

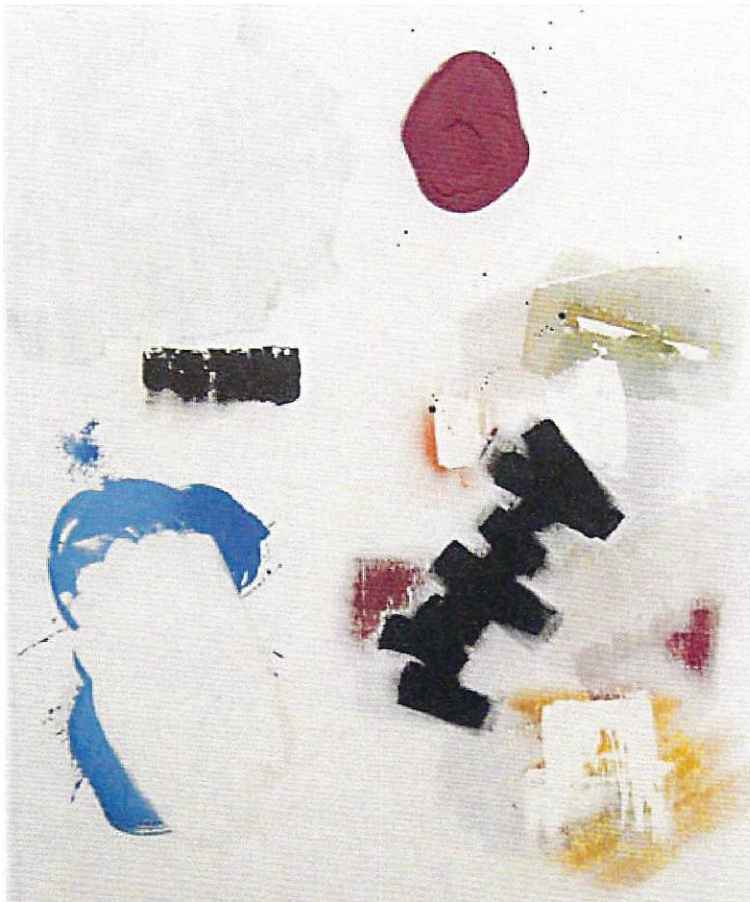
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The Material Sign: Craig Fisher, Marthe Keller, Phillis Ideal, Gwenn Thomas.
Curated by Stephen Westfall

Florence Lynch Gallery
531-539 West 25th Street
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By AARON YASSIN



Craig Fisher **Untitled** 2006
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 66 inches
all images courtesy Florence Lynch Gallery

The Material Sign is the carefully chosen title given by painter and critic Stephen Westfall to this show of four artists: Craig Fisher, Phillis Ideal, Marthe Keller, and Gwenn Thomas. Their work, as

Westfall writes in the press release, “reflects an overt participation in the material processes of painting in abstract work that nonetheless admits references to what one might call the “image” of the material itself.” This statement along with the title of the show act to frame the primary questions of the exhibition: What is a “material sign,” and what is “the ‘image’ of the material.”

First, before an examination of the paintings, it is helpful to define the terms *sign* and *image*. According to the Swiss linguist Saussure (1857-1913) a sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified and this relationship is referred to as signification. The paintings then are signifiers (a sound, image, written shape, object, practice, or gesture invested with meaning). *Image*, on the other hand, is *the thing perceived and represented in the mind*.

Craig Fisher is represented by a single 6-1/2 by 5-1/2 feet work that is typical of his unique form of abstract non-objective and non-relational painting. It includes many of his seemingly casual but masterful moves of drips, pours, splatters, scrubbing, etc. Fisher paints on raw unprimed cotton canvas and begins with many yards of it rolled on the floor. He then goes about his haphazard process until there is enough of something that it suggests a painting of a certain size and a certain orientation. At this point the section of canvas is cut out, stretched, and possibly worked more typically on both the front and backsides. Then almost as if nothing specific happened there is a finished painting.

Fisher’s work is often discussed in relationship to the French Support/Surface movement of the 1970’s, which attempted to strip down painting to its basic phenomenology of support and surface in order to build the process again while maintaining the integrity of these fundamental elements. Fisher in his own way does something similar, yet his work is more solidly rooted in a lineage from Pollock and de Kooning to Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler.

In Fisher’s paintings the meaning exists in the trace of their existence as signifiers and it is in this way that they become “material images.” It is only through their materiality that the residue of the essential decisions and non-decisions that occur in their process of creation can be seen.



Phillis Ideal **Flashback** 2006
mixed media on wood panel, 36 x 36 inches

Creating a similar quality of the material-as-image are the two square pieces of Phillis Ideal. Her paintings are built from varyingly thick skeins of paint that have been previously poured and collected for later use; the final works become a collage of their material elements. Ideal refers to it

as a kind of ecological process where her poured paint skeins become interdependent signifiers. As a result different parts of the paintings suggest cartoon outlines, raster dots, computer graphics, graffiti, and a wide range of abstraction.

