

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Adam Henry: Parts to a Whole

OPINION



Adam Henry, Installation view, photo credit: Charles Benton. Courtesy of Candice Madey gallery

Amongst a burgeoning market of retrograde art practices there runs an undercurrent of artists seeking to establish for art and its practices a new sustainable identity as a means of inquiry. What made his work different was that he was using painting as a platform primarily to explore the subjectivity and semiotics of perception—the polarity between painting as an optical event and a conceptual one. Taking his vocabulary from color theory, systemic and color-field painting, and cognitive science, his work focused on the difference between what a thing (materially) is and what it may descriptively represent. As with those works, Henry in his present exhibition at [Candice Madey Gallery](#) rejects at every turn the cult of individual expression, the magical thinking of transcendence, the pervasive appeal of accessibility, and spectacle. Instead with his present body of works, he reasserts his ambition is to use art as a means to engage his audience in speculative thought and self-reflection.

Getting beyond the fact that this showing looks like a group exhibition, one realizes its unity and complexity. So, despite the fact each work asserts its own specificity of form, medium, and content, they must be approached as parts of an integrated whole. If we need a model for what Henry is doing, we might turn to the Belgian conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers' *Museum of Eagles*, which is a meditation on the use of the eagle as icon and symbol. Another model would be Marcel Duchamp's *Green Box*, which consists of the disparate notes, sketches, and ideas that went into the making of his *Large Glass* and its narrative. Similarly, Henry links together varied works to form a rebus — a puzzle in which words, sounds, concepts, objects, and pictures are combined to expose a deeply structured network of relationships and thoughts.

It was my assumption that if there is such intentionality to Henry's *Overtone*, there must be one work that represents his guiding principle—a key to his cypher. Based on this, I discovered at first a number of red herrings: for instance, my first candidate was *Life Score* (2023), the piece used as the show's announcement card. Laid out on a musical staff similar to a song, it instructs the viewer to breath in and out, and to continue to do so. Its three main components are dual information systems based on denoting sound, and the implication that the viewer is in this situation to some degree, a performer even if they are not aware that they are. Yet, these terms quickly reveal that they are not applicable to all the works presented.

Another likely candidate was the work, *Overtone*, which serves the dual purposes as the show's title and that of a small, altered photograph. A small circle has been cut from it and rotated so as to bring part of the margin into the picture. This work hangs alone at the entry to the show. The term *Overtone* is both a musical term for a harmonic effect and an insinuation in the sense: something may have a sinister overtone. While its dual meaning and displacement is indicative of Henry's various strategies, it too does not unlock the whole of the show. What does the trick is the work *The Beat* (2023), which occupies a niche in the gallery wall. It consists of a stack of hardcover and paperback copies of Felix Deleuze's book *Difference and Repetition*. There are three paperback copies for each hardcover copy setting up 1-3 rhythm; the beat the title refers to. The subject of this particular book is Deleuze's concept of repetition in kind and difference in type.

As one surveys the variants at work in this show it is apparent that *Difference and Repetition*, supplies the general strategy Henry is employing throughout. *Symphony No.3 "A Silent Storm"* for instance consists of a grid of 18 photographs that appear to depict a landscape being struck by multiple bolts of lightning — its title seems to ask us to imagine the sonic boom of the lightening. Yet, with repetition and variation in mind this work comes to be joined to the two abstract paintings in the show (one horizontal, the other vertical). Each painting appears at first to be shaped canvas'—in actuality they are flat. All these works involve tromp l'oeil; they are meant to fool the eye. The lightning bolts in *Symphony No.3 "A Silent Storm"* are scratched and torn into each photo's surface, the paintings' effect merely a result of the process of how they are painted. Here as in his earlier work, Henry questions the veracity of vision. This connects them to *Aura Score in Two Parts (John Coltrane)* which purports to consist of two individually framed blank staff sheets once belonging to John Coltrane. Obviously, there is no way to verify this claim again, calling into question empirical and positivist thinking.

A by-product of Henry's strategy is, as we track the theme of repetition in kind and type through the show, other themes come to the fore. We discover not only references to sight, sound, and silence, but also to time, movement, and reproduction. These sub-categories all come together in *Score for a Conductor without Orchestra* (2023) which consists of hundreds of small pictures of gesturing hands plotted out on two canvas' inked with lines that can be taken for a musical staff. This is a script for a conductor unguided by a musical score. Yet perhaps this pantomime is how one is meant to conduct *Aura Score in Two Parts (John Coltrane)*, *Symphony No.3 "A Silent Storm"*, *Score with Three Point Rotation*, or *Life Score*.

With *Score for a Conductor without Orchestra*, Henry brings together his various formal, conceptual, and aesthetic concerns that order his awareness of the role that repetition in kind and difference in type, plays in our cognition and thinking. Subsequently, it might be strange to some readers that given what I have written, for me to assert that beneath all of this, Henry is a formalist who is concerned with the terms of art's identity and how the material limitations of his mediums surrender up new conceptual possibilities. This implicitly constitutes a form of resistance to living in a world of disembodied images and a technological thought rooted in replication. To this end Henry appears committed to a Benjaminian notion that art's content resides in its power to induce speculation, as well as its ability to give its audience an embodied sense of their own presence.

About the Writer: Saul Ostrow is an independent curator and critic. Since 1985, he has organized over 80 exhibitions in the US and abroad. His writings have appeared in art magazines, journals, catalogues, and books in the USA and Europe. In 2010, he founded along with David Goodman and Edouard Prulehiere, the not-for-profit [Critical Practices Inc.](#) as a platform for critical conversation and cultural practices. His book *Formal Matters* (selected and revised) published by Elective Affinities will be launched Fall, 2022. He served as Art Editor at *Bomb Magazine*, Co-Editor of *Lusitania Press* (1996-2004) and as Editor of the book series *Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture* (1996-2006) published by Routledge, London.

