

HYPERALLERGIC

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Art Weekend

Garth Weiser Explores the Limits of Technical Wizardry

Moving beyond the confines of abstract signs, Weiser seems to be seeking social and philosophical meaning.



John Yau February 27, 2021



Garth Weiser, "Isolette" (2020), oil and digital media on canvas, 89 x 72 inches (courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photography: Karen Pearson and Jason Wyche)

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In an essay included in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Garth Weiser: Paintings, 2008-2017*, organized by the Contemporary Austin and curated by Louis Grachos, Weiser (quoted by Charles Wylie) says of his paintings: “The surface and the bottom really fight with each other.”

That dynamic, which is less apparent in the exhibition *Garth Weiser*, at Casey Kaplan (January 28–March 6, 2021), is what I want to examine.

In earlier works, Weiser superimposed one kind of abstraction (geometric) on another (gestural), binding together image, form, and texture in ways that were riveting, if not also visually astringent.

Weiser’s postmodern abstractions shared something with Jack Whitten’s “Energy Fields,” David Reed’s luscious layered abstractions, and Gerhard Richter’s blurred photo paintings, but Weiser staked out his own area of exploration. However, there is a difference between the perceptual disruptions found in the work of these three major artists and Weiser’s overlays, which becomes more explicit in his recent art.

Weiser’s work does not yet have the breadth or depth of inquiry that Whitten, Reed, and Richter — exploring different bodies of work — have attained. A deepening investigation is what he seems to be pursuing in his current exhibition.



Installation view, *Garth Weiser* at Casey Kaplan, New York (courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photography: Jason Wyche)

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Weiser incorporated digital media in these paintings, a process he has not previously used. Over a *mélange* of diverse images printed onto the canvas — appropriated from science fiction, art history, and popular culture — he superimposed a topographical pattern of paint.

The recurring images in the exhibition's nine paintings include eyes; segmented metallic or multicolored tentacles; extraterrestrial hands with long, pointed fingers; the dates 2020 and/or 2021; the red-capped, white-spotted hallucinogenic mushroom *amanita muscaria*, which is often seen on Christmas cards and associated with shamanism; red valentine hearts; the word "Gilead"; an extraterrestrial creature possessing humanoid features; containers with logos on them; and less legible things.

By including the dates, which will be remembered as the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, Weiser seems to be reaching for a topical relevance that I don't think the cringy sci-fi imagery quite supports. The extraterrestrial images, along with the gargoyle, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and valentine hearts are empty signs. Trying to connect them to the pandemic seems to me a fool's errand.

At the same time, the fact that Weiser is seeking to expand his possibilities, as well as create something that is neither purely optical nor abstract, is to be commended. I wonder if the recent change has to do with the times. Why else would Weiser feel the need to include the date in many of the paintings, essentially making them diaristic records?

In his earlier work, Weiser fixed a tactile, striated *moiré* pattern over his version of gestural abstraction. He was able to hold the viewer's attention because neither mode of abstraction completely dominated the other. That balance could be his commentary on the stylistic options available to artists of his generation (he was born in 1979). Op Art, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Color Field painting, Pattern and Decoration, and process art — all were at his disposal as a readymade collection.

Hearts, segmented tentacles, and hallucinogenic mushrooms are also readymade symbols, but they come with a different history; superimposing a

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series of ridged lines over them is not enough to establish a dynamic relationship between what Weiser has called “the surface and the bottom.” They neither fight nor dance with each other, at least not at the intense pitch of his best earlier works. I felt as if I were looking at the combination of detailed images and abstract marks through a scrim, and that the entanglement did not add anything.

One of the exceptions was “reality farm” (2020). At close range, the painting’s topographical surface — composed of rows of raised black bumps, many of which are topped by bits of silver paint — appeared radically different from the mélange of incommensurable images dispersed across the canvas.



Garth Weiser, “reality farm” (2020), oil and digital media on canvas, 89 x 72 inches (courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photography: Karen Pearson and Jason Wyche)

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Looking at this painting was like experiencing a pleasant form of whiplash, where the tactile and visual both join and separate in extreme ways. There was no ideal place from which to view it. Either the tactile or the visual dominated, which is antithetical to most two-dimensional works.

The topographical surface of “2021” (2021), the largest painting in the exhibition, is uneven; in places, an unseen force seems to tear it apart. As with “reality farm,” the conflict between printed image and topographical surface seemed more engaging, but this felt less true of other paintings.

By going beyond the confines of the abstract signs found in his earlier work, it seems that Weiser wants to invest his paintings with social and philosophical meaning. The extraterrestrials, oversized fingerprints, and dates bring up instability, the body’s unique identity, and time — which can be seen as the artist’s recognition of our vulnerability as living beings. By overlaying printed images of eyes with a tactile surface, Weiser calls further attention to the split between eye and body.

Inspired by Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern theories about simulacra and signs, there are those who believe the digital realm has become our primary mode of experience, and that we have become disembodied entities existing in an algorithmic domain. We are eyes without bodies.

The uneven surfaces of Weiser’s recent paintings remind us that images, now matter how seductive or threatening, are not physical entities. Whether or not we are on our computers, a deadly pandemic reminds us that we do have bodies, and, at least for the past year, we have had to “socially distance” our bodies from others. Weiser’s floating extraterrestrial hands don’t evoke that state of necessary isolation.

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As of today, February 27, 2021, more than half a million Americans have officially died from COVID-19.

I don't think that artists have to take on the pandemic as a subject. But once artists add the dates "2020" and "2021" into their work they have moved beyond the sanctioned fine art territory of "art-about-art" and postmodern notions of simulacra, and entered the messier realm of mortality and death — subjects some artists choose to face and others don't.

It will be interesting to see what Weiser does next.

Garth Weiser continues at Casey Kaplan (121 West 27th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 6.