



Rebecca Murtaugh

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Alluring Repulsions

March 7 - April 3, 2014

Essay by Casey Ruble

Hiles Gallery
Creative Arts Workshop
New Haven, CT

In Favor of Buoyancy: The Work of Rebecca Murtaugh

by Casey Ruble

“I began to see my life,” said Anne Truitt in her 1982 *Daybook: The Journal of an Artist*, “as somewhere between these two orders of the natural and the abstract, belonging entirely neither to the one nor to the other.” The sculptor was reflecting on the straight lines imposed by man on the natural landscape, and on the countryside’s swaths of colors, which she described as “met, matched, challenged, repulsed, embraced by [one] another, none out of proportion, each at once unique and a proper part of the whole.”

Rebecca Murtaugh’s sculptures and works on paper invoke a similar contemplation. Straddling sculpture and painting, they establish relationships both harmonious and appealingly awkward: Organic forms coexist with geometric ones, and colors range from autumnal orange and smoke blue to antifreeze green and Pepto-Bismol pink. In the sculptures, thick, textured surfaces resembling blooms of algae or lichen temper the contours of otherwise rigid objects, while bands of color cleave soft-edged solids in ways reminiscent of the paintings of Barnett Newman or Kenneth Noland. In a series of drawings, sharply delineated vertical bars are filled with fields of loose, dripping paint. Despite their strict geometries, all the works have the distinct feeling of being living, breathing organisms, growing or shifting at a speed too slow to perceive.



Shrimp and Grandview, 2013, repurposed house paint and crystalline granules on plastic
22 x 14 x 10 inches

Now based in Brooklyn and upstate New York, where she teaches at Hamilton College, Murtaugh grew up in what she calls a “family of makers”—their Philadelphia home housed a wood shop, flat-glass studio, and full darkroom. The artist spent her young-adult years studying and working in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Richmond, where she earned an MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University, floating freely among the departments of sculpture, painting, and crafts. With a warm personality and boisterous laugh, Murtaugh projects a palpable energy and likeableness. In many ways, her sculptures do the same, existing as much more than just studies in composition, color, and form.

For example, the pieces *Leaner I* and *Leaner II* have an irresistible quirkiness. At 96 inches high, each of these thin vertical forms sports a thick encasement of dried, globular paint, with bands of vibrant color marching upward. Both are propped against the wall, but *Leaner I* remains stiffly erect while *Leaner II* contorts and sags. Together they seem like oddball siblings—one straight-laced, the other less predictable. The smaller-scaled pieces in Murtaugh’s “Aequalis” series engage in a pleasing kind of visual

gymnastics. Two trapezoids, also covered in the thick layer of paint, balance precariously in various configurations and color combinations. More monumental and restrained in tone are the “Stand” works—scaled to match the artist’s own height and width—which preside over the others with a calm dignity.

The titling of many of the pieces adds to their playfulness and conceptual depth. Murtaugh began collecting discarded house paint nearly a decade ago, and eventually the material made its way into her pieces—and into the pieces’ titles, which combine the commercial names of the colors. A dissonance is thus created between the abstraction of the forms in the pieces and the associations conjured by the paint names. A rather quiet plinth-shaped sculpture—pale pink on one side and soft blue-green on the other, with a dividing stripe of the two colors mixed—is humorously titled *Shrimp and Grandview*. A work on paper, in which vertical stripes articulate a lavender ovoid surrounded by scarlet red, carries the theatrical title *Mythical and Showstopper*. Autumn Summer, Reflecting Pool, Charisma, Refresh—these commercial names appeal to consumers through a calculated mix of fantasy and fact. Lime isn’t just lime; it’s enlightened lime. Dark blue isn’t dark blue; it’s a sophisticated regatta. This function carries over in Murtaugh’s works as well, hijacking pieces on their way to pure formalism and rerouting them toward more exotic destinations.