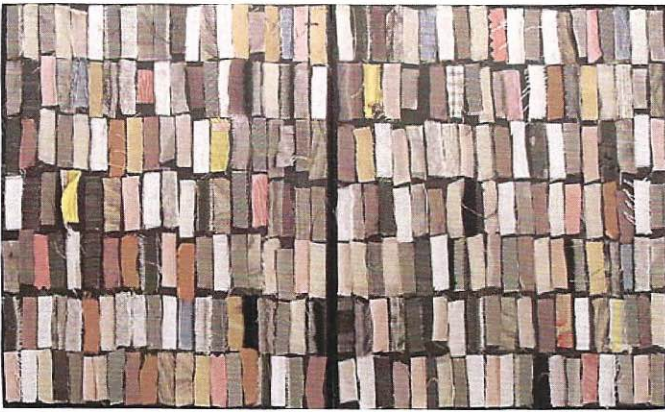
This process produces a unique conceptual doubling where the paint exists as both a specific tangible material and simultaneously as a referent of the visual language of different styles of image making. It links to Dada and Surrealist experiments through its use of collage and chance elements to create meaning. It also acts as a parallel with the experience of current technologies like cellular communications and high speed Internet where time becomes a warp-speed pastiche of information and signifiers. The work also references forms of abstraction from the Concrete movement led by Max Bill to the Neo-Concrete and Grupo Madi movements in Brazil in the 1940's all while showing hints of Lichtenstein and Warhol. The scope of Ideal's project is broad and even though these two paintings feel a bit unresolved they suggest the innovative and invigorating potential of her process.



Marthe Keller **Collapse of the Stuttering Hand = Return** 2005
canvas, acrylic, foam, vinyl, tape, stitching, grommets, screws and metal step stool, and acrylic on linen & mixed media, 83 x 70 x 22 inches; and acrylic on linen, 20 x 19 inches

The two works by Marthe Keller expand the material form of painting into 3-dimensions with a stunningly painted curved ceramic piece and a work in two parts, half of which drapes off the wall and conceals what appears to be a chair. Unifying all of Keller work is a compositional device that she emphatically refers to as vertical strokes, rather than stripes. These strokes become, in essence, the *image* of her work. They also act as a comprehensive signifier for the issues at stake, which include a complex, ironic, and playful questioning of the nature of painting as subject versus object, and illusionistic versus concrete.

Keller uses her material with a sensitive touch achieving sensuous, rich surfaces, and vibrant fields of color. Central to her work is an understanding of the fundamental role of drawing at the origin of the creative process—she allows it to exist unfettered. Thus she has great freedom and flexibility as she applies her 'strokes' from stretched canvas and linen, to tarpaulins and walls. Keller's work shows the influence of the New York School in their goal of sublime painting while at the same time embraces the paradoxical impulses of artists from Lucio Fontana to Cy Twombly in their use of a single seemingly authorless gesture.



Gwenn Thomas **Story of a Shadow** 2004
pigment print on canvas, 34-3/4 x 57 inches

Gwenn Thomas whimsically and cleverly broadens the idea of the material image with her use of photography and inkjet printing. The end result of which is, ironically, an image of material. First, she creates delicate collages of different swatches of fabric and other woven textiles often arranged in a grid of some sort. Then she photographs these collages, prints the photograph on canvas and stretches the canvas in the same manner as one would stretch a painting and presents them as such.

On one hand Thomas' work exists entirely as signifier as a result of its mimetic function. The objects perform all of the functions expected from a painting: they present an image on canvas and stretched on a frame, they create space that's in dialogue with specific Modernist works, and they feel painterly. On the other hand they become a new material form that is entirely their own and mediates between painting and photography. The result, while a fairly accurately printed and "true" photograph, creates a distancing effect between the viewer and the thing seen that forces the acknowledgement of the absence of the real. It is a perceptual conundrum that deeply questions the possibility of phenomenological truth.

In all four of these artists work there is something disturbing, mischievous and ironic. They continue to shake-up painting by questioning it and then giving it new life. They consider each aspect of their process and the specific material that's involved and they impregnate it with meaning. The work is not slick, crafty or pretty. None of it feels like the current mass proliferation of laboriously decorative post-minimal abstract painting that is often covered with a shinning layer of epoxy. A good look at this show and at these artists who have all been working for decades makes it clear that in the search for this years new "ism" we should just consider ourselves "ismed out" and instead focus on what's really good and continually extending its potential.

Aaron Yassin is and artist and writer based in Jersey City. His work can be seen at aaronyassin.com