

Occo Socko!

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Matthew Neil Gehring
Paul Behnke

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October 16 - November 13, 2015

Essay by Robin Stout

Stout Projects
Brooklyn, New York

An Inner and an Outer Thing

by Robin Stout

The poet, Louise Glück, in an interview with *Poets & Writers*, says, "Don't prejudge your stimuli. Just trust where your attention goes."¹ In *Occo Socko!* three artists do just that. Following their own hunches, their own distinct paths and inviting viewers to join the exploration.

If you look up "socko" on dictionary.com, you find the definition is "extremely impressive or successful." The actual phrase, "occo socko" is taken from a 2003 article in the *New York Times*, in which a friend of the painter Stewart Hitch described Hitch's work as "occo socko." The friend was referring to Hitch's use of intense color and bold form. Both ideas are at play here in Stout Projects' inaugural exhibition, as well as the nod to pop inherent in the term "socko."

These three artists, Rebecca Murtaugh, Matthew Neil Gehring, and Paul Behnke have developed individual, but related styles of working with color and form in zoetic ways. There are commonalities in their approach to their practice, most particularly in a focus on process; they do not begin their work with fixed or pre-conceived ideas. Instead there is reliance on intuition, borne of many years' experience with their materials and ideas.

Another important common thread is the freedom created by limiting materials and forms. It's as though their inventiveness is born from a reduction in parameters. In return, the works require the viewer to slow down, focus, and really engage with the work. They demand, as Gehring has declared, a "rapt, still attention."

Rebecca Murtaugh experiments with the spaces between painting and sculpture and utilizes off-kilter shapes, as well as apertures to invite the viewers into the pieces in an intimate and exciting way. There is juxtaposition in the simple, geometric forms and the organic look and feel of the paint. After creating the form, Murtaugh builds surfaces with her paint in a way that resembles the creation of coral on a living reef. The viewer can imagine the pieces actually "breathing" and moving air around in the space. It's as if paintings suddenly gained mass and volume and morph into 3D.

There is a sense of playfulness, of humor, that belies the seriousness of this artist. Murtaugh comes from a family of "makers" and her belief and trust in the object is readily apparent.

A long-standing relationship to drawing, which continues to be a part of his studio practice, gives depth to Matthew Neil Gehring's loose, colorful paintings.

Gehring has lived and worked in many different places, including New York City, Upstate and Central New York, the Midwest and Northern California. And though each environment has contributed to his views of spatial relationships, his work is very much a product of the present. The directness and emotional honesty of these paintings invites a positive discourse with contemporary painting.

¹William Giraldi, "A Conversation with Louise Glück," *Poets & Writers*. (September/October 2014)



Matthew Neil Gehring, Paul Behnke, Robin Stout, Jodie Manasevit and Rebecca Murtaugh.
New York City, February, 2015.

Paul Behnke's influences are far and wide and he is non-discriminating in their application to his paintings. Behnke treats Sluggo cartoons, opera, superheroes and poetry as equal fodder for the grist mill. His southern roots and attachment to ritual, especially religious iconography, show up in the repetition of forms.

It's this rootedness in the quotidian that lend his large, difficult paintings a familiarity. The viewer is at once drawn in and put off.

For these artists, there is truth to the idea that art is both an inner and an outer thing. There's the process, the intimate work in the studio, and there is the object that results and goes out into the world. The boldness of form and color, the uniqueness of vision and the transformation of personal history as well as the digestion of influences and environment combine to bring the impossible to light.



Rebecca Murtaugh

Rebecca Murtaugh earned a Master of Fine Arts Degree from Virginia Commonwealth University and a Bachelor of Science from the Pennsylvania State University. She also attended Maryland Institute College of Art and the Corcoran College of Art and Design. Her work has been exhibited nationally in solo and group exhibitions in New York City, Philadelphia, District of Columbia, New Haven, Cleveland, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Richmond, Nashville, Seattle and San Francisco. Murtaugh's work has been written about in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The New Criterion*, *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, *Artweek*, *Stone Canoe* and *Shamenet Magazine*.