Nodding to artists ranging from Josef Albers to Ellsworth Kelly, Anne Truitt to Eva Hesse, Murtaugh’s work balances the cool logic of formalism with the expressiveness of post-minimalism and the mirth of Pop, all with a dose of well-placed humor. Although the artist never abandons the lofty goals of her abstractionist predecessors, she pursues them with a decidedly light-handed intelligence, shedding gravitas in favor of buoyancy. In the end her work still exists in Truitt’s “somewhere” between the orders of the natural and the abstract—but that somewhere is a place with a whimsy and charm all its own.

Casey Ruble is an artist in residence at Fordham University and freelance writer for Art in America magazine. She is represented by Foley Gallery in New York City and lives in Milford, New Jersey.



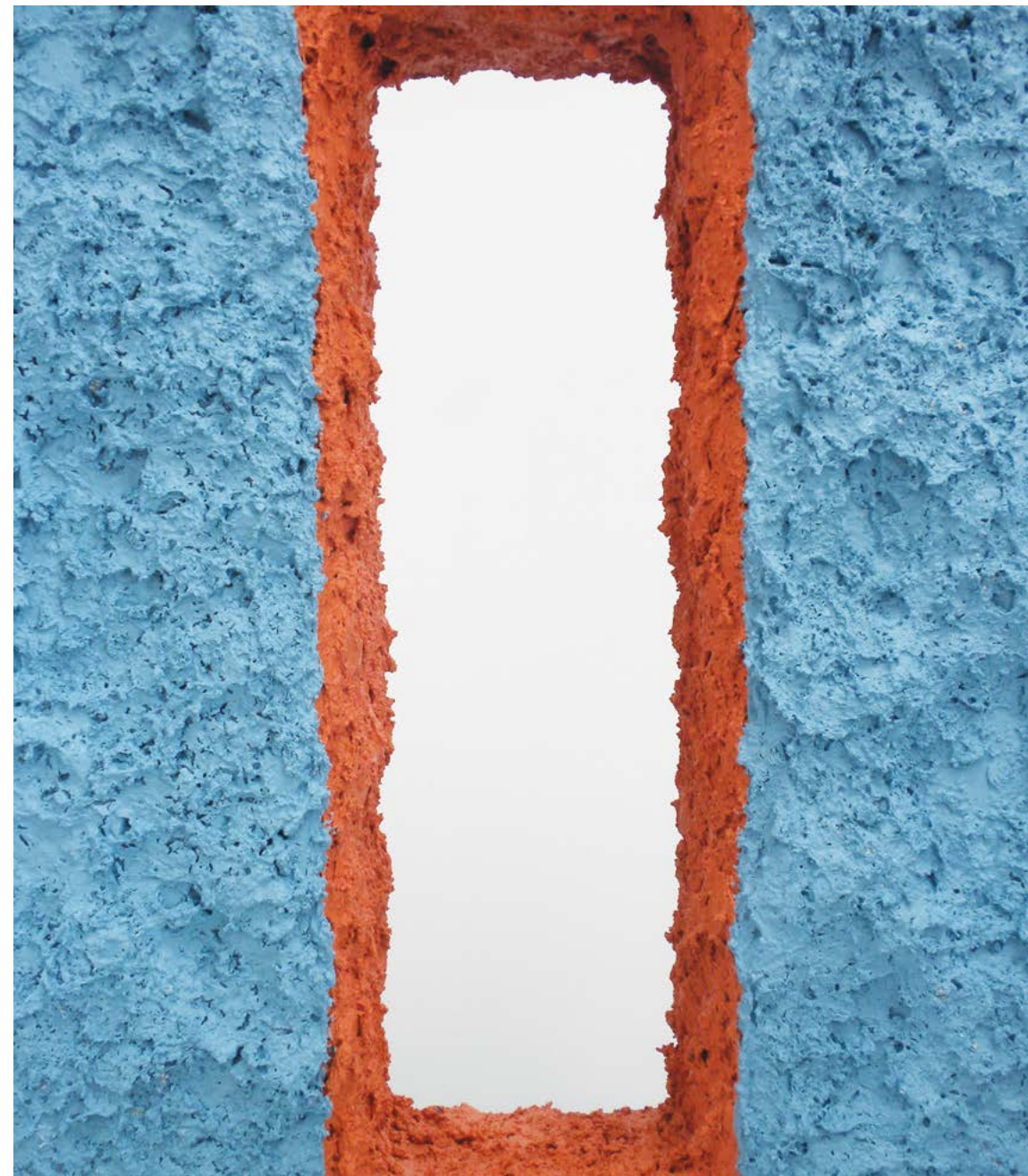
Installation view, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven, CT, June 2013

