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View of Nathan Hylden, "Again and as if to Begin," 2007, Richard Telles Fine Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

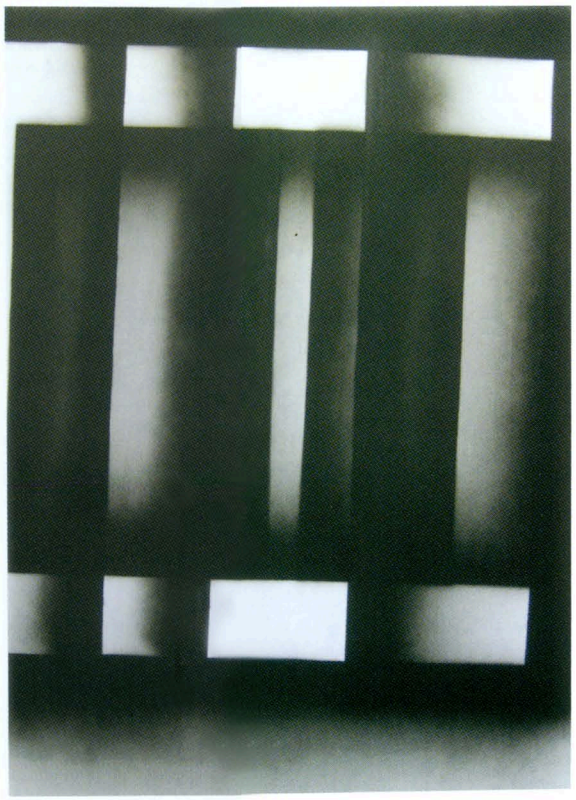
OPENINGS

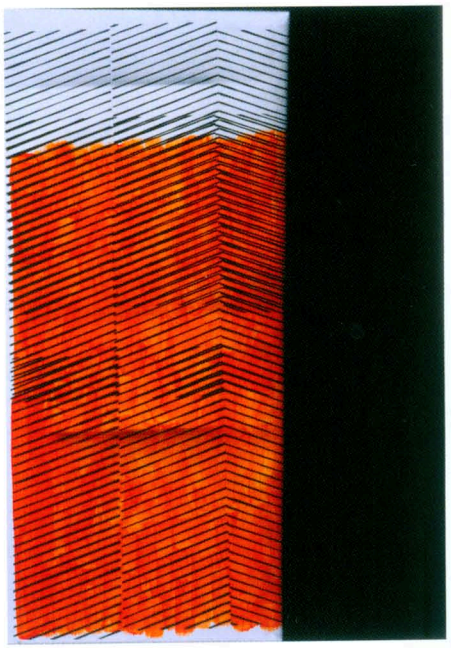
Michael Ned Holte on

Nathan Hylden

FOR HIS DEBUT SOLO EXHIBITION at Richard Telles Fine Art in Los Angeles this past spring, the LA-based artist Nathan Hylden situated a tidy stack of 11 x 8½-inch, perfect-bound and editioned books on the floor by the gallery's entryway. Free for the taking (and quickly snapped up), each volume was filled with nearly cinematic sequences of evenly spaced, if slightly wonky, fields of black diagonals appearing on lengthy passages of black, then white, paper—with individual lines becoming off-kilter, occasionally overlapping to the point of visual obliteration, as one flipped through the pages. In fact, the interior of the book might have looked like a printer's error—devoid of text and outfitted with a plain, matte-black cover—if it hadn't paired so perfectly with a small (29 x 23-inch) painting of black diagonals atop a black ground hanging directly above the ephemeral stack. The lines on this near monochrome's surface were visible only from certain angles, and the sustained attention demanded by the painting matched not only the formal, stenciled design of the book's sequences, but also those passages' implications for our experience of time. And so viewers became aware of Hylden's staging of a spatial exegesis—on repetition, on mirroring, on order and disorder—that would, as his exhibition unfolded, even propose a complex model of temporality with its articulation of a circuit between seriality and simultaneity.

