

A Hardcore Commitment to Abstraction

by Erik Wenzel

UBS 12 x 12: Carrie Gundersdorf

Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA)
 220 East Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60611
 August 7, 2010 - August 29, 2010



Carrie Gundersdorf's two concurrent exhibitions, collages of reference material at *Julius Caesar* and the main event, large format drawings at Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), display what I would term a "hardcore" commitment to abstraction. A bit like classic rock, or a new band that carries on the tradition, Gundersdorf is a committed Modernist. Both exhibitions closed on August 29th.

The text accompanying the MCA exhibition names Ellsworth Kelly and Piet Mondrian as historic references, but Gundersdorf's artistic motif of repeated line segments that are more or less parallel, somewhat scattered, immediately point to Kazimir Malevich. Compositionally, this relationship is most pronounced in *Trails and Space, light phalo green version* (2009). But here instead of resting in a nonobjective field of white, like Malevich, the Gundersdorf's background is made of various greens suggesting a dense forest. There is something mysterious and slightly ominous about it.

Gundersdorf's practice of arriving at composition through abstracting source material is also a trait of high abstraction. She collects images of stellar phenomenon, cosmic bodies such as stars, planets and spectral analyses thereof. This fascination with scientific observation is also a highlight of modernist working methods. The particular subject of outer space is an apropos analogue to the non-objective, purely pictorial space of abstract art.



Carrie Gundersdorf. *Trails and space, blended version*. 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

In the works on paper in the MCA exhibition, the space is more traditional and it's a one-to-one relationship between Gundersdorf's work and their sources. They are total images; the strokes of the colored pencil mimic the strips and segments that make up the source image. The colored pencil is also a great choice of medium that complicates the staid genre of abstraction with a "low" material. Colored pencil, to my knowledge, has not even been embraced by abstract painters using spray paint or intentionally clashing color schemes. The collaged works at Julius Caesar are more complicated, though, because there is a doubling of imagery and space—almost as though two pictures exist simultaneously. And it is for this reason that the works on view at Julius Caesar capture the viewer's attention more completely.



Carrie Gundersdorf. *Saturn's Rings*. 2009. Found images on paper. Image used by permission of Julius Caesar Gallery.

First are the images and sense of space inherent within each picture that has been cut from a page. But then there is the space, depth and composition created in the way Gundersdorf has affixed those slips of paper to the ground. Some butt up against another, some are spread out. It is clear these subtle relationships have been carefully thought out. In some cases the most dominant image is the one created by the overall effect all the small pictures make when seen together as in *Saturn's Rings* (2009, seen above). We first see a composition of multiple swatches of parallel stripes placed in various orientations. It is only after this observation that the original image becomes apparent: detail shots of the planet's famous rings. Here I would draw the comparison with Kelly, specifically in regards to his collages made of cut up black ink drawings reassembled in rough grids—something not dissimilar to Gundersdorf's process. Both artists began with complete images, fragmented them, and produced yet another object full of abstract visual dynamism.

In works like *Field of Spectral Star Trails – various lengths of times* (2010) the two worlds of cut-up pictures and the collage made of those pictures merge more completely. Little strips of reds, greens and blues litter a black ground. Since the image themselves are essentially abstract (bands of color) there is already a tension between representation and abstraction. The images are almost completely black as well, so there are multiple blacks and near blacks. An interesting phenomenological effect is created between the glossy blacks of the printed page and the matte black of the collage ground, especially when viewed obliquely. This visual effect is possible only through the decision to nicely frame and mount the pieces but not put them under glass. Here we have a literal visual phenomenon taking place: viewing of an abstraction of a series of photographs of phenomena that take place in the heavens.

-Erik Wenzel

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