

the sun that never sets

New Paintings by Paul Ryan



above: *no waiting between batches*, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 12" x 90"
cover image: *see if you agree*, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 64" x 90"
back cover: *be sure to ask*, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72"



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Staniar Gallery
Department of Art and Art History
Washington and Lee University
Lexington, Virginia
September 7 – October 4, 2015

Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech
Moss Arts Center, 190 Alumni Mall
Blacksburg, Virginia
December 3, 2015 – February 7, 2016

Reynolds Gallery
1514 West Main Street
Richmond, Virginia
February 26 – April 8, 2016



meet or exceed, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 50" x 54"

Foreword

It is always a privilege to present new work by an exceptionally talented and accomplished artist, especially one who, over the years, has explored and continues to develop such a unique, challenging, and thoughtful approach to the practice of painting. But Paul Ryan is not only a painter; over the past twenty-five years he has also made valuable contributions as a critic, writer, teacher, and curator that reverberate throughout the Mid-Atlantic region's arts community. Thus, it is especially fitting that Paul Ryan's recent work be presented across the state of Virginia at three highly-regarded institutions: the Staniar Gallery at Washington and Lee University, the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech, and Reynolds Gallery in Richmond.

Visually intriguing, deliberately ambiguous, and ostensibly playful are perhaps some of the ways to describe Paul Ryan's new series of paintings. With a distinct palette and singular style, Ryan's abstract compositions engage the mind and eyes in complex interplays of shape and form. In a retinal experience that seems fluid and almost lyrical, the artist's unique vocabulary of images—derived from commercial packaging

materials—presents perceptual and spatial complexities as forms recede and advance in the picture plane. On the other hand, Ryan brings intellectual rigor and astute social commentary into play, integrating the dialectic of image/representation and nature/culture into his art. Ryan's use of unfolded packaging cartons as a metaphor for consumption, accumulation, and mindless waste, as well stylized silhouettes of treetops, smokestacks, hands, and other iconic images add layers of subtle but significant socio-economic subtexts to the work.

The exhibition takes its title – *the sun that never sets* – from Guy Debord's seminal treatise *The Society of the Spectacle*. Though the philosophical text was published in 1967, Ryan uses this reference to engage in a critical issue that is more relevant than ever in 2015 — the impact of late capitalism on our society and what it means to exist in a culture completely mediated by images. In this work, Ryan does not defer or deny the pervasive products of commercialism but transforms them in a series of paintings that is visually appealing and refreshing and replete with a density of ideas.

We wish to thank Ashley Kistler, curator of the Anderson Gallery in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University, for her especially thoughtful and insightful essay accompanying this exhibition and publication. Sincere thanks also go to Alice Livingston and Julia Monroe, directors of Reynolds Gallery, for their support of this exhibition and its presentation in Richmond, as well as the gallery's critical role in supporting contemporary artists in Virginia for nearly 40 years. For the innovative catalog design, we thank Gretchen Long of Queen City Creative (Staunton) and, for the printing services, Mid Valley Press (Verona). And not least, we thank Paul Ryan for sharing his exceptional body of work with all of us.

Margo Ann Crutchfield
Curator at Large, Center for the Arts
Virginia Tech

Clover Archer
Director, Staniar Gallery
Washington and Lee University

Paul Ryan's Labyrinths

By Ashley Kistler

It's hard for me to think in a purely formal way. There's always something else there.

— Paul Ryan

Sixteen years ago, Paul Ryan began using a rather narrow horizontal format to compose his paintings. This break from the traditional rectangle or square was liberating, he says, but his choice stemmed mainly from a desire to employ a format for the picture plane that referred to the shape of sentences. A highly accomplished painter, Ryan is also a veteran art critic and editor who teaches critical theory and deeply understands the role of language in shaping perception. “We see through language and text,” he recently remarked. Certainly, he admires various painters—Suzan Frecon, John Zurier, and Steven Westfall among them—but perhaps more importantly, he draws inspiration from an array of political and cultural theorists, Neo-Marxist criticism, and especially in relation to his latest body of work, Guy Debord’s 1967 critique of late capitalism, *Society of the Spectacle*. Given this background, Ryan’s transition from an expressionist mode of painting, signaled by his change in format, to a style of conceptual abstraction that seamlessly fuses form and idea hardly surprises.

The ideas fueling the paintings featured in this exhibition reflect Ryan’s fascination with the underlying narratives embedded in commonplace, expendable items, which he

distills into aesthetically seductive encounters that also speak to critical concerns. Instrumental in the ascendancy of pop and much conceptual art during the 1950s and 60s, imagery based on the mundane objects of everyday life continues to provide an essential source of formal and thematic invention for such diverse contemporary artists as Ester Partegàs and Danh V , as well as many others. As if physically deconstructing a Warhol box, Ryan unfolds and flattens cardboard cartons and containers used to package consumer goods and, in paintings produced since 2011, relies on their ready-made shapes to create an abstract visual vocabulary of his own design.

