

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Miami

Paul Cowan

Michael Jon Gallery
20 NE 41st Street, Suite 2
January 21-February 25

Braithwaite, Hunter . "Paul Cowan, Michael Jon Gallery". Critic's Pick. Artforum, February 13, 2012.

As a regional counterposition to the aesthetic lingua franca, vernacular painting is often populist to a fault. However, with the transatlantic popularity of Cologne-style "bad" painting, the distinction between local and global has been muddled. Realizing this, the Chicago-based artist Paul Cowan celebrates the myriad ways of image making by dressing the conceptual ploys of recent painting - rapacious de-skilling, outsourcing of production, and presentation within a diffuse environment bordering on installation - with visual mores of Main Street USA. The results, generous and wily, would seem at home in the Lower East Side and in Lake Wobegon.

For this show, Cowan contracted a sign painter to re-create the stylistic flourishes adorning advertisements on bodega and deli windows sans the ads themselves. On four small white canvases hung in the gallery, the stripes, whirls, and zigzags recall the diverse style of museum-worthy paintings yet cannot help but blush with humble origins. Similarly, the void left by the absent text equally signifies a tundra of painterly anxiety and the unfulfilled desire to offer a discount on corned beef.

The work is installed amid slowly deflating balloons that have drifted to the floor and a piped-in jazz tune, Bobbi Humphrey's "Blacks and Blues", which is just unobtrusive enough to become Muzak. Cowan's network of dissemination, thus draped in kitsch, is topped off by a sponge painting. *Untitled (Lincoln Park Zoo)*, 2012, is a happenstance pattern of sponge prints spread evenly across the gallery window. With its allover and geometric nod to art history, it also summons the glass barriers at many zoos, which are similarly painted to acclimate the animals to captivity. In this way, *Untitled* ironically quarantines the gallery from external systems and earnestly links the white cube and the zo, two sites of intellectual elucidation and places of weekend leisure.

- Hunter Braithwaite