Indeed, the show's title, "Again and as if to Begin," seemed only appropriate as two more black-on-black canvases were placed by Hylden in the main gallery, reiterating the monochrome in the entry and creating, in turn, a sense of the



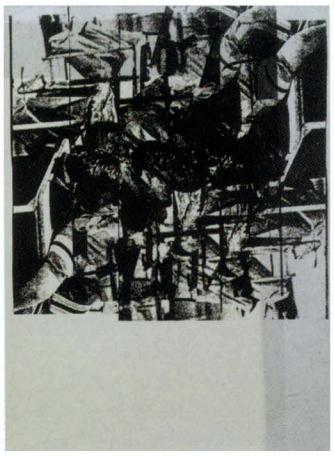


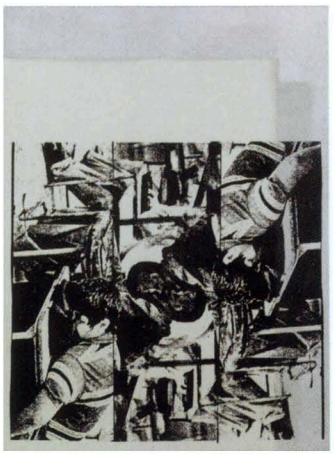
From left: **Nathan Hylden, *Untitled*, 2007**, collage and paint on paper, nine framed parts, each 11 x 8½". **Nathan Hylden, *Untitled*, 2007**, acrylic on linen, 94 x 67". **Nathan Hylden, *Untitled*, 2007**, acrylic on linen, 67 x 47". **Nathan Hylden, *For Not Working II*, 2007**, polyptych, spray paint on silk-screened paper, each 30 x 20".

exhibition's having multiple thresholds. But Hylden created this impression most clearly by installing three visually hectic, untitled, roughly six-by-four-foot canvases amid two highly polished aluminum and painted sculptures. For these works, the artist employed a strategic seriality, making a number of similar canvases using the same materials and techniques. Each of the three paintings featured a stenciled thicket of black lines crisscrossing a field of bright orange brushwork and white gesso, with a pitch-black area taking over the right third of the support. These black voids, somewhat recalling unexposed film (not to mention the smaller paintings), are inextricably linked, since Hylden overlaid the canvases on the ground and used them as stencils for one another while spraying the black paint. His two sculptures—each comprising a pair of folded aluminum planes standing three feet high—result from a similar tactic, in which one angled plane is die-cut and then used as a stencil for its partner before being pulled apart to reveal this indexical relationship. With their high-polished, reflective surfaces, both sculptures literally mirrored the paintings on the walls, adding to the controlled visual delirium of Hylden's installation while also implicating the viewer in it.

One immediate effect was to exacerbate a demand for sustained attention that again was issued by Hylden's subtly layered, lush surfaces, which were surprisingly created using spray paint and stencils. I say "surprisingly" because, contrary to expectations, these media are not employed by the artist to produce any graphic crispness, which one typically associates with images intended to be read quickly (whether construction signage or a tagger's brand identity), but are, rather, clearly used to agitate the eye. Hylden's paintings then produce a paradoxical slippage between what is anticipated from certain materials or procedures and what he actually does with them: Fluorescent orange paint, typically sought for its flat, Pop sheen, is here applied thinly in loose brushstrokes to produce a washy field beneath the diagonal lines—sometimes gently overlapping, sometimes crisscrossing—of sprayed black acrylic.

Still, taken individually, Hylden's paintings can flirt with slightness—a charge I've occasionally heard whispered about these works, and which perhaps results as much from their expedient realization as from the amount of visual information they feature. But what would "too slight" look like in the present moment? Rather than getting hung up on such a rhetorical question, Hylden's canvases confidently resonate with a trajectory of "cool," "reductive," or seemingly impersonal painting. His works variously evoke the repetitive structures of Stella's "Black Paintings" and Warhol's silk screens, and the reflexive, almost-compulsive signature gestures—identical vertical stripes, patterns of brush "prints," etc.—of BMPT (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier, Toroni) and Martin Barre. With his limited materials and palette, Hylden also looks to the punk-inflected efforts of Christopher Wool and Steven Parrino from the 1980s and '90s—to say nothing of the seemingly "offhand" efforts of Richard Hawkins and Michael Krebber. Significantly, Hylden spent a summer working with Krebber, and studied at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, with both Hawkins and Christopher Williams, whose poker-faced combination of seriousness and humor seems influential here. One might easily discern this disposition in a recent group of five silk-screen monoprints by Hylden, in which he repeats and overlaps a found image of bored students—one, wearing a striped shirt, is facedown on his desk. Clearly, the artist is willing to poke fun at the risk inherent in any repetitive strategy, including his own.





