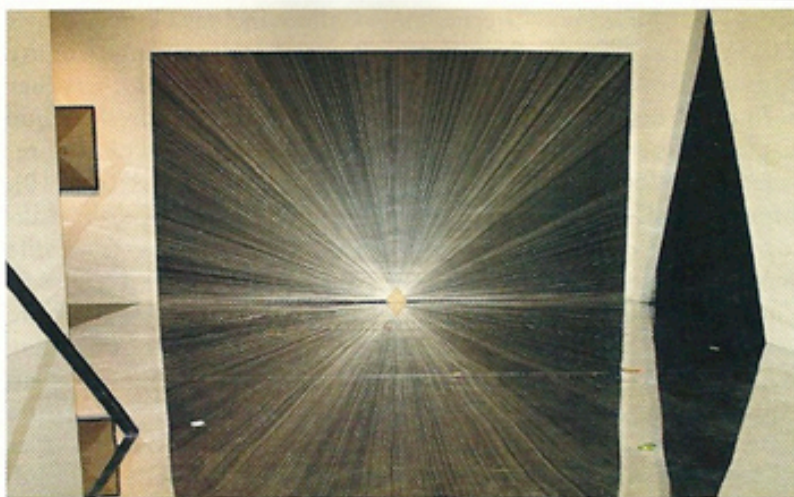


ARTFORUM

Chris Duncan

BAER RIDGWAY EXHIBITIONS

Chris Duncan's latest exhibition, "Eye Against I," opened with a makeshift, poster-covered wall, like one you might have seen at some grimy punk venue back in the '90s. The gesture underscored the show's title, a nod to the Washington, DC, hardcore band Bad Brains, and in particular to their anthem "I Against I." The reference may be an oblique one for some, but it lends important context to this Oakland, California-based artist's efforts. Throughout this show, and indeed his practice, Duncan mined questions of optics, partaking freely of



techniques echoing the transcendental abstraction of Emma Kunz, the color theory of Josef Albers, and the dynamic patterning of Bridget Riley. But eschewing the slickness of these canonical precursors, his materialist aesthetic is decidedly rough-hewn, intended to prevent the viewer from slipping into some hypnagogic mode of perception.

The flanked entranceway led out onto an expansive room surfaced with a Plexiglas-mirrored floor, anchored on one end by a dazzling radial string installation and on the other by a large-scale kaleidoscopic painting, the chaos of swirling and refracted patterns delivering a jolt not unlike the screech of feedback during sound check, cuing

everyone within earshot to attention. Across this stage, Duncan had deployed several techniques familiar to geometric abstraction—trompe l'oeil, dynamic repetition of simple forms, seemingly kinetic combinations of subtly nuanced color—teasing the eye with the promise of altered states and new visual regimes (with sustained looking, the large-scale panel work *Untitled [The Painting]*, 2010, appeared to rotate like a giant art school color wheel). If the visual intensities offered never quite reached a state of assault, it was because total destruction was not entirely necessary. Ultimately, these optical pyrotechnics gave way to a subtler meditation on process and material that proved to be one of the show's key attributes. This meditative turn was evident in the decidedly less spectacular objects strewn throughout the space, including a series of handheld, roughly made mirrored masks and some "rocks" fashioned from scraps of the artist's old palettes, which were themselves recycled remnants of Duncan's more heroically scaled efforts. Moments such as these called attention to the various armatures that underpin Duncan's brand of abstraction, and encouraged a healthy skepticism toward the utopian powers frequently ascribed to geometric psychedelia.

In this, Duncan inadvertently offers a contrast to other contemporary forays into optics, in particular the RISD-rooted neo-psychedelia of the mid-aughts associated with New York's former Deitch Projects, and the Chinatown/Tiny Creatures scene in Los Angeles. Through a decidedly DIY treatment of refined geometric abstraction the show paid respect to a punk ethos while framing its aesthetic as art-world fetish. This was perhaps most literally enacted in the reoccurring motif of seams and seaming (and yes, poseur "seeming"), for instance the photographs of lens flares that had been sewn together in side-by-side pairs to resemble sets of eyes. Repeated at various scales, the motif seemed to be outright mocking the idea of transcendental vision, demanding instead an engagement with direct looking. Significantly, the exhibition also functioned as an actual stage for which Duncan programmed a series of events and performances to take place throughout his run. From poetry readings by Bay Area-based writers and artists, including Colter Jacobsen, to musical performances by bands such as Shock and Orbless, the literal traces of these gatherings remained imprinted on

the exhibition floor: By the time the show closed, the installation was far from pristine, attesting to a spirit of collaboration that rendered the gallery space porous and the artist's vision razor sharp.

—Franklin Melendez