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Broken Frames and Shaky Stages

by Christopher Howard



Simultaneous solo exhibitions in DODGEgallery's duplex space—Jane Fox Hipple's *Blanks and Holes* and Robert de Saint Phalle's *Curtain Call* (both through March 27)—respectively explore a pair of longstanding inquiries in contemporary art: framing and staging. Many artists lose themselves in a conceptual hall of mirrors when dealing with the two, or isolate their work with rigid institutional critique. Hipple and de Saint Phalle adeptly sidestep such dead ends and endgame situations to offer challenging takes on the picture frame and art's institutional setting.

The nails hammered or holes cut into the wooden supports of several of Hipple's fourteen abstract paintings—mostly oil on panel with a finite color palette ranging from lavender to salmon and from aqua to mint—would seem to resume the avant-garde attack on modern art. Though serialized with their vertical, portrait-like orientations, the works instead suggest mirrors or windows—an archaic notion in Western painting. At the same time, Hipple exaggerates the avant-garde's potential for infinite regress by painting thick borders around the perimeter of half her works, making rectangles within rectangles within rectangles. Most thrilling is the black spray paint on the gallery wall surrounding "as such non such Allegory" (2011), a large painting with its own rim of black paint around the surface edges, which in turn contain a purple field containing a white rectangle, the shape of which is duplicated in a second fleshy-pink painting to the right, titled "The Keeper" (2010). A nail faintly visible at dead center of this smaller piece punctuates the path to get there.

Hipple gives other tantalizing directions, such as the two eye-level holes drilled into the front of "Given(s)" (2010), framing her work in Duchampian terms. The long, elegant pink strokes in "Sexy Painting" (2010) offer sensuous optical pleasure, but a punctured gash on the panel's right side, spray-painted hot pink, indicates a preference for something rougher. She stuffs a scrap of black t-shirt into a hole in "The Good in the Bad" (2010), recalling Jasper John's "Gray Painting with Ball" (1958). Hipple in fact shares the same quiet, enigmatic sensibility with the elder artist, though she's more playful than deadpan.

De Saint Phalle presents sculptures that are equally hermetic but more visually audacious. His predilection is for dramatic staging, not unlike Banks Violette, but through feats of balance. For the track-stopping "Dress Rehearsal" (2010), he impressively stabilizes a large pane of back-painted glass with a single steel brace caught on the leg of a low bench. Similarly, a fragile fluorescent bulb supports a fiberglass rock and wooden brace in "Lean To" (2007).

In addition to machine-fabricated materials, de Saint Phalle casts and reuses his own objects, such as the fake stone in "Lean To," whose crushed mold turns up in "Untitled (Chameleon)" (2008). He digitally scanned a grocery-store bag's interior for "La Nana" (2010), casting the empty volume in black crystal and placing it back inside the bag.

The art historian Michael Fried used the term "theatrical" in his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" to disparage Minimalist sculpture. De Saint Phalle departs from Fried and Minimalism in two distinct ways: first by using industrial materials to advance traditional sculptural concerns like composition, color, and part-to-whole relationships. Second, he brings sculpture closer to set design, with elements like the non-functioning theater light hoisted on a long white pole in "Untitled (Chameleon)." His sculptural staging presents mute images without stories or narratives, making the work fascinating as well as frustrating.