

Spatio-Temporal Flux

Seven painters mix it up in Surface Strata

By DeWitt Cheng
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The Renaissance discovery of perspective led to convincing Cartesian illusions of virtual space: realistically rendered figures became newly tangible, located just behind the picture plane. Four centuries later, that illusionistic wonderland having degenerated into what Maurice Denis called a "naturalist lie," modernist artists increasingly came to see paintings as "flat surface[s] covered with colors in a certain order," and the old war-horses and young nudes were gradually supplanted by geometry and painterly gesture. In the paradoxically entitled *Surface Strata*, Michael Cutlip, **Joshua Dildine**, Jay Merryweather, Alison Rash, Kevin Scianni, Chris Trueman (also the curator), and Eric Ward explore pictorial spaces of various depths, eschewing the old dogmatic distinctions. In our media-bombarded culture-mash mentality, Scianni writes, "Actuality/virtuality, surface/depth, physicality/immateriality, representation/abstraction all become entangled." Flatness and space again mingle freely.

Dildine, Rash, Scianni, and Trueman explore mark-making as a space-creation. Dildine's graphite/oil-pastel hatchings and smudges in "Congested" and "Stockpile Memory" suggest neural networks, while his clusters of impasto in "Space and Void" suggest magnetization and crystallization — and the brambled planets of abstract expressionist Adolph Gottlieb. Rash drips medium-bodied paint at an angle to her panels in "Sideline" and "Floe," and then scrapes or sands the elliptical blobs down, creating gorgeous, lyrical surfaces; in "Scotch and Water" she improvises a brushy, scumbled background and then superimposes black and white honeycomb patterns. Trueman also geometrizes painterly chaos in "The Collider" and "Volley," creating an abstract baroque space, an ambiguous hall of mirrors that keeps the eye continually in motion, interpreting. Scianni favors a frontal classical style employing video and computer game motifs; his planar abstractions combine freely brushed shapes beneath arrays of pixels at various magnifications, suggesting nature seen through a heads-up windshield/cockpit display.

Cutlip, Merryweather, and Ward create psychological rather than optical space. Cutlip adds collage to his abstractions, and his black-and-white palette reads as calligraphy or notation rather than landscape; in the grid of animal-themed collages, "Endless Journey," the artist is a subjective, vicarious naturalist. Merryweather's theatrically costumed subjects in "Common Thomas, the Veteran Cosmic Rocker" and "The Walrus" read as portraits, but the metallic surfaces and inscribed drawing contours emphasize their nature as artifices and artifacts. Ward's mixed-media "Portrait" takes the opposite strategy, replacing its human subject matter with an extruded mask of charred wood that slumps from the ornate frame; in "Fusion" the slagheap crawls down the edges of a vibrantly colored abstraction, engulfing it. Also showing: Gabe Sheen's photos of street musicians. *Surface Strata* runs through October 31 at Joyce Gordon Gallery (406 14th St., Oakland). JoyceGordonGallery.com or 510-465-8928.

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