

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

January 19, 2013

Scraps and Squares: Cordy Ryman's Subversive Formalism

-Thomas Micchelli

What's the difference between the lackadaisical and the slapdash? Apparently, a great deal.

Although he is employing the same strategies and materials that he used in his 2010 solo exhibition at DCKT Contemporary on the Lower East Side, I found the just-opened Cordy Ryman: Shuffle / Scrap / Echo at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey to be a far more convincing excursion.

In the show two years ago, Ryman's ambition was evident in the enormous wooden relief, "Scrap Wall" (2009-2010, 113 x 108 x 10 inches), that he constructed in front of the gallery window. But the exhibition was undermined by a crowded installation and what felt like a lackadaisical, even apathetic approach to materials.

Disparate elements like foil-backed jute insulation and Styrofoam were stuck onto rough-hewn panels and embellished with coats of paint without achieving coherence, physically or conceptually. Despite the often sharp collisions of recycled materials and discordant colors, no sparks flew. The show at the Visual Arts Center, a large, light-filled space in Summit, New Jersey, avoids some of the more offbeat forms, like the pyramidal corner pieces and the open framework painted reliefs. Everything is kinda sorta rectilinear, which adds at least a semblance of consistency among the works. This measure of conventional formatting enhances, rather than homogenizes, the disparity of the pictorial elements while preventing their idiosyncrasies from becoming distractions.

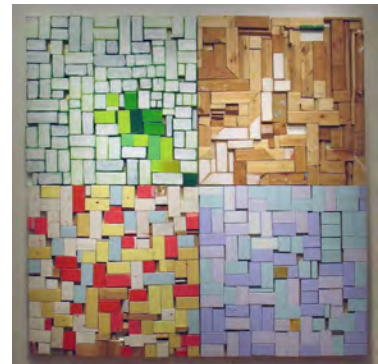
Although there are pieces dated as early as 2008 in this show, and there is even one — "Dudley!" (2010) — from the DCKT exhibition, everything feels much more developed, the ideas more fully played out. There is, for instance, a large relief titled "Wave Echo Scrap Ghost" (2012), which is reminiscent of "Scrap Wall," but where the earlier piece was composed of ragtag blocks jammed hither and thither — mostly bare wood with some colored and others flecked with white — "Wave Echo Scrap Ghost" is a square divided evenly into four quadrants, each with its own schema.

The quadrants — clockwise from top left: mostly whited-out shades of green; bare with swatches of white; pastel shades of violet and green; and pastel shades of red, yellow and blue, interspersed with unpainted wood — stabilize the piece while reinforcing the weight as well as the herky-jerky energy of each section. Paradoxically, Ryman's slacker aesthetic improves the more formal and rigorous it gets, without straightjacketing his distinctively improvisational, at times slapdash execution.

All of the works in this well-curated show (by Mary Birmingham) share the tight focus evident in "Wave Echo Scrap Ghost." Another telling example is "Chop and Spin" from 2010, in which four wooden near-squares are abutted together, each painted in acrylic and enamel with boldly interlocking abstract shapes. In the earlier exhibition, the colors and shapes in a piece like "Gorilla Lips" or "Peppermint Ice Cream," done the same year as "Chop and Spin," seem to float independently of each other, as if they had drifted onto the picture plane while belonging somewhere else, saddling the composition with an indecisive cast.

The formalism coming to the fore in Shuffle / Scrap / Echo underscores the thing-ness of the objects used in the service of Ryman's art. A work like "Red Mini" (2008) offers itself as nothing other than a red-painted chunk of wood, despite its sly evocation of a red Mini Cooper. In a similar way, the provocatively split panel of "Blue Cracker" (2011) seems content simply to serve as the support for blue, yellow, violet, umber and silver paint as it tilts upward from the wall, catching the overhead light in its flecks of reflective pigment. The crack down its center is presented as nothing other than a natural attribute of the wood.

In this regard, Ryman is following Jasper Johns's much-quoted advice ("Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it."), but he is doing so with hacked-up pieces of two-by-fours.



Cordy Ryman, "Wave Echo Scrap Ghost" (2012). Mixed media on wood.

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Since wood is an age-old painting support, Ryman's project can be viewed as returning John's brand of Neo-Dada to the realm of painting. His recycling is not only an aesthetic reuse of discarded materials, but also a form of cycling back, from Johns's layered ironies to a positivistic assertion that a painting is fundamentally a pigmented object in space.

And yet it would be a mistake to assume that Ryman's declaration of the real is restricted to the retinal; while his work can be witty and even, I daresay, charming, it can also be harsh, disarming and ragged, an intellectual puzzle with no answer key.

This distinction is played out in the largest work in the show, "Windowboxing: (2010/2013), a site-specific relief sculpture composed of open frames made from roughly cut boards painted white on the outer lip and fluorescent pink, purple or Prussian blue on the inside. The frames hang on the wall from white pegs, resembling a precarious pyramid of stacked boxes.

To my eye, "Windowboxing" operates entirely on the visual plane — it is eye-filling and fun to look at, but its spectacle is light and fleeting, while works like "Wave Echo Scrap Ghost" or "Chop and Spin" exert a magnetism that only a substantial conceptual foundation can summon.

Ryman is a rigorous formalist whose work gathers energy through its subversion of the rigors of formalism. His pieces seem to scramble and reassemble before our eyes, an aesthetic shell game focused not on deceiving the customer but on the beauty of its ever-shifting, ever-elusory movements.

Cordy Ryman: Shuffle / Scrap / Echo continues at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey (68 Elm Street, Summit, New Jersey) through March 24.



Cordy Ryman, "Chop and Spin"
(2010). Acrylic and enamel on wood.