Aequalis: Radish and Lime, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 21 x 19 x 4 inches

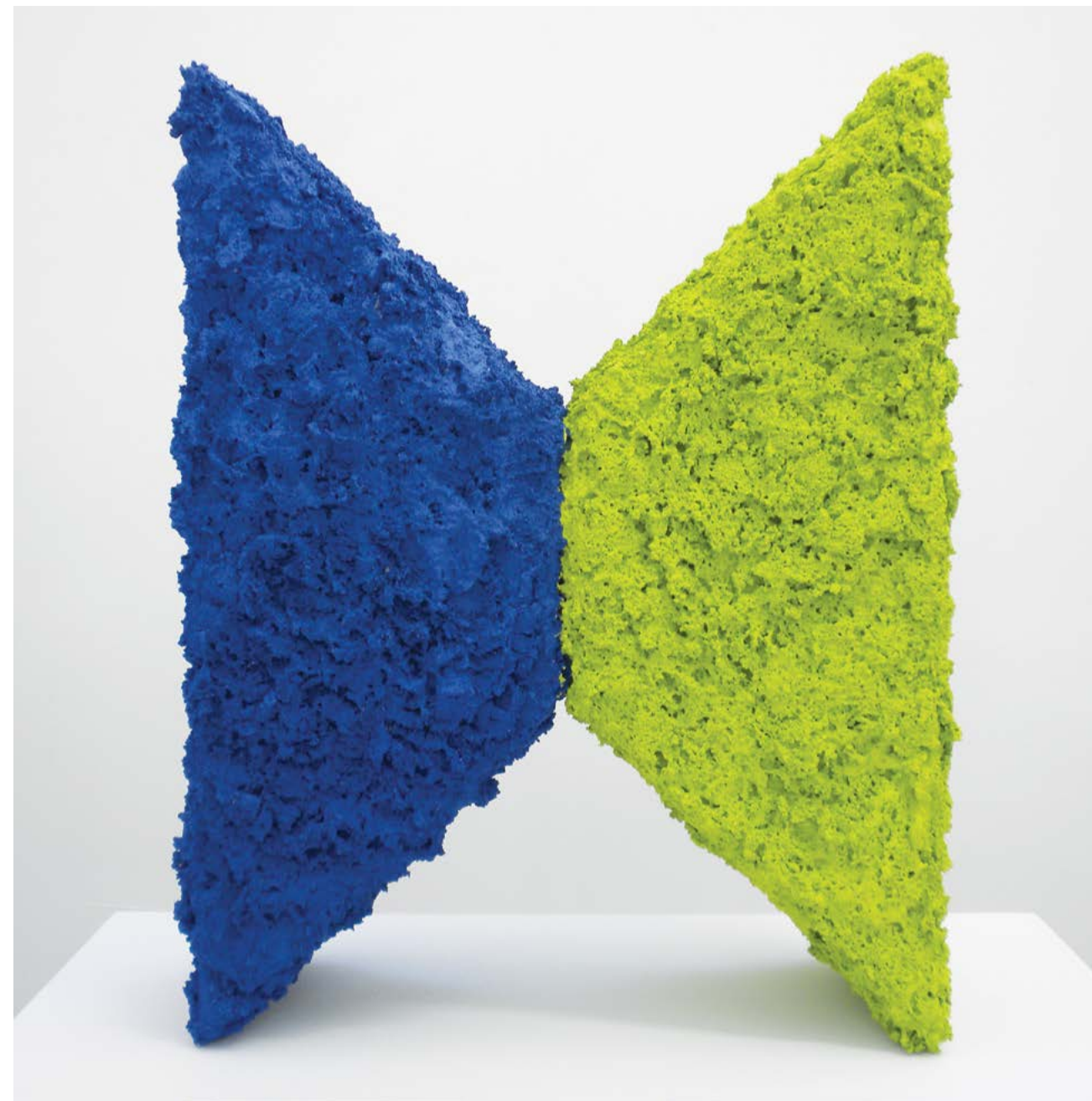




