

Sometimes as we encounter a work of art it is enough to just look without wondering how the object was made; process and materials barely intrude into our awareness. But at other times it is absolutely impossible to look without thinking about how the work was made. That is certainly the case with each of the works on view in “Fold In.”

When we gaze at Marcelyn McNeil’s Ramp Painting No. 2, a large unprimed stretched canvas leaning against the wall at a substantial angle, our eyes retrace the gravity-induced flow of paint as it must have slowly descended to form the tongue-like peninsulas of vivid color that define the composition. This painting as well as the other work by McNeil in the show—a more sombre, but strongly sensual painting titled Condensed Version—mark a departure for the artist, who has gained attention for exuberant abstractions in which almost cartoony abstract shapes jostle against each other and push gleefully against the edges of the canvas. McNeil describes her new paintings as seeking a “more contemplative, meditative experience,” which they clearly achieve, while also sparking a lively dialogue with art history, from Matisse’s cut-out Blue Nude to Morris Louis’s abstract Veils.

In the work of Katy Heinlein the coalescence of what we see and how it was made is even more explicit. Using a distinct set of soft and hard materials (wood, aluminium and various kinds of fabric), Heinlein assembles casual-looking constructions that invite us, nay, require us, to examine their structure as the only way to adequately apprehend them. Wood frames, draped fabrics, sewn-together pieces of cloth, tautly stretched bands: these are sculptures that tell the story of their own making. But not everything is easy to see: they also tease us with hidden volumes, with covered struts, with a seductive play of apertures, transparency and concealment. Her work can also engage, without being site-specific, the contingencies of installation, as when On Again Off Again On Again is propped against a column in the middle of the gallery or Snake Eyes huddles in a corner of the space.

The simultaneity of object and making (or, more accurately, unmaking) reaches its apogee here Kristen Cochran’s “deconstructed” and “suspended” (the artist’s terms) workshirts. Cutting away everything except the seams of various types of clothes and uniforms associated with manual labour (fluorescent road-crew work shirts, blue work shirts, a white painter’s suit) Cochran hangs these slender seams on simple metal hooks to create delicate, symmetrical drawings in space. (Bilateral symmetry is a theme that recurs through the show, with the effect of subtly evoking the human figure via abstract forms.) The physical properties of each type of clothing affect the hanging structures, which possess a memorable totemic quality, even as they lead us to think about issues of class, labour and the diminishing role of the handmade in our society, themes that also inform Cochran’s cement-filled work gloves and photographs of unstitched pockets.

It was many decades ago that art historian Leo Steinberg observed how works of art were among the last handmade objects in our society. If that still remains true, it must be because we continue to have need of them, need to share the endlessly resourceful efforts of artists as they assemble and disassemble the world around themselves, and us.

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