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Lehrer-Graiwer, Sarah, "Scott Olson," *Artforum*, September 2008

past the artist based his sets on real-life settings in which improbable, dreamlike occurrences take place—a cascade of snow forms a mound on the living-room floor, for instance, as a nude woman in a wing chair swings her foot. These new images, however, show no other players; Nicosia now plays a solitary game. *Untitled #11*, 2007, finds him staring at the fruits of his labor—a giant human form made of splotches resulting from lobbing paintballs at the wall. The artist has backed off slightly and stands as if stunned and exhausted from trying to render, or destroy, his likeness.

Time is ineluctably at work here, in that the camera's speed and the repetitive, prolonged drawing processes exacerbate Nicosia's problem: trying to reconcile two very different media. For Nicosia, drawing provides a space for theater and gamesmanship, while photography is a record of the tension between the artist and his tools. This problem inflects the work with an interesting dialectic, as the artist shifts between performing and documenting. *Untitled #18*, 2007, is the only image sans Nicosia, who has exited the frame, leaving only a mess of props. The viewer almost misses him, a reaction that underscores the central role Nicosia plays in these works.

—*Ellen Berkovitch*

LOS ANGELES

Masami Teraoka

SAMUEL FREEMAN

"Where to begin?" was the first question prompted by this dense selection of paintings produced between 1997 and 2007 by the Japan-born, Hawaii-based Masami Teraoka—his first Los Angeles gallery presentation in twenty years. The next question was something along the lines of, "Do I even want to take this on?" given that Teraoka was essentially bombarding the viewer with variations on a prevailing theme: The world is heading to hell on a jet. Aircraft did in fact turn up, and were a clear reference to the September 11 attacks, in Teraoka's 2004 painting *Semana Santa/Cloisters Workout*; it quickly became apparent that in this exhibition, with its imagery of computers, cell phones, fitness clubs, burkas, Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, and pervert priests, Teraoka meant to speak of the "now." But as with the artist's past work, in which he used Japanese Edo-period imagery and aesthetics to frame East-West culture clashes and epidemics including AIDS and McDonald's, Teraoka here filtered a contemporary image stream through various past styles and approaches, this time with obvious nods to Renaissance artists including Duccio, Fra Angelico, Masaccio, and Botticelli; the proto-Surrealist Bosch; and the Weimar satirists George Grosz and Max Beckmann.

Masami Teraoka, *The Cloisters/Holy Sea Pregnancy Test*, 2006, oil on panel in frame with gold leaf, 119½ x 112½ x 2¾".

Done up in leather, lace, or velvet, the players in Teraoka's cabaret of the damned perform, in epic-scale panoramas and on multipanel altarpieces in gilt frames, acts of deviance, hypocrisy, cruelty, and brutality amid hordes of animals, rising flames, and gothic and Romanesque architecture. The figures routinely have a skin quality, impressively mastered by Teraoka, that suggests both the glow of life and the decay of death—an appearance akin to both the effect of solarization in photography and depictions of the undead by Bosch and Goya. The lighting and composition, meanwhile, are reminiscent of both Mannerist and Baroque painting and of theatrical staging: These scenes could have been choreographed by either Pontormo or Bob Fosse.

Interpreting artworks in terms of "correctness" can be a tricky prospect, leading as it can to didacticism and an embrace of mediocrity. But when an artist opens the door to issues of morality as widely as Teraoka does, one can't help but step inside. The more you examine Teraoka's complex compositions, the more you wish they were more complex pictures, especially with regard to the relationship between gender and power. Here, women are variously Venus, virgin, vixen, victim, mother, nun, temptress, whore, or disease carrier—roles that are often signified by their attributes: pregnant bellies, bald heads, heaving bosoms, leather or lace garments. Occasionally in Teraoka's depictions a woman throws on a uniform and accepts a low-paying job as an airport screener, or takes a break from modeling lingerie to try on a suicide bomber's belt. Meanwhile, the men, while sure to fare poorly in the hell of which these paintings are a preview, enjoy an array of appointments and professions—doctor, businessman, policeman, pontiff, politician, even president. Perhaps Teraoka is offering an accurate picture, or an astute satire, of the world as it is, but it also seems that in some way he has fallen prey to the same sort of thinking he might wish to parody and protest.

—*Christopher Miles*

Scott Olson

OVERDUIN AND KITE

Scott Olson paints small abstractions of irregular and fragmented geometries that give a somewhat unexpected initial impression of familiarity, age, and wear. The eleven oil paintings (on linen or MDF) that made up his Los Angeles debut employ distinctly traditional techniques from a century past and refer to the pictorial methods of early modernist abstraction; they repeatedly conjure, in their compositions and reduced size, the modest quietude of works by Paul Klee. They are heavy with an indefinite, though palpable, sense of history, as though they have been unearthed or rediscovered after a long period of neglect.

Scott Olson, *Untitled*, 2008, oil on linen, 20 x 15".

Each painting is about the size of a laptop, the largest measuring twenty by fifteen inches—downsized abstractions for our economic downturn. All of Olson's compositions appear cropped in some way, most with horizontal bands across the top or bottom or both. The primary visual activity in these works is separated from the edges by margins of raw or monochromatically painted canvas, as though Olson is depicting both a painting and part of the wall on which it hangs. A smaller composition, then, nests within each painting—a square inset framed by a vertical rectangle.

Imbued with an air of age and great warmth, Olson's palette is muted and muddied, dominated by understated grays, off-whites, burnt umbers, dark maroons, navies, browns, and ochers. On occasion, a brighter hue punctuates the works. The pictures' subdued luminosity is that of

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candlelight—they often look greasy, waxy, and smoke-stained. In anachronistically summoning a modernist aesthetic, Olson's works often evoke the ghost of industrialism's soot and oil. Thin washes on one canvas (all works *Untitled*, 2008) leave tiny pools of dirty brown grease, as though the surface has been touched by a mechanic's sopping sponge.