In 1999, prior to his appropriation of commercial packaging shapes, Ryan began extracting abstract elements and figural motifs from photographs clipped out of fashion magazines, playing with the positive and negative spaces they contained. Just as he now depends on purchases for his own household to supply the flattened cartons piled on his studio floor, Ryan’s interest in this material emerged at a time when his teenage daughters’ magazines cluttered the family home. “Actually our kids are part of the content,” he observes. Firmly rooted in his own daily life, Ryan’s preoccupation with “the stories that come out of the stuff we

buy” evolved from the cultural implications of these images to focus a decade later on certain aspects of the capitalist system that permeate and define our lives. Derived from the literal carriers of commodification and exchange, packaging shapes and their intrinsic associations signified his conceptual interests ever more pointedly.

Ryan’s compositions seem carefully preconceived but, in fact, they develop intuitively on the green, yellow, orange, blue, brown, or white ground of his stretched canvases. For each piece, he selects and places the first packaging shape on the painted ground, lightly tracing it, and moves to the next shape, working left to right across the canvas. After completing this layout, Ryan paints the negative spaces between the shapes, rather than the shapes themselves, for the purpose of establishing a spatial indeterminacy that is key to the painting’s conception and our apprehension of it. By then brushing the entire surface with a transparent glaze of oil paint, Ryan produces the distinctive, striated texture seen in these and earlier works. Only at this point does the overall structure of the composition become apparent. His application of the oil glaze acts as a softening, translucent agent that reveals what lies beneath, allowing the

shapes to pop through. At the same time, this technique adds a certain mystery to the painting's surface by subtly veiling its process of construction, which in turn compels our curiosity and close attention.

Since Ryan began working with the odd geometries of packaging shapes five years ago, he has experimented with adding more shapes to each painting and also compressing the spaces between them. As his compositions have become structurally denser and the interplay of shapes more complex, they more readily prompt shifts in perspective between frontal and overhead points of view and take on the appearance of mazelike maps. In *see if you agree*, Ryan again multiplies his components by vertically stacking five horizontal canvases to create his largest, most labyrinthine composition to date. Our eye instinctively navigates the perceptual and spatial complexities of this multipart maze, seeking resolution and a way through it, but instead is constantly rerouted by its eccentric pathways. For Ryan, the formal attributes of the labyrinth offer a visual metaphor for the "twisted aesthetic of late capitalism," whose operations and effects likewise confound and consequently hold scant hope for successfully maneuvering the system. This notion of constructing an inescapable space recalls the fantastic and ambiguous architecture of Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons*, a suite of etchings first published in 1750.

Like the icons on a map or computer screen, Ryan punctuates the novel compositional terrain of his paintings with the socio-economic signs of the capitalist

spectacle—silhouetted images of military weaponry, billowing smokestacks and, more humorously, wedding cakes—whose inclusion in each instance further activates our reading of positive and negative space. The proliferating shapes of hands, derived from photographs of the artist's own hands in various gestures, inhabit *see if you agree*. With their peculiar sense of extraction, these silhouettes assume different personas that convey different actions, sometimes playfully. The gesture of one hand suggests a figure walking down the "steps" of a packaging shape; the fingers of another slump over (or grip) the edge of a carton contour, while other hands are conversationally grouped together. Above all, Ryan's combination of insistent hand gestures with the packaging shapes speaks to our willing participation in, and interactions with, what those shapes represent, conjuring such expedient measures as reaching, grasping, and general busyness that embody the ubiquitous impulses of desire and consumption.

During a studio conversation, Ryan noted his recent encounter with Thomas Hart Benton's ten-panel mural, *America Today*, created in 1930-31 for the New School of Social Research and now installed at New York's Metropolitan Museum. The everyday scenes making up Benton's dramatic panorama of American life heroically celebrate modern industrial progress and the economic boom of the 1920s. The mural's last panel, however, painted during the early years of the Great Depression, evokes the desperation and inequity caused by that calamitous event. *Outreaching Hands*, as the

panel is titled, counterpoints the hands of the poor with those of the plutocrats—the first reaching for bread, the latter grasping money. Although Benton's panoply of hands epitomizes the dissimilar circumstances of another era, his images nevertheless foreshadow the present-day narratives of social construction and exchange that their distant cousins enact in Ryan's paintings.

