



The Material Sign

Essay by Stephen Westfall

This exhibition brings together four artists: Craig Fisher, Phillis Ideal, Marthe Keller, and Gwenn Thomas, whose work 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 material itself. Fisher’s stains, scrubs, and applied skins of paint to the back and front of the canvas float in a euphoric space where the canvas doubles as a kind of

atmosphere full of chromatic and textural possibilities. Working in a similar fashion at the outset, Ideal creates an ultimately denser collage space in which fragments of earlier images and shreds of cartoon outlines are imbedded in surging skeins of medium. Her color is structural, higher keys are glimpsed through the polarities of black and white. Keller stains and soaks into the canvas, almost like a watercolorist, creating rippling, ribbed image structures. She then might then drape the canvas over a discreet object so that it swells as though there were a body behind the curtain, or else bind it with clear vinyl to create different levels of opticality. The canvas hangs free as its own self-identifying, materially structuring object. Finally, Thomas uses photosensitized canvas to record strips and swatches of fabric laid out in undulating grid patterns. The colors can be unusually sharp against a neutral photo-backdrop white, and the swatch images are perceived as puns: images of fabric on fabric and traces of the photographic fiction of the "real." The range is wide: Ideal's paintings have the peculiar density of the west coast strain of Pop and Beat artists; Thomas' textures and colors are, in effect, *de-materialized* by their photographic hyperclarity, while her compositions invoke both the post-Minimal animated grid and recently the open spaces of Morris Louis' "Unfurleds"; Fisher conflates the airy gestural spirits of Joan Mitchell, Yves Klein, and Robert Rauschenberg with the French Support/Surface movement, Keller shares some material traits with Fisher, but with an earthier palette and a materiality that also draws on the Italian post war art of Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, and Piero Manzoni. Her material touch is masterfully demonstrated in a curving ceramic shell that seems covered by her painted fabric but is really a matte glaze. Collectively, these four artists suggest that many of the concerns of post-Minimal painting hold out viable paths for converting studio practice into opulent, playful imagery that invokes and celebrates the ambiguity between material self-referentiality and the infinite material and imagistic inventory of the world beyond the studio walls. This openness to the "doubling" between concrete materiality and sign invites an ironic consciousness into the operations of abstraction, where it both subverts and reinvigorates an imaginative impulse that is too often beholden to constraining and exhausting notions of clarity and purity. They celebrate a layered art as a response to our layered world.