

Known Unknowns: *Painting in Chicago*



Known Unknowns

The phrase “known unknowns” is most commonly attributed to former Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld, who used it during a 2002 Department of Defense news briefing. But the concept of “known unknowns”—things that we *know* we don’t know—originated in the field of psychology and has become a common expression at NASA, where Rumsfeld says he picked it up.

“Known unknowns” as a category offers a way to separate foreseeable outcomes from circumstances and results we cannot possibly anticipate; by contrast, “unknown unknowns” represent events and risks that are completely outside our prior theoretical knowledge. This distinction evokes the role of controlled independent variables in scientific research, where the experimenter is master of the environment and changes only one factor at a time in order to challenge a hypothesis. The rigorous experiment as a form of systematic activity differs from mere observational studies, where information about a situation is simply gathered wholesale for later analysis.

The eight artists in *Known Unknowns* have studio practices that fall under the former category of inquiry. While their work takes on different factors of painting, what links these artists is an intentional, methodical, and often deeply systematic approach to painting. Their work exhibits less reliance on happy accidents than a scientific mindset that examines the materiality of painting through multiple trials, highly structured. This is painting as a system that is always, if not closed, closely regulated by the artist, the X factor in each case being various sustained close engagements with painting’s materiality itself.

One way to engage with the physicality of painting is to explore its material surface via the process of erasure. Magalie Guérin and Sherwin Ovid experiment with the gesture of literal rubbing away and formal removal of material as an experimental factor to amplify and adjust.

Guérin’s paintings are often built up and around interlocked and overlapping shapes that through her physical reworking, which includes sanding down as well as building up paint, operate simultaneously as empty spaces and realized forms. *Untitled (hat-big nose)* recalls

pictographic ambiguity, in which a single illustration contains multiple shifting shapes. The painting is divided like a jigsaw puzzle into shapes that have been carefully textured, shaded, and silhouetted in order to remove any sense of relative depth in space, resulting in a powerful effect of disorientation that reinforces the painting as an unstable surface and obstructs any reading of one shape as the foregrounded subject.

Where Guérin's erasures unmoor the surface of the painting, Ovid's dissolve it. In his mixed media paintings, shapes rise from and collapse into voids, as in *Paint-Skin Wares and Porcelain*, in which incongruous shapes float against a dimensionless white as though floating up from a vat of opaque liquid. In *Grafted Blouse from an Alien Resident*, a glittery repeated pattern at the center of the painting disintegrates into blurry, amorphous clouds. The threat of total disappearance hangs heavily over this work.

If Guérin and Ovid's work can be read as testing the surface of painting by rubbing against it to the point of erasure, Steven Husby and Rebecca Shore test the structure of the line itself in space through repetition and radical reduction. Both Husby and Shore take replication as their dominant language, taking up the rhetoric of scientific experimentation, where replication is meant to prove consistent results, reduce variability and validate findings.

Husby's practice is itself an extended exercise in controlled repetition. Often working from a restricted palette of blues and whites, Husby persistently breaks apart geometric shapes into their constituent fragments and shades. In his three *Untitled Fragment* paintings, Husby experiments with the form of the curved line and the possible ways it can create intersections, junctions and meetings. Against indistinct, eroded backgrounds of unreadable text, the meandering loops in Husby's trademark black and blue grow increasingly sharp, as though triumphantly freed from the burden of signification.

In much of Shore's work, the silhouettes of recognizable shapes are repeated and linked to form chains and patterns, or placed side by side as silhouettes that draw attention to the paths and designs created in the spaces between them. Other work uses repeated lines in concentric geometric shapes, resulting in abstracted labyrinths for the eye. Shore's two paintings here bring both practices to bear. Her untitled diptych presents one painting as the negative of another, with simple circles and lines connecting the system together like an electrical circuit. This evocation of circuitry and closed systems extends to the other painting, where a network of repeated red lines evoke physical cords pulling taut against the outline of a shape-as-armature.

Leslie Baum and Anna Kunz shift material explorations of painting from the two-dimensional surface and its constituent lines and shapes into the possibility of the painting as a three-dimensional subject. Both present larger, un-stretched fabric works in *Known Unknowns* that take into consideration the latent sculptural and even architectural potential for painting.

For Baum, the painted canvas is the departure point and raw material for her processes of fragmentation and decontextualization. Here Baum's paintings take on the balanced construction of the equilateral triangle. In *Testimony of Weightlessness*, the dominant monochromatic triangle suggests an A-frame house in which to dwell, an unnaturally perfect shape against a busy background of exuberant trees and flowers. In *Shape of the Day*, Baum works with a similarly decorative background, but rather than superimposing the shape of human construction against it, reconstructs this pre-painted scene into this form: both painting and sculpture.