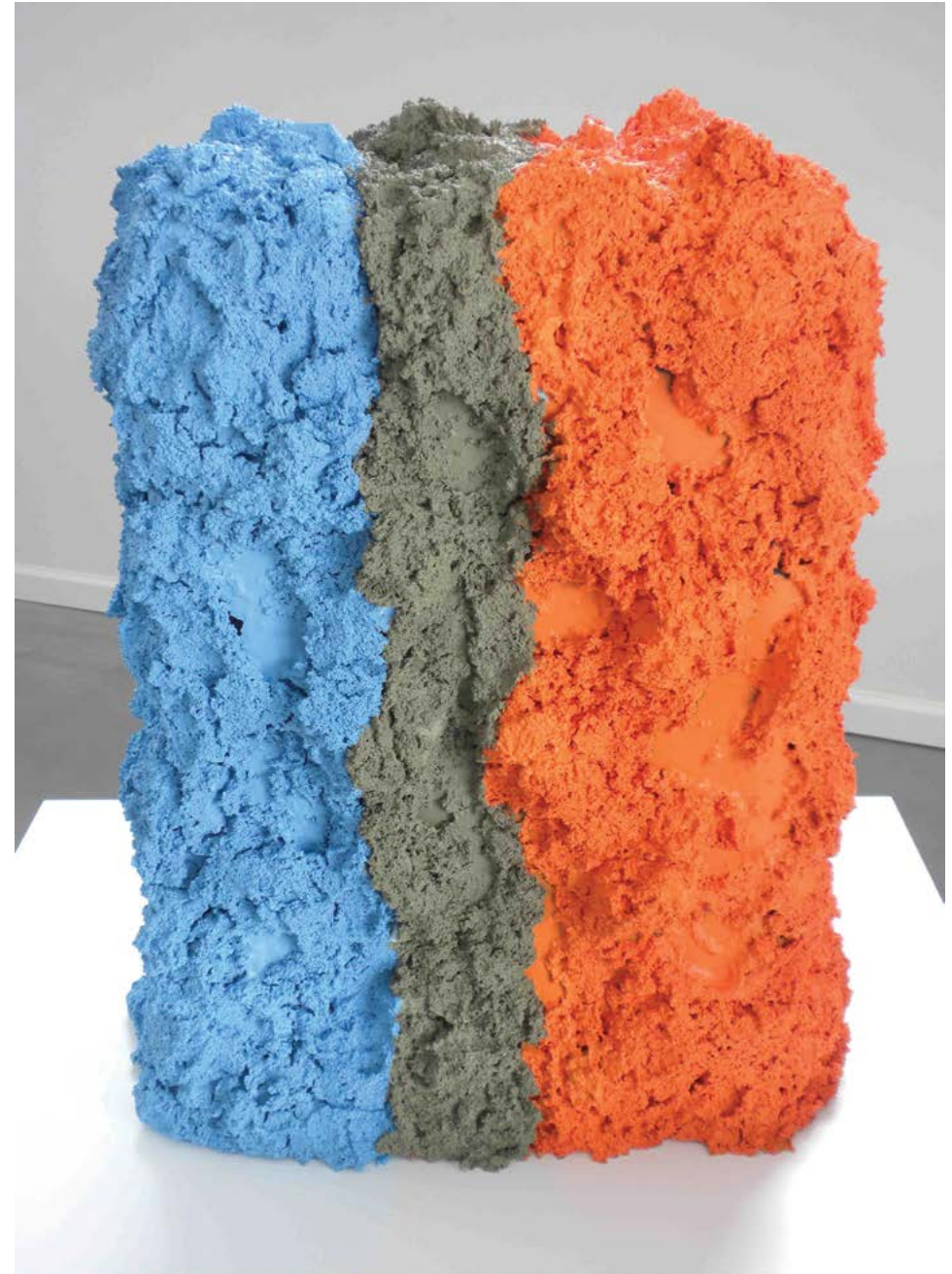
Aperture: Waterfall and Saffron, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 36 x 19 x 7 inches