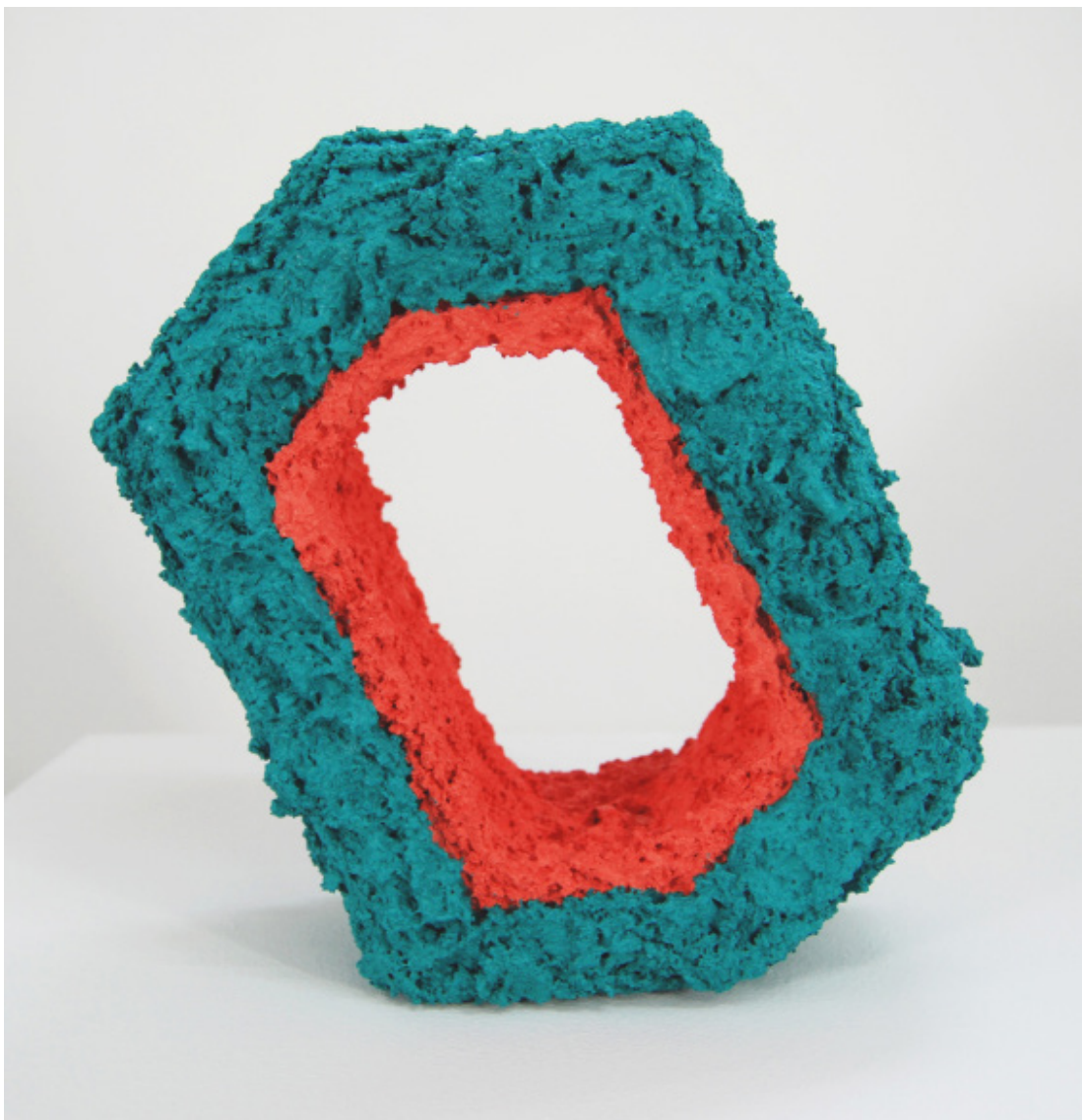
She holds the position of Associate Professor of Art at Hamilton College and lives and works in Brooklyn.



Aperture: Orange Burst and Ultra Violet (Hexagon)
2015
reclaimed house paint, wood and mixed media
15 x 13 x 5 in.



Aperture: Orange Burst and Blueblood
2015
reclaimed house paint, wood and mixed media
10 x 8 x 4 in.



Aperture: Tempo Teal and Gladiolus (Hexagon)
2015
reclaimed house paint, wood and mixed media
10 x 10 x 5 in.



Matthew Neil Gehring

Matthew Neil Gehring received a Bachelor of Science from the University of Southern Indiana and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Delaware. He has lived and worked in Northern California, Central New York, and is currently in Brooklyn. Gehring has exhibited in numerous group exhibitions and eight solo exhibitions including recent solos at the Dishman Art Museum at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas and the Islip Art Museum in East Islip, New York. He recently participated in a two person show at c2c Projects in San Francisco. Gehring's work has been featured or reviewed in publications including the New Criterion, Art Journal, Art Review and Art Weekly.

He is currently an Associate Professor of Visual Art at SUNY Suffolk where he is Assistant Chair of Visual Arts and the Director of Flecker Gallery.



Zephyr
2015
oil on linen
40 x 35 in.



Equinox
2015
oil on linen
40 x 32 in.



Toro
2015
oil on linen
19 x 17 in.



Paul Behnke

Paul Behnke was born in Memphis, Tennessee and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting from the Memphis College of Art. Behnke's work has been exhibited widely in the United States and internationally. He has had solo exhibitions in New York, Philadelphia, Saint Augustine and Memphis, as well as group shows in San Francisco, Honolulu, London, Dublin and the Republic of Cyprus. He has been awarded residencies at the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation and the Vermont Studio Center. Behnke's work has been reviewed in *The New Criterion*, *Hyperallergic* and *The New Republic*.

Behnke currently lives and works in Manhattan.



Big Corsair
2015
acrylic on canvas
50 x 48 in.



Lucifer
2015
acrylic on canvas
50 x 48 in.



Devil Bat
2015
acrylic on canvas
48 x 50

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Photograph accompanying the essay courtesy of Matthew Neil Gehring

All images of work and studio portraits courtesy of the artists.

www.rebeccamurtaugh.com

www.matthewgehring.wordpress.com

www.paulbehnke.net

The artists wish to thank Robin Stout and Stout Projects for making this exhibition possible.

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