Anna Kunz's site specific fabric painting *Other and Another* at the front of the gallery takes this structural cutting and pasting even further. Her massive assemblages quilt together saturated fields of color, made of porous fabric that make the pieces glow in their translucency like stained glass and turn the gallery into an immersive environment. For Kunz, paintings take up the language of both installation and architecture through capturing the light of the gallery space and creating a new virtual space latent to the color field itself.

From these outer limits and new fields of possibility for painting, Craig Yu and Autumn Ramsey raise the question of the role of the image in a painting practice that is fundamentally driven by material.

Craig Yu's *The Town Centers II* anchors a familiar painterly trope—a human-organized landscape as seen from above—and translates it back into a formal problem of line, shape and surface. Yu's aerial grid of agricultural fields and towns is abstracted into geometric shape, so that the resulting image hovers as borderline-pictorial and lays bare our always-present instinct to read images into the fields and strokes of material painting.

The animals in Autumn Ramsey's paintings, the most figurative work in the show, rest disquietly, even agitatedly, within the canvas. In *Tiger*, the flattened titular character appears trapped within the flattened plane of the canvas, the curved strokes of its stripes and tail formally

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Magalie Guérin



Untitled (hat-big nose), 2015 oil on canvas, 20" x 16"
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Sherwin Ovid



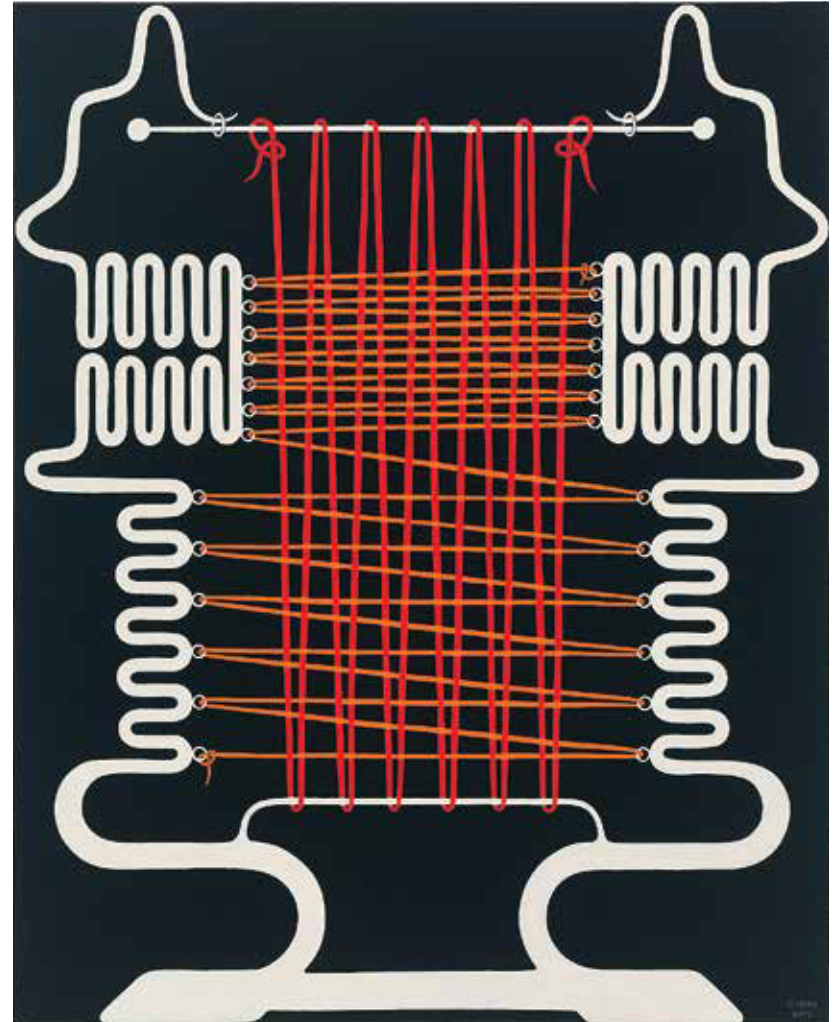
Grafted Blouse from an Alien Resident, 2015, latex, oil, leafing and ink on canvas, 22" x 19"

