

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Paul Sietsema and the Trompe L'Oeil Avant Garde



© Paul Sietsema, courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery

Paul Sietsema's "Untitled figure ground study (Degas/Obama)," 2011

By Daniel Kunitz

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Paul Sietsema

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Our lives are a jog through veils upon veils of illusion. Mega-screen billboards, altered news photos, political hallucinations played out on 3-D televisions, the kaleidoscopic profusion of camera-phone images: with reality become so virtual, it's no surprise that numerous artists are now pushing back by plying their own

deceptive surfaces. Encountering L.A. artist Paul Sietsema's bewitching show at Matthew Marks, for instance, the first question that comes to mind is: What am I looking at?

A framed sheet of what seems to be photographic paper, creased and perhaps exposed, yet imageless, is paired with a similarly framed and creased photograph of a yawl at sea. Later one finds an abstract work, a series of photograms, and, apparently, some messy silkscreens and a monochromatic abstraction. The work is disparate enough that one ponders what could possibly be uniting it all. And it's not until coming upon "Untitled figure ground study (facing German suffering)" (2011), that an answer suggests itself. That piece looks like a notebook, pen, a roll of tape, and the top of a paint can doused in gray pigment and affixed to a sheet of newspaper, framed and hanging on the wall. However, closer inspection proves the newspaper to be, in fact, an elaborate drawing, with each letter, design element, and photograph meticulously rendered in ink. Go back through the show and you realize that all the pieces are actually drawings of one sort or another, each masquerading as something else: a photograph, photogram, or collage.

Sietsema leads a growing wedge of trompe l'oeil artists that includes Tauba Auerbach, Mark Handleman, Kaz Oshiro, Heather Cook, and Matthew Metzger. Although trompe l'oeil asks our minds to stop and contemplate the hoaxes perpetrated by our eyes, Sietsema's versions here linger particularly among the niceties of representation. To create the composition for "Painter's Mussel," the artist opened a frame with a hammer and chisel and removed a photograph. The elements — frame, glass, photo, matte, hammer, chisel — of the composition were first painted in a resist medium. After spraying black ink on the sheet, he removes the medium to disclose an image that, at a glance, suggests a photogram. The boat too is an ink drawing posing as a photograph, while the ink in "Untitled (short cuts)" (2010), is made to suggest a print of spilled bottles of White Out liquid paper.

Indeed everything in the show is a suggestion. The 14 sheets on view are not only astonishingly accomplished teases, they also remind us how forcefully belief pulls us through the visual landscape of our days — the belief that what our eyes report is accurate and that it's there at all. That said, the seductive power of Sietsema's work is no mirage.

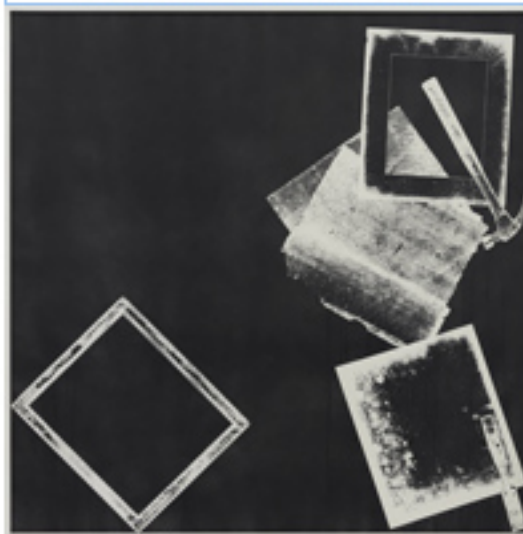
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© Paul Sietsema, courtesy Matthew Marks
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The artist's "Untitled (short cuts),"
2010

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Sietsema's "Painter's Mussel 4,"
2011