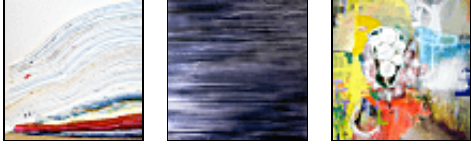


## Heeks changes technique to keep works alive

Kenneth Baker

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Rhode Island painter Willy Heeks, whose recent work hangs at Brian Gross Fine Art, practices what we might call post-Richter abstraction.

In 2002, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective of German painter Gerhard Richter's work that included a number of the large, imageless canvases he produces by troweling on curtains of paint layer over layer. These Richter paintings strike a Beckett-like tone of equal resignation to the pointlessness of an activity and to the impossibility of quitting it. Whatever aesthetic glories arise from Richter's process, as in Beckett's language, seem more like precipitates of the medium itself than of artistry.

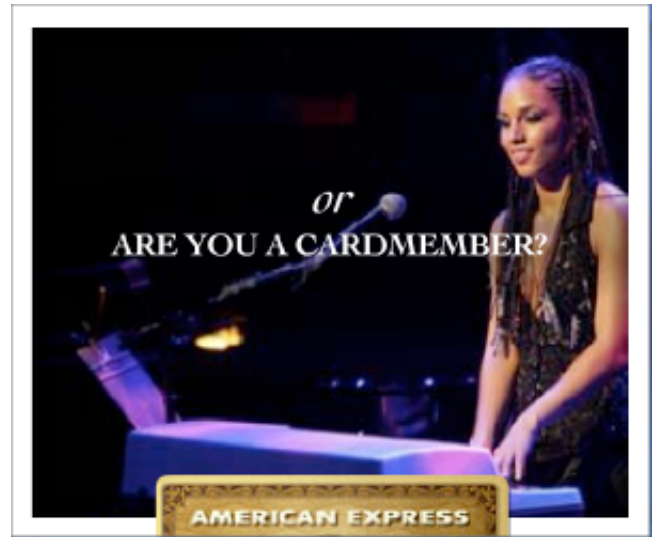
The peculiar tenor and powerful presence of Richter's abstractions make them mileposts for somewhat younger painters such as Heeks, burdened with consciousness of their historical position in the art.

Heeks' paintings simply look a mess at first. But a painting such as "Eccentric Location" (2008) records a struggle to keep it alive to his eye, and ours, despite the allusive echoes that every move touches off, despite the temptation to resolve the very dissonances he seeks.

The success of "Eccentric Location" and several other pictures here shows in the way they look like the result of several painters collaborating reluctantly.

In making "Eccentric Location" Heeks changed tools and techniques frequently, here letting materials themselves shape visual information, there containing it with drawing or even fragments of stencil. A viewer infers that Heeks rotated the canvas, possibly often, while working on it. The composition's stop-and-start quality attests to its improvised character and evokes a sense of frequently wavering conviction on the painter's part.

The result, though, is a painting that will not play dead or accept its culturally predestined fate as decor. Like Richter, Heeks seems continually to be fending off nostalgia, irony and grief - emotional postures of defeat in the face of his art's dwindling into pastiche, commerce and lifestyle.



**Dufort in two keys at Anglim:** Bay Area painter Laura Dufort pursues two very different paths in a show of recent work that ends today at Gallery Paule Anglim.

In one series, she coats canvases with pale acrylic interference pigments. On these grounds, with one exception that almost seems to describe satin drapery, she scattered circles painted in single, translucent strokes. Viewers conversant with Asian art will think of the *enso*, the one-stroke circle that Zen painters strived to perfect. But in the largest such pictures, from a distance, these orbs suggest bubbles rising in a Champagne flute: a pleasant effervescence of emotion.

The second series strikes darker notes, literally and metaphorically.

"Deep Sleep I" (2008) presents a modulated field of troweled-on steel blue. It achieves, at least for a moment, the tacit aim of much abstract painting to induce inner silence. In doing this, it also exposes the comfort of inner prattle, irrespective of its reference, and the viewer's probably unacknowledged resistance to thinking of nothing.

Thinking of nothing perhaps verges on thoughts of nothingness, and so of one's own annihilation.

Why do Dufort's monochrome paintings lead to this experience when so much other work of this ilk that I admire, such as the late Sam Tchakalian's, does not? Perhaps her inner disposition while making them explains it, perhaps the proximity of work by her in a different key helps.

In any case, her dark paintings, though no more noiseless than anyone else's, vividly recall the thought of Beckett's character Malone that "objects exist so that there may be silence."

**Clean laundry at the Lab:** Los Angeles installation artist Mariah Johnson has only two pieces in her show at the Lab, which ends today, but they make me want to see more.

Johnson works with scavenged linens in a manner so vulnerable to dismissal as art that it no doubt partitions viewers' responses between solicitousness and annoyance.

In "How Lovely on the Mountain" (2008), she has meticulously folded and stacked disused sheets and pillowcases against a wall, just high enough to make us feel that something - beyond mere storage - is up. They form a miniature mountainscape whose colored layers evoke rock outcroppings.

The piece sits on the edge of nonsense, as much significant contemporary art does. It respects the encroaching sense of absurdity occasionally felt by every 21st century citizen not drunk on some ideological Kool-Aid.

In their claim to being art, Johnson's pieces depend on precedents in the work of others such as Ann Hamilton and Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), for whom tasks such as folding and stacking honor the role in our everyday material lives of nameless, but devoted, labor.

Johnson also draws some power from the interest - stretching back to the 1970s - in "women's work," which arose partly out of a wish to illuminate the invisible zones of domesticity, and partly as alternative to the machismo and heroic associations of labor in heavy industry that male sculptors annexed when they took to realizing work in steel mills or bronze casting foundries.

Even a viewer who ignores these contextual facts can recognize in Johnson's "Ladder" (2008) - a chain of knotted-together found textiles - a dream of escape or rescue, inherited from the numberless movies and cartoons in which prisoners make bedsheet ropes to lower themselves to freedom.

Such associations give Johnson's work a quiet emotional and cultural complexity disproportionate to its quotient of invention. That surprise reveals something of the condition of art and its reception at the moment, making her work far more significant than its materials and methods imply.

**Willy Heeks: Recent Work:** Paintings. Through Aug. 16. Brian Gross Fine Art, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 788-1050, [www.briangrossfineart.com](http://www.briangrossfineart.com).

**Laura Dufort: Integral Whirl:** Paintings. Ends today. Gallery Paule Anglim, 14 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 433-2710, [www.gallerypauleanglim.com](http://www.gallerypauleanglim.com).

**Mariah Johnson: How Lovely on the Mountain:** Two installation works. Ends today. The Lab, 2948 16th St., San Francisco. (415) 864-8855, [www.thelab.org](http://www.thelab.org).

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/08/01/DDGK122TJ2.DTL>

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