Steven Husby



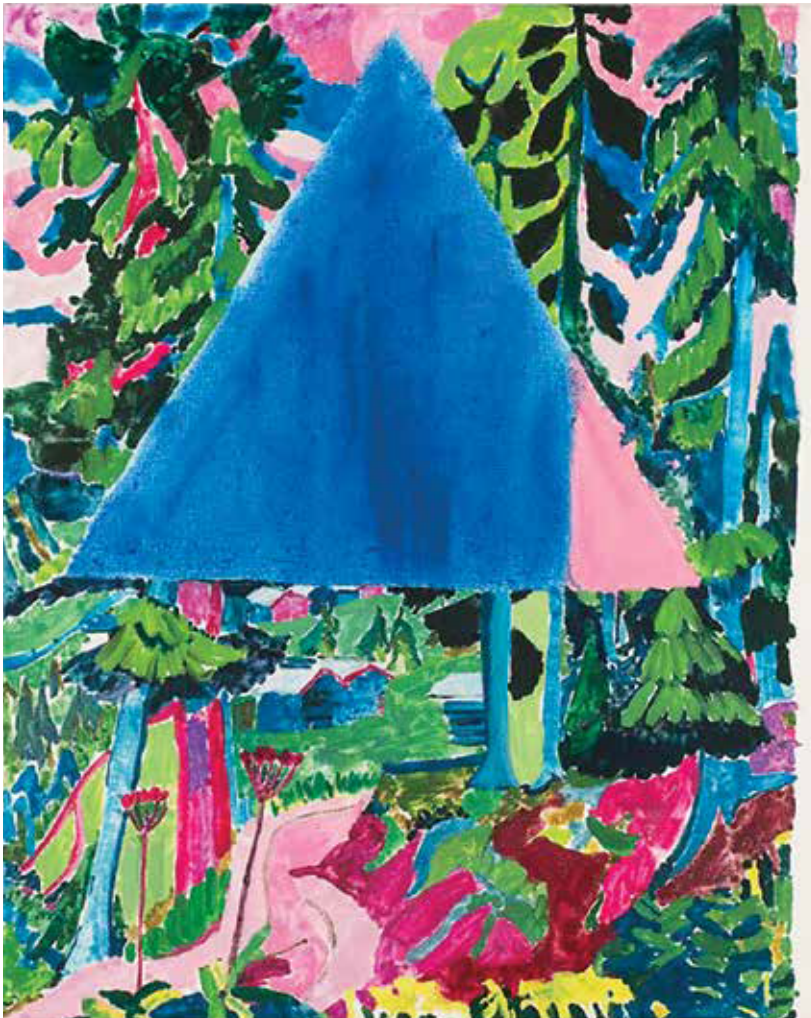
Untitled Fragment, 2016, acrylic on canvas over panel, 20" x 16"

Rebecca Shore



Untitled (15-04), 2015, acrylic on linen, 20" x 16"
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago

Leslie Baum



Testimony of Weightlessness, 2016, oil on canvas, 20" x 16"

Anna Kunz



The Day, 2014, acrylic on fabric, daylight, 14' x 18'

Craig Yu



The Town Centers II, 2016, oil on canvas over panel, 16" x 20"

Autumn Ramsey



Tiger, 2015, oil on canvas, 28" x 22"

reflecting and repeating the shapes of the plant leaves in front of and behind it. The density of layered shapes and varied brushstrokes in *Tiger* press on the question of when a painterly gesture becomes anchored as a fully formed subject in space.

The structured experimentations with paint's materiality that these eight artists undertake pushes past basic explorations of the flattened plane to open up other fields of possibility for painting. In doing so, these artists often evoke and work with certain problems and systems in painting associated with different moments in art history, particularly high modernism, when this kind of investigation was understood as central to serious art practices.

In particular, this work suggests an expanded arena for the medium specificity of painting. Medium specificity takes as its central problem the qualities inherent to the medium itself, which for Clement Greenberg include flatness, the shape of canvas, and the qualities of pigment for painting. Where these three variables were understood by Greenberg and other modernist theorists as the primary sites—or key independent variables for study, to continue the theme of this essay—from which to explore the nature of painting, the grouping of the approaches in *Known Unknowns* suggests that there are more.

Here, the action of a brushstroke extends to its inverse in the process of erasure. The latency of painting to have presence in three dimensions is brought to the forefront, along with hypotheses about the materiality of the image and the line. Many contemporary painters are taking up this and other related language in continuing evaluations and assessments of painting, suggesting that we need not look outside the controlled system of the canvas and pigment to update our understanding of its faculties.

—Monica Westin

Monica Westin is an arts writer and historian of rhetoric based in San Francisco. A regular contributor to Artforum.com, her writing has also recently appeared in frieze, BOMB, Art Papers and The Believer, among other places.

Cleve Carney Art Gallery

Known Unknowns

Thursday, June 2 to Friday, July 29, 2016

The Cleve Carney Art Gallery would like to thank Leslie Baum, Magalie Guérin, Steven Husby, Anna Kunz, Sherwin Ovid, Autumn Ramsey, Rebecca Shore and Craig Yu for their participation in the exhibition. We would also like to thank Monica Westin for her wonderful essay and all of the student workers and interns who helped to install and produce *Known Unknowns*.

Justin Witte

Director and Curator

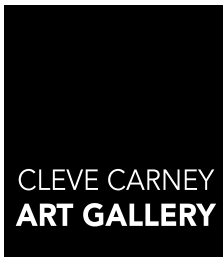
Cleve Carney Art Gallery

Cover Image: ***Shape of the Day*, 2016, acrylic on canvas drop cloth 9' x 9' x 9'**



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