Aequalis: Blueblood and Fusion, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 20 x 16 x 7 inches



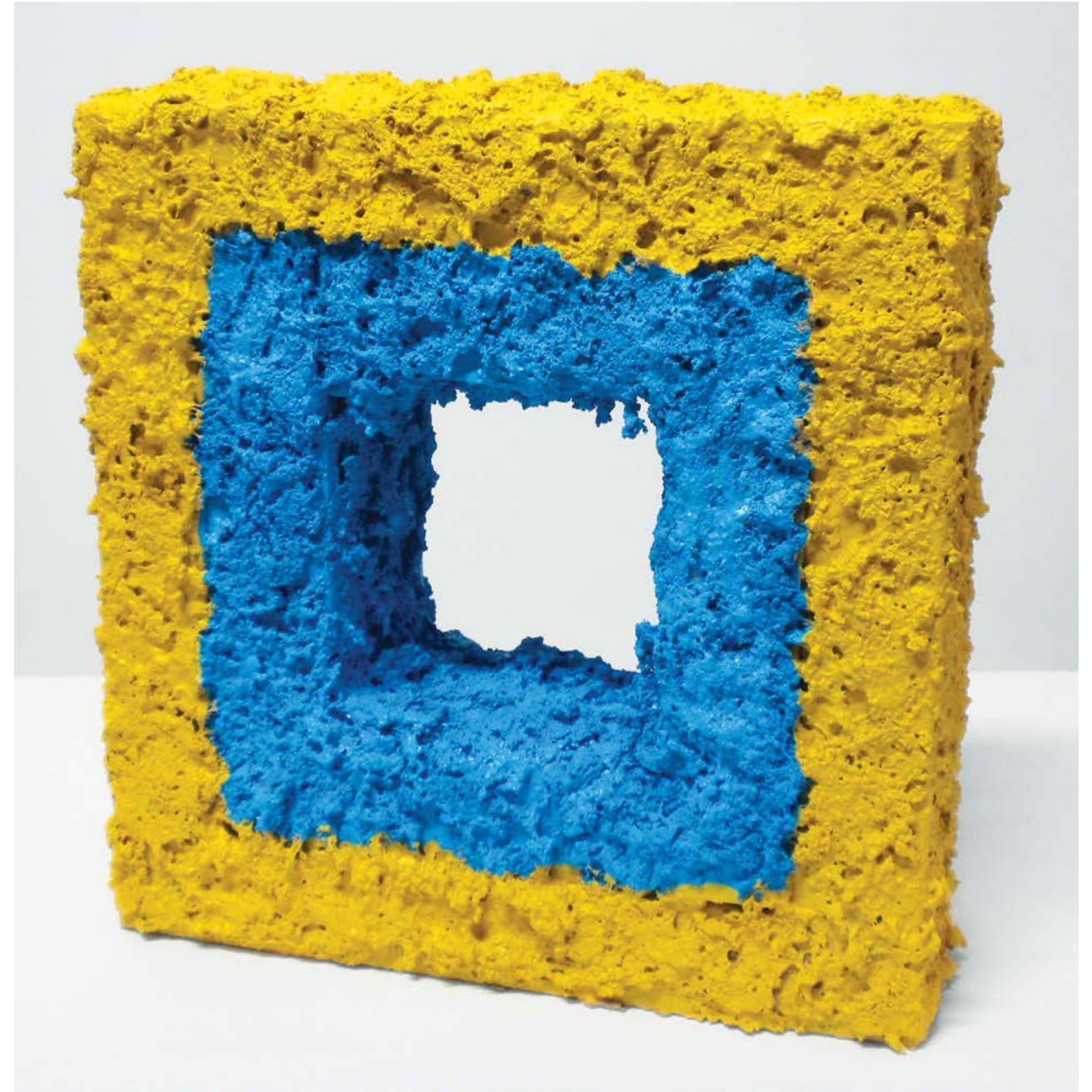
Sentiment: Dynamic Blue and Autumn Summer, 2013
reclaimed house paint and mixed media, 22 x 14 x 10 inches



