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ART REVIEW

In These Shows, the Material Is the Message

By [ROBERTA SMITH](#)

Chelsea's summer group shows are both test sites for new ideas and polling stations for aesthetic trends. They indicate what might be seen elsewhere in the near future — in the next [Whitney Biennial](#), for example. A few summers ago there was an outbreak of '60s psychedelia, rainbow colors and all-around craftsiness, lots of sewing and knitting and rather twee art. Then followed a summer or so of heavy-metal boys in black.

This summer several group shows seem to say “back to basics,” starting with titles like “Stubborn Materials,” “Substance & Surface,” “Laying Bricks” and “The Lath Picture Show.” Perhaps a younger generation of artists is adding its own spin to the long-running romance with the Post-Minimalist styles of the late '60s and early '70s. The shift away from language and images and toward fairly raw materials is hardly new, just more pronounced.

Bortolami

The work in these shows is not always in complete agreement; usually a dissenter or two takes a stand for intricate craftsmanship, language or narrative. Bortolami's “Substance & Surface,” though, is nearly unanimous: it takes the Modernist monochrome as its not-so-sub subtext.

Given the long history of corrupting the monochrome, it shouldn't be as interesting as it is. The show's vitality may reflect a good theme-to-variation ratio. Nearly everything here has corners and a single color, and adheres to the wall, if only by a cable, like Bozidar Brazda's “Idle Idol,” a dangling television set sprayed with orange car paint.

But substances and surfaces vary. The combinations include paint, sand, cassette tape, tile or silver vinyl tape, on carpet, paper, canvas, plywood or mattress. Sly allusions to artistic elders occur. With three perpendicular slices in a black bath towel, Paul Lee ingeniously evokes black-and-white panels by [Ellsworth Kelly](#).

Historical precedents are here too: Piero Manzoni's small rectangle of pebbles painted white, from 1959; John Armleder's green pegboard, from 1984; and Donald Sultan's new hulking black painting in the tar and spackle he has used since the 1970s.

Piero Golia's piece resembles a small white biomorphic sculpture on a wood pedestal that has been installed sideways on the wall. It looks like a substance seceding from its surface.

Peter Blum

The art in "Stubborn Materials" at Peter Blum Chelsea breaks rank with the wall, the rectangle, abstraction and even the object itself. Among the show's several newcomers, Larry Bamburg contributes a nearly invisible spinning galaxy made of tiny bits of detritus (beads, paper clips, a dead cricket) strung on monofilament from the blades of a revolving ceiling fan.

Ian Pedigo creates wall pieces and sculptures by combining found and made materials with startling grace: an old straw mat here, a red-stained cylinder of foam on a tripod of bamboo there.

Rosy Keyser, another newcomer, has a promiscuous pictorial sensibility that veers from an enamel-and-sawdust abstraction, to a fittingly obstreperous collage tribute to Robert Rauschenberg, back to an abstract splash of silver paint that looks like frozen mercury.

Nick Herman is even more capricious. He makes a polyurethane cast of a rock face look like bronze, constructs a duck blind with silver twigs and feathers made of magazines, and then goes over to the dark side of realistic obviousness with "Halves," in which sculptures of the front portions of a wolf and a sheep confront each other warily.

Heather Rowe presents a mirrored wall piece that is more two-sided (and domestic) than you think, and uses more mirrors and perceptual tricks to evoke a domed pavilion from 1914 by the architect Bruno Julius Florian Taut. Jutta Koether contributes a small, shiny Minimalist triangle and a large, moody canvas that riffs on Neo-Expressionism; both black, they seem to honor the opposite poles of postwar German painting, Blinky Palermo and Anselm Kiefer.

The ever-practical Jonah Freeman and Michael Phelan make large, lustrous archival prints from scans of rumpled aluminum that are triple plays on Gerhard Richter's work.

This smart and subtle show has been organized by Simone Subal, the gallery's director. Full of ricochets among seemingly disparate works, it celebrates the endurance of art and beauty by emphasizing happenstance and fragility with materials that refuse to relinquish their identities.

Wallspace

In "Laying Bricks" at Wallspace, Michael Ned Holte, a young Los Angeles critic, makes his New York curatorial debut with a presentation of four young artists. Here the

physical distress that prevails in the Blum show turns suave and becomes more depicted subject than physical fact, conveyed through combinations of cutting and collage.

