

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

Paul Sietsema

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The fifteen acrylic ink drawings by Paul Sietsema exhibited here toy with the afterlife of medium-specificity in an age Rosalind Krauss has described as “post-medium.” Best known as a filmmaker, in these works Sietsema subjects the medium of painting to the language of photography. Controlled and precise, these paintings seem to be the work of a machine rather than the artist’s hand; they resemble large-scale photograms, collages of newsprint, and photographed pools of gray-blue paint. The diptych *Boat drawing*, 2010, renders the front and back of an aged chromogenic print. Watery inks in muted tones reproduce every idiosyncrasy of its absent photographic double, including slight tears and creases in the paper, mold spots, and color-printing imperfections. This trompe l’oeil effect recasts the question of medium in the terms of metaphor, suggesting that painting may speak best in the guise of photography.

Throughout this exhibition, Sietsema transfers the modernist investigation of materials—light, pigment, paper—onto a symbolic register. Several works depict studio tools, such as paint sticks, picture frames, and, in *Untitled (short cuts 2)*, 2010, cans of Krylon Short Cut paint. Yet it is often unclear from looking at these works how such materials were (or were not) used in their production. Elsewhere, in the series “Painters’ Mussel,” 2011, Sietsema paints photographically: He applies liquid rubber to resist an ink wash, and then lifts the rubber to reveal the white areas of the paper, as if the painting were a photographic negative. Given this symbolic formalism, the main challenge is to identify the role played by iconography of a very different sort: How do the charged newspaper headlines in two works with reproductions from the *New York Times*—the violence on the US-Mexican border, the delayed closing of Guantánamo—relate to the work’s self-reflexivity? The connection risks arbitrariness. As a result, the range of possibilities for art can feel increasingly circumscribed in this show. It is hard to know if this is the work’s aim or its limitation. Perhaps it is both.