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Material Color

A peek at the hue and substance of Material Color at the Hunterdon Art Museum
October 28th, 2005

The Hunterdon Art Museum is located in a 19th Century stone building that began life as a grist mill. MoMa it's not—but then MoMA doesn't have a river and waterfall outside its front door, either. About an hour west of Manhattan in Clinton, New Jersey, this solid, four-story building provides an unlikely but lovely environment for contemporary art, specifically *Material Color*, the subject of this post. The thick walls and shuttered windows remind you of its former life, as do the wooden floors, massive beams and solid staircases. Looking up you see the remains of what was once a chute that sent materials from one floor to another. Looking out, you see the Raritan river.



Carlos Estrada-Vega, *Marcus*

In this bucolic setting, the museum's chief curator, Mary Birmingham, has assembled and installed a sophisticated international show.

"I had been thinking about the Material Color idea since Miami last December," says Birmingham. After being introduced there to the work of Robert Sagerman—"at no fewer than four places in Miami," she notes—her antennae tuned into the color frequency.

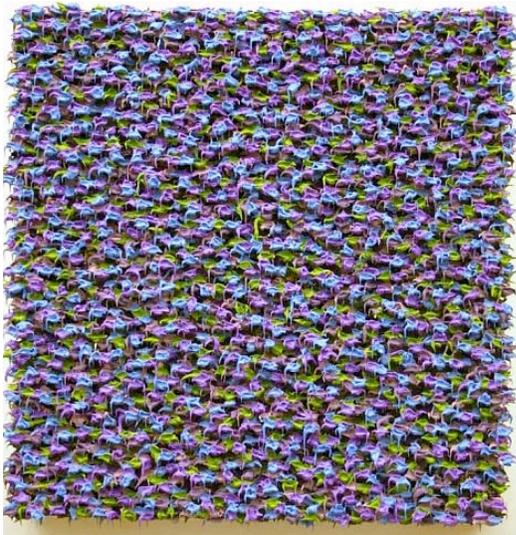
"I started to become more aware of other artwork that shared this material/surface quality, and by the end of my stay in Miami, I had seen enough to tease my thinking about a possible future exhibition," she says, adding that the works she responded to "had a very visceral feeling about them."

In subsequent trips to the Chelsea galleries, with references from artist friends, as well as visits to the various art fairs in town (and, artists take note: some Internet searches), the concept expanded to include material and process, and the roster was formed.

"I was especially interested in seeing how different artists found different ways to handle paint and color," Birmingham says. "While it is not the entire story, the idea of paint as a substantial material is central in all of these works."

There are 20 artists in the show, all of whom work with mostly saturated color in a tangible, physical way. Nobody in this show just “paints.” As you can see, pigment is poured, pulled, rolled, slumped, sliced, dripped, swiped, squirted, pieced and scraped. Dan Bischoff, who reviewed the show for *The Newark Star Ledger*, calls it “corporeal color.”

Many of the paintings are sufficiently built up to qualify as reliefs. This is certainly true of Robert Sagerman’s painting, *15,356*, a shimmering green rectangular field comprised of thousands of dense brush strokes, well exactly 15, 356 dense brush strokes, pulled up into individual peaks. It’s true of Leslie Wayne, who—I’m not sure how she does this—seems to assemble layers of still-plastic paint and then scrapes and pushes them into an over-the-top topography of lushness, like the elongated *Mondo Mondo*. It’s true of **Carlos Estrada Vega**, whose roughly four-foot-square grid of waxy color, *Marcus*, consists of hundreds of individually painted tiny canvases adhered by means of magnets to a metal plate. It’s true of Peter Fox, whose canvas, *Royaume*, the largest in the exhibition, consists of multicolor drips that form an undulating, almost hypnotic field.



Robert Sagerman, *5,886*, 2007, Oil on Canvas

into the third dimension of his gridded paintings. Then there’s **Cecilia Biagini**’s *Emanates From a Center Point*, a sinuous assemblage of painted wooden shims hanging on the wall. Is it flat sculpture or a dimensional painting? No matter, it’s formally rewarding and visually luscious, a satisfying paradigm of the exhibition theme.

Birmingham’s statement ends this way: “Each of the artists in *Material Color* engages in a conversation with paint. Using different processes, each creates a unique visual language with a diverse vocabulary of marks, always giving color an active voice. The hope in assembling this wide range of individual works is to provide the opportunity for a larger and more meaningful conversation.”

Formally, the issue for all of these works and many of the others you will see, is a single element repeated again and again to form a whole—a maximal result from minimal means. The grid is an obvious organizational motif in some of the work, but the pattern of repetition and regularity, however different from artist to artist, provides the overarching structure of the show. Technically, each artist is in formidable control of his or her medium—a peak that holds its shape, a smoosh that doesn’t slump, a drip that remains eternally at the point where surface tension, about to give way, defies gravity. If you think that’s easy, you haven’t done it.

There are also sculptures, such as Gregg Hill’s installation of slumped forms, *Beliefs*. They look like vinyl but they’re painted steel—crushed helium canisters, in fact. Touche, Gregg, for your neat *trompe l’oeil*. **Estrada-Vegas**’s *Carlito* is a physical extension