

GRAHAM

Art in America

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View of Joe Fyfe's exhibition, showing (left) *Psar Thmei*, 2011, gauze and cotton, and (right) *Vendredi*, 2010, wood and cotton; at James Graham & Sons.



JOE FYFE JAMES GRAHAM & SONS

Joe Fyfe, a New York artist who wears multiple hats, including those of curator, writer, critic and globetrotter on a shoe-string, continued his canny exploration of present-tense abstraction in his recent exhibition of paintings, sculptures and photographs. While this show featured his trademark engagement with humble materials—burlap, felt, muslin, wood scraps and other detritus collected on his travels in Bangladesh, Cambodia,

Vietnam and elsewhere—it was much more expansive than his earlier ventures. Rawness was replaced by a more polished, less ruffled vision, one that was not as insistent on informality and the barely there, barely transformed, although enough of that remained for longtime Fyfe fans to get their fix.

Amping up the colors and providing more of them via large swatches of fabric—vivid crimsons and oxblood, blues, greens and yellows in geometric or push-pull modernist compositions (*Psar Thmei*, 2011; *Arrel*, 2010; *Khan Jahan*, 2010)—Fyfe appears to have become less suspicious of visual seduction, more willing to please while still using only what's available. Even when the color scheme is muted, as in the terrific *Boeng Kak* (2011) and the polka-dotted or portholed *Mofetta* (2010), the works are sensuous, the juxtaposition of fabrics and the composition of stripes, planes or circles striking. This is painting in the expanded field, that is, outside of "painting culture per se," as Fyfe once remarked to me, a displacement he strongly favors and something that younger artists who likewise make paintings without paint—Sergej Jensen, say, who creates provocative found-fabric works (recently on view at MoMA PS1)—also explore, although from different perspectives.

Retaining an as-is, improvisational air, Fyfe's sculptures consist of one or two weathered pieces of wood and sometimes a stripped branch, propped against the wall, with occasional strips of torn fabric wrapped around them like bandages or scarves. Looking terribly

vulnerable and sometimes talismanic, the objects are vibrant with sensation and an intense immediacy.

Fyfe's largish photographs of Southeast Asian villages and cities offer glimpses of a daily life that is part familiar, part exotic. We see a small group of houses on stilts in the Red River in Hanoi; the bustling, colorful Sisowath Quay in Phnom Penh; cattle draped in burlap. These pictures show the actual locales that Fyfe conjures in his abstractions, adding another layer to his carefully constructed evocation of place—a multidisciplinary combination of fact, fiction and memory.

Contrasting and overlaying the handmade with the manufactured and mass-produced, the art object with the throwaway, the immediate with the no longer so far away, Fyfe's show was a personal odyssey as well as a social/esthetic commentary on painting in the world, a kind of updated, peripatetic Constructivism. This is the most visually rich of Fyfe's projects that I've seen to date, though its takeaway is more or less the same—that to see, pay attention, make connections, remember and record deeply matter.

—Lilly Wei