This past summer Hylden produced another series of canvases in which a finite group of building blocks—a brushy, metallic gray ground; a network of canted, overlapping fluorescent orange rectangular "frames"; and dense blocks of thin black hatch marks—was used to create a range of surfaces from sparse to overloaded. Seen in conjunction, the paintings put into play the twin poles of *just-enough* and *too-much*. But what particularly seems at stake for Hylden is a desire to (re-)locate the physicality of the body and (per his visual joke above) his own all-too-human decision making within a painting practice indebted to, if not governed by, the inhuman process of mechanical reproduction. It's worthwhile in this regard to note that the artist's stencils are handmade from cardboard, which eventually becomes warped and "imperfect" from repeated use: A clash of the haptic and optic consistently threads through Hylden's work. To this end, the larger paintings from this latest series are made to be installed low, with the bottom edge of the stretcher just six inches off the floor, emphasizing a relationship between the work—whose vertical dimension exactly corresponded to the artist's height—and the viewer's body. And with the repetitive strategies and use of physical gestures and crude devices that mimic mechanical reproduction—and, in the case of the books, use that methodology—Hylden's works suggested that the human ambition to construct something is always inflected with the possibility of its eventual collapse, regardless of the apparatus used.

It's the kind of intimation one also found at Telles in a grid of nine framed collages on gray paper, which combined variable amounts of stenciled silver spray paint, black paper triangles, and carefully chosen newspaper images of architectural construction and ruin. Nearly hidden within these pieces was a mirrored pair of newspaper images featuring a motley construction crew that included Spider-Man, Curious George, and Frankenstein in matching hard hats, erecting a wood stud–frame wall for Habitat for Humanity. The picture is goofy and ambiguous, but nonetheless offered a clue for understanding the paintings and sculpture by pointing toward a comic confusion of building and demolition—to the point that any notion of "progress" would seem called into question. One might usefully consider Robert Smithson's "Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" (1967), in which site-seeing is described as viewing ". . . *ruins in reverse*, that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin *before* they are built." The sprayed networks of black paint on Hylden's paintings rhymed visually with the repetitive and overlapping lines of the scaffolding, trusses, and stud walls found in his collages; reiterating a threshold between order and disorder, each painting presents itself as an example from a nearly endless series of possible permutations of building and unbuilding with these chosen elements. In this sense, the objects in Hylden's exhibition rose into ruin and thereby resisted—if not rejected—finality, pragmatically offering solutions for intensifying and prolonging the present while deferring the future.

For his most recent show at Art: Concept in Paris, given the self-deprecating title "Just Something Else," Hylden introduced three large canvases at precisely double the size of his earlier black-and-orange paintings (though, one should note, the width of their supports equals the artist's height and reach).

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With their stenciled blocks of solid black—which are fuzzy at the perimeters, repeating and overlapping over a washy ground of translucent, iridescent gold—the works produce subtly complex images that recall strips of celluloid film even while disrupting figure-ground relationships. The luminous squares and rectangles—remnants of what should be the backgrounds of these paintings—seem to float atop the black surface marks. Still, Hylden seems less interested in optical agitation than in the sheer variety of interrelated, accumulated images he is able to produce through an economy of means: He again employed few materials and undertook the compulsive process of painting while dragging large stencils across canvas as a mode of reproduction. Eschewing progress in favor of intensifying a sense of the present, Hylden continues to find solace in "building" not as a noun but as a verb, insisting that his body of work is always under construction. □

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