Michael Wilkinson, a Glasgow artist, covets other artists' walls. His elegant grisaille photocopy collages strip Piero della Francesca's "Nativity" of its religious personages, leaving only the stone manger, or bring forward the distant brick wall in [Vermeer's](#) sun-drenched "View of Delft."

The paintings of Nathan Hylden, from Los Angeles, show silken washes of black seeping like nightfall over blotted geological fields of grays.

The New Yorker Richard Aldrich makes abstraction stretch from the sculptural to the political, but risks brittleness; his paintings seem more like mock-ups than paintings.

In a sculpture titled "Double Take," Alice Könitz, another Angeleno, throws usual design combinations into conflict. Faux metals and real stonework suggestive of a 1970s fireplace are distorted into a functionless hybrid of bric-a-brac holder, cat jungle gym and architectural model. Her "Banana-Peel-Rug" parodies design's weakness for pictorial Surrealism. Made of cut-out brown felt, it is innocuous but lies in wait, sinisterly trippable.

D'Amelio Terras

The battle between illusion and reality becomes pitched even within single artworks in "Circumventing the City," a show of 10 artists at D'Amelio Terras. Here you never lose sight of process or materials, or the tricks they can play. Erika Vogt's scrappy yet elegantly attenuated collage "Up Your Wall Forever No. 4 (Orange)" is an instance of Kurt Schwitters writ large and Minimal. Valerie Hegarty's "Cracked Wall" is both real and patently fake, a ragged, stage-set-like fissure made of paper.

Jacob Robichaux builds abstract paintings from string or bits of wood painted red. Ian Pedigo (also at Peter Blum) is here with a free-standing piece. Sarah Braman works more expansively in a similar mode with found furniture, a sheet of Plexiglas and a dazzling dose of blue spray paint.

In "Graphite/Dolman," David Brooks piles chunks of opulent unrefined graphite into a precarious sculpture, making a wall drawing in the process. A large paper drawing by the talented Sterling Ruby counters with more black, spray-painted and inscribed with crystalline lines and collage elements that suggest suspended scepters or votive objects.

Nicole Cherubini echoes the mood of off-key grandeur with a large, elaborately crude jar set on stilts that greedily combines different clays and glazes. Yuri Masnyj's piled coffee

table, fashioned from wood, plaster, wax and paper, refines the fake-real duality of Ms. Hegarty's crack in the wall and is the show's most carefully made piece.

The least is Jedediah Caesar's "Untitled (grey container)," a block of cast resin and trash, both organic and inorganic. Sleek as marble and wildly marbled, it is tacky and refined at the same time, like a fossil from now or a four-cornered version of a poured urethane piece by Lynda Benglis. It includes the stained and crummy cardboard box in which it was cast, and from which it was cut like ice from a frozen river.

Friedrich Petzel

In "The Lath Picture Show," at Petzel, an older generation holds forth. The title signals a certain predominance of wood; a handout claims lath as "the fundamental building block of construction." And woods both raw and finished, both real and fake, prevail in a cheerfully crowded confab that is almost carnivalesque.

There's also the pun on [Peter Bogdanovich's](#) 1971 movie; it goes beyond "The Last Picture Show" to the land, with no painting but plenty of carpentry.

Maybe wood grain is the substitute. Other materials obtrude, like Rirkrit Tiravanija's brick-filled doorway or Fischli/Weiss's trompe-l'oeil scraps of drywall. But the show is really a kind of woodworking contest, as seen in the different deployments of leaning planks by Charles Ray, Jorge Pardo and Lawrence Weiner.

Richard Artschwager contributes two enigmatic wall sculptures in Formica wood grain, and Robert Melee covers a wall with interlocking panels of imitation wood and marbled colors to evoke a rec room where [Carmen Miranda](#) might suddenly appear. In the only work actually made of lath, Georg Herold derisively lists more than two dozen given names, all of them eminently German and male, which seems fitting.

As with "Substance & Surface," the historical tilt here may explain but does not quite excuse why this show is noticeably short on women. "The Lath Picture Show" emphasizes one of the most universal of materials, artistic and not, but its segues into highly finished forms depart from the back-to-basics idea.

Plain sheets of plywood are among the exceptions, however, whether in Robert Gober's handmade version, Cheyney Thompson's ghostly impression of one or Martin Creed's towering stack of the milled, lumberyard variety. Wade Guyton disrupts the proceedings with two long planks that form a big black X, but feels more like an exclamation point.

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