In these works, Ryan alludes to various modes of communication, from the silhouetted hand gestures whose accumulation suggests a familiar yet idiosyncratic sign language, to a horizontal format adopted for its relation to the sentence structure of written text, to rectangular shapes representative of the screens of the myriad electronic devices that now mediate so much of human experience—yet another source of his imagery. Ryan's consummate ability as a painter to merge these and many other references into seductive visual experiences reasserts the communicative power of abstraction itself and underscores its vital, longstanding connection to the world at large. His paintings are a gorgeous pleasure to behold and an enticing challenge as they unfold.

Note: All quotations attributed to the artist derive from a conversation with the author on June 15, 2015.

Ashley Kistler has served as Director of the Anderson Gallery at the VCU School of the Arts, Curator of Exhibitions at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, and Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

Artist's Statement & Acknowledgments

As an abstract painter, my studio practice combines a natural attentiveness to formal problems with a reflective consideration of conceptual ideas. In my new work I am interested in developing a visual vocabulary derived from the curiously narrative forms of everyday commercial packaging—the unfolded shapes of the cardboard cartons and containers that hold the stuff of our necessities and desires, and the eccentric visual structures that occur when these contours are combined within the picture plane. While my engagement with the formal is vital, at the same time I am equally interested in conceptual implications and applications that derive from focused play and invention with these chosen shapes and constructed spaces. For example, the created geometric structures within the compositions are far from the painterly architectural spaces of pure formalism, of modernist hard-edged abstraction.

Often labyrinthine, their spatial complexity and oddness—derived from the commercial packaging that is their source and the inherent associations with desire, exchange, acquisition, consumption, and loss—activate the

paintings as visual metaphors for the operations and effects of late or neoliberal capitalism. Within this framework, the paintings function as a kind of intuitive mapping of late capitalism's social and cultural architecture, and its participants' and servants' passive acceptance of its incessant demands. The paintings become a portrait of a kind of twisted aesthetic that is capitalism's seamless, unrelenting system, function, and effect. They suggest late capitalism as pervasive and nearly inescapable context, not only in terms of economics and linked socio-political mechanisms and activity, but also culturally and personally.

Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, his 1967 critique of this condition, seems more relevant than ever. Of the phenomenon Debord describes as the spectacle, "...a social relation between people that is mediated by images," he writes: "[The spectacle] is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory." Art historian and cultural critic, Jonathan Crary, concurs in his 2013 book, *24/7*:

Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep: "It is only recently that the elaboration, the modeling of one's personal and social identity, has been reorganized to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems. A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social world of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness."

Theorist William Connolly's book, *The Fragility of Things*, published in 2013, is another contemporary critique of the detrimental effects of late capitalism and neoliberal ideologies. He writes, "If you ignore any of the relevant dimensions—[...] the acceleration of pace in some domains of contemporary life, the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, the fragility of things, the need for an expanded image of the human sciences, heightened patterns of sensitivity and experimental shifts in role definition, and the imperative to democratic activism—you deny something essential to our engagement with the contemporary condition..."



take us anywhere, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 18" x 90"

[W]e are surrounded by many who fail or refuse—for reasons rooted in conceptions of science, religious faith, or economic activity—to be moved by the situation.” We are also unmoved by the contemporary situation because of our unrestrained participation in the ubiquity and aesthetic allure of consumerism—a kind of infection that Debord attributed to the commodity’s total colonization of social life and our “passive acceptance” of it. This “perfected denial” is an everyday, overall occurrence that permeates our lives. In fact, all of the packaging shapes in the paintings come from my own household, making this work a meditation on my own participation in capitalism’s social condition—its ubiquitous cultural context—and the difficulty of bypassing it. Within the paintings, my construction of visual ambiguity and indeterminacy through negative space and the interplay of

shapes parallels the warped aesthetic of the spectacle’s abstract beauty, its seductive dispatches and our subjective submission to them.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the individuals and organizations that have been supportive of this new work and for the exhibitions at Staniar Gallery, the Center for the Arts at Virginia Tech, and Reynolds Gallery. Clover Archer and Margot Crutchfield, directors of the galleries at W&L and Virginia Tech, respectively, have given their insightful attention to every aspect of this process, and I am honored to have them as colleagues and friends. Reynolds Gallery continues to provide a vital venue for my work, and I am grateful to co-directors Alice Livingston and Julia Monroe for their unstinting support—as I am to the late Bev Reynolds, whose

