

# frieze

## PAUL SIETSEMA

Matthew Marks Gallery,  
New York

For LA-based artist Paul Sietsema, the term 'currency' – in all its slippery meaning – is especially resonant. Known for his meticulously researched and constructed films, Sietsema also specializes in highly crafted *trompe l'œil* paintings and ink drawings that speculate on artifice, mediation and history. His latest show at Matthew Marks Gallery presented works that all pointed, to some extent, to the subject of time, not only suggesting art's connection to 'currency' as a value and medium of exchange, but also to how art objects transition from a marker of 'the now' to an antique collectible.

Sietsema's 16mm film *At the hour of tea* (2013), for instance, pictures a pocket watch, palette, skull, coins, Roman glassware and other vintage objects, all diaristically accompanied by recent calendar dates. Here, patches of paint dreamily merge with the textures of antique drinking vessels, as palette daubs blur into relics of museological display. Dividing each segment of the film is a folded paper envelope resembling an inbox icon that unfolds to describe a historical painting in the outmoded formal language of Modernism. Do these tableaux belong to our time? Can we even say what 'our time' might mean, given today's virtual telescoping of past and present? Such a collapse of temporality also informs the fastidious ink paintings *1988, 1990 and 1994* (all 2014), which depict years drawn from building inscriptions and modified for their personal resonance to the artist. While these *trompe l'œil* feats echo Minimalist objects and On Kawara's painterly calendar, they also resemble epitaphs on tombstones. I, too, will one day pass, Sietsema suggests, as will all art, into an endless sequence of historical markers flattened, made equivalent and unmoored by increasing technological mediation.

If, as André Bazin wrote, photography 'embalms time, rescuing it [...] from its these and many of Sietsema's works mimic the language of photography. In three ink drawings on paper, *Black veil*, *Plank drawing* and *Painted oval* (all 2014), Sietsema offers us impeccable photographic replicas that, although reminiscent of Sigmar Polke's half-tone patterns, owe more to Mark

Tansey's meta-paintings. *Black veil*, for example, depicts a hand folding a veil as if alluding to painting as an act of illusionism – since what does a veil promise if not there being something behind it? Alternatively, *Plank drawing* depicts a hand holding a painted board as if allegorizing the Modernist picture plane, while *Painted oval* shows an oval shape being painted in a rough style recalling Expressionism. While this type of reflexivity often characterizes Sietsema's choice of images, just as compelling is the laborious process behind these works, created by painting the negative spaces with latex, spraying the surface with ink and lifting the mask to reveal the image in a negative process paralleling analogue photography.

Yet, although Sietsema privileges photography, film and other mechanical means of communication, he also suggests that they, like painting, are faulty translators. The more literal *White painting* (2014), for instance, shows an antiquated rotary telephone with its receiver off the hook sitting in a pool of enamel. In this white-on-white composition and the chromatically ravishing *Red painting* (2014) – with its echoes of Alberto Burri and illusions of blistering, peeling paint – appearance intermingles with actual substance as the rendered image cleverly incorporates the material of the exposed canvas.

Indeed, such slippage between representational registers is central to Sietsema's conceptual strategy. As a case in point, *Palette drawing* (2014) presents the viewer with a photorealistic depiction of a painter's palette – its smears doubling as abstract marks – while the 3D animation, *Abstract composition* (2014), abstracts various antiques into prosaic text on a rotating piece of cardboard. Each object appears as a textual description punched through the cardboard in a method used for industrial stamping. 'Chinese Porcelain, Autumn Landscape, Victorian Settee, we read, as each collectible oscillates between an archived object, visualized image and banal entry on a discarded piece of flotsam.

This liquid slide from state to state, medium to medium, image to thing and thing to image is what Sietsema suggests ultimately equates art with currency – since what is more mercurial than our regime of virtual capital and fetishized, symbolically invested art objects? In this light, Sietsema paints currency as the ultimate symbol of our abstracted, slippery world. And though this show may have seemed hermetic to some, the key to its hidden riches might have been found in the first painting that greeted the viewer upon entering the gallery. In *Untitled zip* (2013), a lone Eisenhower dollar, the word *liberty* emblazoned above the head, slides down a canvas in the manner that coyly deflates Barnett Newman's signature 'zip' motif. Significantly, this is a found canvas, rescued from obsolescence and invested with value. And yet, despite this attempted recuperation, the drift depicted in the painting is unstoppable; as this index of the moment – this coveted 'liberty' – slips slowly out of circulation and into history.

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