Aequalis: Daffodil and Cerise, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 12 x 12 x 2 inches

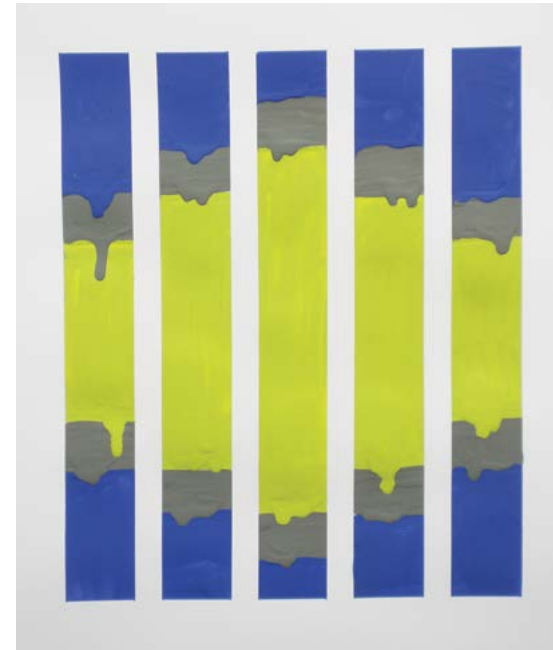
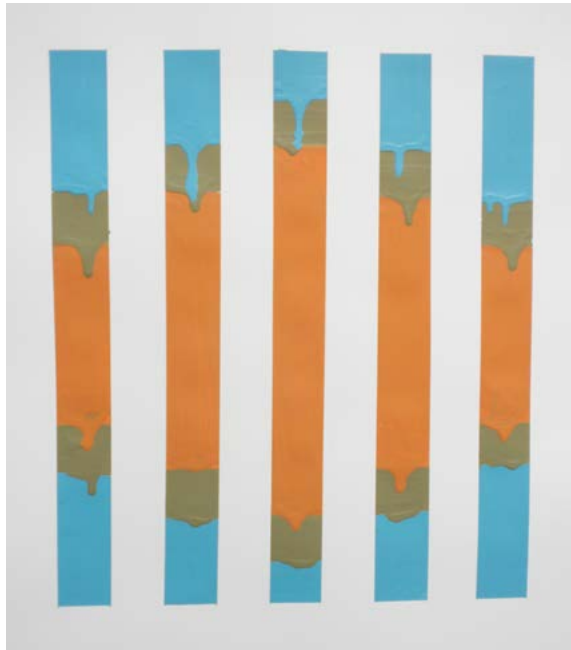


Aperture: Pencil and Calypso, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 11 x 11 x 4 inches



Leaner I and *Leaner II*, 2013
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 96 inches in height