Generally consistent in palette and tone, the paintings' imagery varies from vaguely pictographic, linear forms of whimsical delicacy to striated patterning and busy collage-like arrangements of overlapping shapes. The former are executed in translucent glazes and washes, while the latter tend to be built up more substantially using heavily worked textures. All of them result from a considered, if unpredictable and idiosyncratic, precision that is based on the subtle and varied layering of pigment. The material accretion involves both additions and subtractions and many combinations of paint treatments: speckled, transparent, glossy, matte, scrubbed, peeled, grooved, scumbled. To view Olson's works is to assume an investigative project: Parsing the techniques and materials used to create them requires careful inspection. Underpainting remains visible to varying degrees, the depth underscoring the importance of process without fully conveying chronology. Each of Olson's surfaces presents a damaged archaeology of its own slow maturation.

The more the viewer homes in on a composition, the more differentiated it becomes. The act of viewing the works takes on a haptic aspect, concerned as the paintings are with establishing contact and affirming physical presence as a counter to the ubiquitous JPEG, which so commonly takes the place of the object it images and forms the basis by which so much art is now viewed and sold. Demanding proximity and patience, Olson draws us away from the clipped pace of remote, digital viewing and rewards prolonged personal encounters with insistently material histories.

—*Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer*

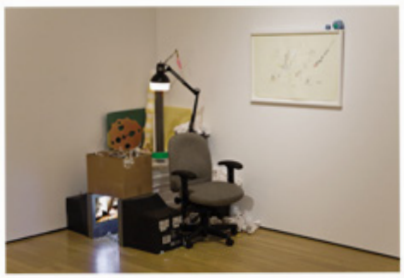
MONTREAL

Geoffrey Farmer

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

Geoffrey Farmer's video *The Fountain People*, 2008, consists of footage of a fountain located in front of an escalator, most likely in an upscale shopping center. While waiting for some narrative to commence, and perhaps for the titular characters to appear, one must make do with the banal sight of spouting water, the dull glow of lights underwater, and the sedating stream of Muzak. In the accompanying installation, the two typewritten pages affixed to the wall provide little interpretive guidance but allude to strange aquatic forces that covertly watch, surround, and transform in ways analogous to the workings of a pervasive culture industry; according to these texts, the more folks ingest and bathe in this replenishing source, the more powerful "they" (presumably the fountain people) become. Despite its deadpan reductiveness, the work summons a number of associations, perhaps the strongest being to Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* and its narrative of a communist conspiracy to fluoridate the bodily fluids of the American people.

A suitable introduction to a mid–career retrospective, organized nonchronologically and with wit by the museum's Pierre Landry, *The Fountain People* provides a glimpse of the homogeneous, packaged, and polished cultural landscape—extending from malls to museums—that the artist has interrogated in myriad ways over the past two decades. Widely in evidence in Montreal was Farmer's fondness for, and inventive use of, provocatively humble and ephemeral materials, as seen in *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*, 2002, a sprawling sculptural installation in which packing, cleaning, and office materials are intricately and whimsically arranged and that, although only one of many works shown here, encapsulates his concerns. In this installation, an enormous disc made up of rows of blank yellow Post-its is adhered to the wall, the artist implying that the sheer laborious accumulation of identical and worthless motifs may in itself constitute an artistic statement. Crumpled bits of paper placed atop and around a trash can could signify a repeated failure to achieve creative fruition—or could delineate the bare-minimum requirement of professional sculptural competency.



Geoffrey Farmer, *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*, 2002, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Placed alongside this material (or refuse) in a corner, as if in temporary storage, is a cardboard box containing, among other items, plant sculptures composed of foil; the container is set atop a monitor on the floor playing a video of the artist irreverently producing the aluminum flora with his feet—a display of agility to be sure, but also a challenge to the fetishization of art objects. Hanging on the opposite wall is a piece of weathered newspaper with two eyeholes cut in it, as if it were a crude masquerade or a performance prop. A nearby component of the installation demonstrates the tensile strength of such everyday items as packing tape and paper cups, which are strung or glued together as bolstering devices, tripods, and columns—all texturally and chromatically enriched by scattered bits of pink tissue paper.

Such experimentation with the durability of materials exemplifies the process-based nature of Farmer's work, which at its best shows that even throwaway objects like plastic bags and masking-tape rolls can carry expressive gravitas. Farmer questions how and why we assign aesthetic value, in a way that is both bitingly clever and heartfelt.

—*Dan Adler*

MEXICO CITY

Felipe Ehrenberg

MUSEO DE ARTE MODERNO

Encompassing fifty years of production, "Manchuria: Peripheral Vision" is the first formal retrospective of Felipe Ehrenberg. The artist's participation in Mexican art and culture during the late 1960s and '70s would prove critical in a country whose restrictions on artists and intellectuals, institutional inefficiency, disinterest, poor communication with the international art world, and political violence (especially the Tlatelolco massacre following large student demonstrations in October 1968 in Mexico City) led Ehrenberg to establish independence from any system or institution and move with his family to England in 1968.

Ehrenberg's six years there were crucial for the development of his conceptual strategies, as evinced in *Living in My Art Room: Considerations on the Habitable Space, Ideas for Ergonometric Actions*, 1973. Here one is reminded of Mel Bochner's approach to art as language and the ideas about quantification and space presented in his measurement pieces. Ehrenberg's typewritten *Mecanographic Symphony for Rhythm and Storm*, 1973, and handwritten *Art According to Me*, 1973, also exemplify his language-oriented works from the '70s. As he recently said, "Ninety percent of my production