are cropped and framed has a clear relationship to a photographic image. The seamless background suggests a continuation of a space outside the specificity of the drawing and the nature of this paper allows for making large drawings. It’s important to break this idealistic infinite space that the seamless paper may promote.

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