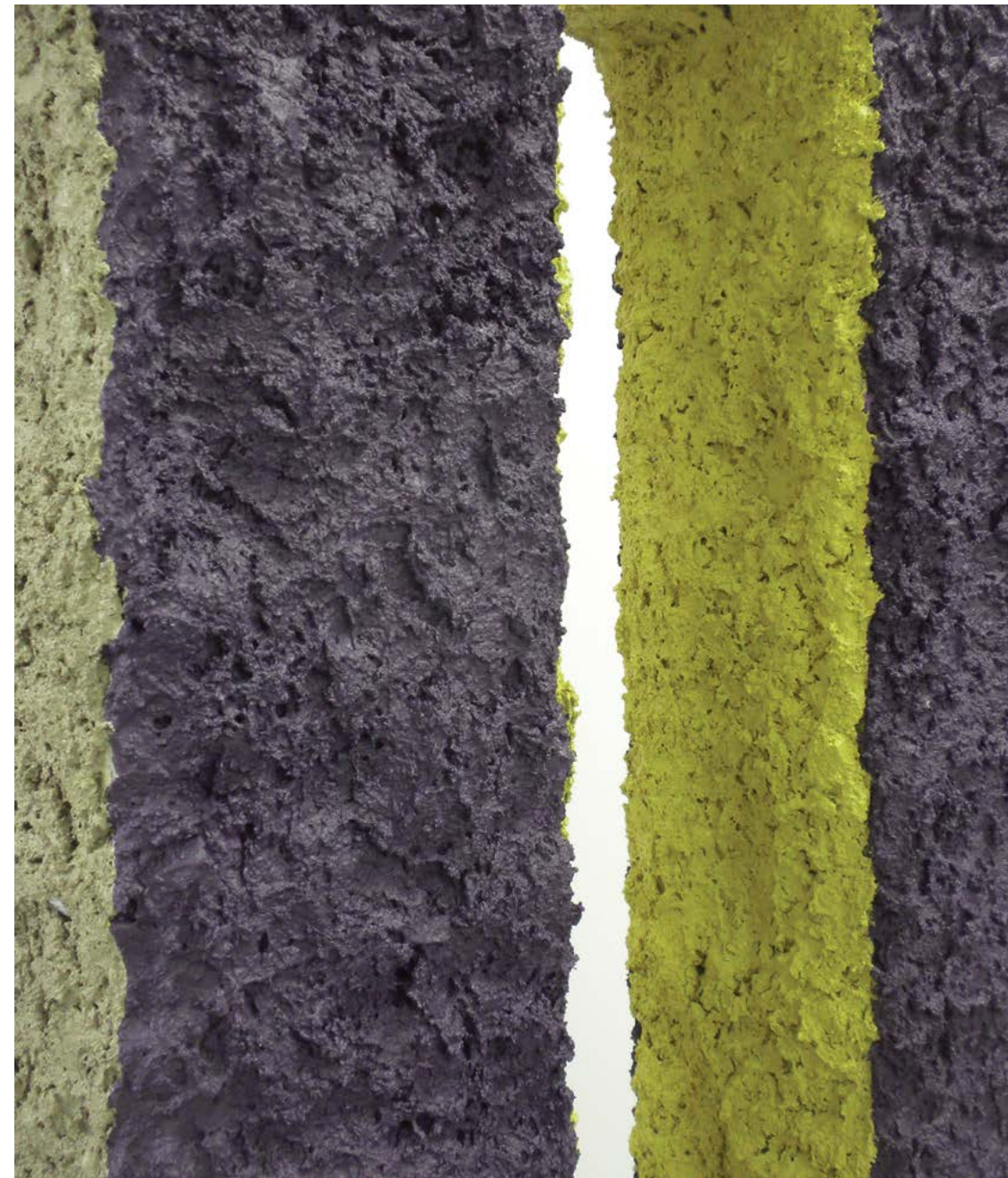
Autumn Summer and Calypso
Mythical and Showstopper
Fusion and Blueblood
Calypso and Autumn Summer
 2013, reclaimed house paint on paper, 17 x 14 inches

Five Leaners, 2013
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 60 inches in height





Aperture: Lilac and Bamboo, 2014
reclaimed house paint, wood, and mixed media, 69 x 24 x 9 inches