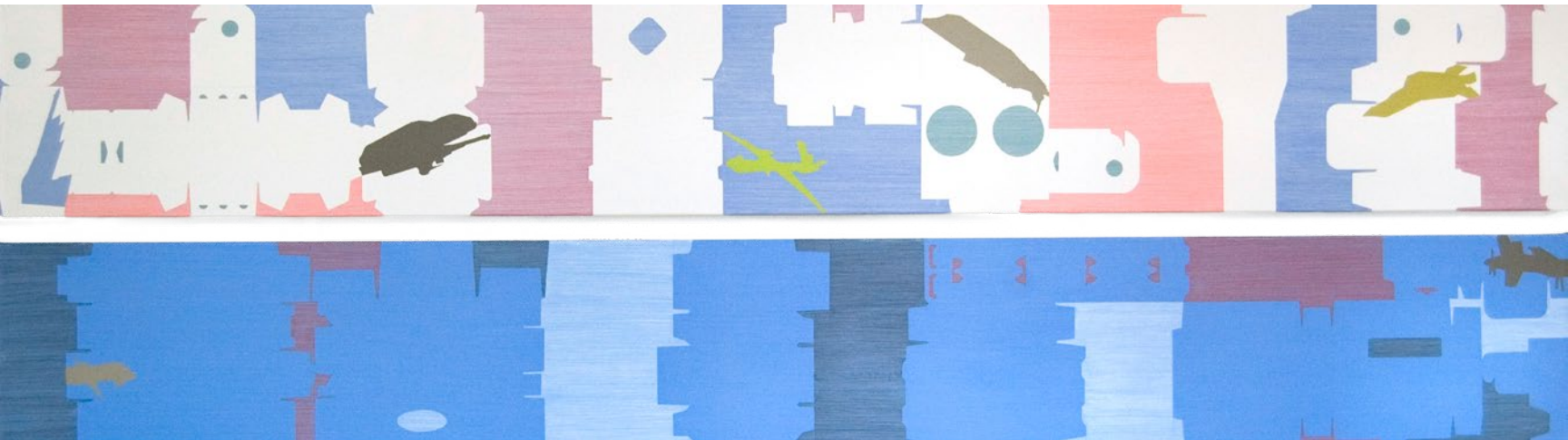
leadership of the gallery and support for the arts community in Virginia and beyond has been a significant part of my professional and creative life, as it has for so many others. A Mednick Fellowship for the 2014-2015 academic year from the Virginia Association of Independent Colleges was beneficial in the production of this new work, especially during a sabbatical leave from Mary Baldwin College during the fall semester. Mary Baldwin’s consistent support of my work during my tenure at the College has been a steady source of encouragement over the years; and, both my recent sabbatical and support for this catalog from the Office of the President have been gratefully received. This exhibition is dedicated to Dinah, my wife and best friend, and to our daughters, Naomi and March.

— Paul Ryan

Exhibition Checklist

The works listed below are in alphabetical order and not according to their sequence in the exhibition.
All of the paintings are the collection of the artist and courtesy of Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, Virginia.

1. *a series of hot and cool spots*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 90"
2. *be sure to ask*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72"
3. *by far the best part*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 12" x 90"
4. *meet or exceed*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 50" x 54"
5. *no matter how hard you try*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 50" x 54"
6. *no waiting between batches*, 2013-2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 12" x 90"
7. *reliever...reducer*, 2014,
oil and acrylic on linen, 36" x 36"
8. *see if you agree*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 64" x 90"
9. *small indulgences*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 50" x 54"
10. *take us anywhere*, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 18" x 90"



a series of hot and cool spots , 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas, 25" x 90"



no matter how hard you try, 2015,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 50" x 54"

Artist's Bio

Paul Ryan is a painter and art critic living and working in Staunton, Virginia. Since 1983 he has shown his work in numerous solo and group exhibitions in a variety of venues, including Reynolds Gallery (Richmond, VA), Marion Gallery, Rockefeller Arts Center at SUNY Fredonia (Fredonia, New York), 1708 Gallery (Richmond, VA), Hartell Gallery at Cornell University (Ithaca, NY), The McLean Project for the Arts (McLean, VA), The University Gallery at The University of South Carolina (Spartanburg, SC), Fine Arts Building Gallery at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond,

VA), The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, VA), Leeds Gallery at Earlham College (Richmond, Indiana), Space 301 (Mobile, Alabama), and the Taubman Museum of Art (Roanoke, VA), among others. He teaches drawing, painting, and courses on contemporary art and art criticism in the Department of Art and Art History at Mary Baldwin College. He also teaches critical theory in the MFA program of the Department of Painting and Printmaking in the School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University. Ryan has been a contributing editor for

Art Papers Magazine since 1990. Since 1989 his writing has appeared in publications such as *Art Papers Magazine*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *ArtLies*, and *Art in America*. He is a recipient of a professional fellowship in painting from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2009-2010), and has received two Mednick fellowships from the Virginia Foundation for Independent Colleges (1996-1997; 2014-2015). His work is represented by Reynolds Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, and his paintings are in numerous public, corporate, and private collections.