Stand: Alea and Chivalry Copper, 2013
reclaimed house paint and mixed media, 60 x 20 x 12 inches





Rebecca Murtaugh

Education

Virginia Commonwealth University, Master of Fine Arts, 2001
Pennsylvania State University, Bachelor of Science, 1995

Selected Solo and Two Person Exhibitions

- 2014 Hiles Gallery, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven, CT, *Alluring Repulsions*
- 2012 Delaware Center for Contemporary Art, Wilmington, DE, *Intimate Constructions*
- 2011 Estel Gallery, Nashville, TN, *Fluidity* (two person)
- 2010 Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts, Grand Rapids, MI, *Temptations*
- 2008 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA, *Seductions* (two person)
- 2004 Kittredge Gallery, Tacoma, WA, *Color Coded*
Morris Graves Museum of Art, Eureka, CA, *The Termination of the Production of Writing*
- 2003 Pentimenti Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, *22 Day Window*
Reese Bullen Gallery, Arcata, CA, *Devices of Organization*

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2013 16 Wilson, Brooklyn, NY, *Meta Vista*
Curating Contemporary, www.curatingcontemporary.com, *Meta Vista*
Hilles Gallery, Creative Arts Workshop, New Haven, CT, *How Simple Can You Get?*, juror Robert Storr
- 2012 Charles Bank Gallery, New York, NY, *NurtureArt Curated Benefit*
Morris Museum, Morristown, NJ, *Toying With Art*
- 2011 Anka Gallery, Portland, OR, *Pixel*
Science Museum, London, Great Britain, *Hidden Heroes: The Genius of Everyday Things*
- 2010 Friends of the High Line, New York, NY, *Francis Cape's The Other End of the Line*, curator Ian Berry
Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany, *Hidden Heroes: The Genius of Everyday Things*
Frist Center for Visual Art, Nashville, TN, *Art Quest*
Sculpture Space, Utica, NY, *CHAIRity*
- 2009 Jack The Pelican Presents, Brooklyn, NY, *Old School*
Estel Gallery, Nashville, TN, *Rock, Paper, Scissors*
- 2008 Space 101 Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA, *Part Clay, Part Object*
Current Gallery, Baltimore, MD, *Made Home*
- 2007 Grant Gallery, New York, NY, *Sparkling Fresh Art*
Athens Institute of Contemporary Art, Athens, GA, *Transience: The Paradox of Being*
- 2006 Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY, *Everson Biennial*, curator Claire Schneider
Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center, Auburn, NY, *Made in New York*
- 2004 Rochester Contemporary, Rochester, NY, *(un)bound*
District of Columbia Arts Center, Washington D.C., *Existing to Remain*
- 2003 Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York, NY, *AAF Contemporary Art Fair*

Selected Bibliography

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Staff. "Simplicity at CAW in New Haven," *The Courant*, July 16, 2013.
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MacInnis, Stephen. "Have You Met Rebecca Murtaugh?," *Painter's Progress Blog*, June 19, 2013.
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Donohoe, Victoria. "Delaware Center Builds Worthy Show," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 4, 2012.
Staff. *Goings on About Town: Art*, "Francis Cape," *The New Yorker*, November 15, 2010.
Green, Penelope. "While You Were Out, the Post-it Went Home," *New York Times*, June 28, 2007, F1.
Bekman, Jen. "When Your Canvas is a Post-It," *Unbeige*, May 13, 2005.
Koppman, Debra. exhibition preview, *Artweek*, CA, May 2004.
Strauss, R.B. "Through a Window Lies an Alien World," *Philadelphia Daily Local News*, August 19, 2003.
Hill, Lori. "First Friday Focus," *Philadelphia City Paper*, July 31, 2003, 36.
Roth, Richard. catalog essay, *Virginia Commonwealth University*, Richmond, VA, May 2001.

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Hiles Gallery

Creative Arts Workshop

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www.rebeccamurtaugh.com

www.creativeartsworkshop.org

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All images courtesy of the artist.

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