

ARTFORUM

Paul Cowan

Shane Campbell Gallery

Artforum Reviews. April 2014. p. 265
Proctor, Jacob.

In 1999, the writer of a letter published in the British magazine *New Scientist* claimed that reorganizing the letters in the middle of a word has little effect on its legibility, as long as the first and last letters are in the correct position. "The reason for this," the author suggested, "is surely that identifying content by parallel processing speeds up recognition." In his first solo outing at Shane Campbell Gallery, Paul Cowan brought this (incorrect) thesis and its textual demonstration to bear in the visual realm.

In "Parallel Processing," Cowan presented seventeen paintings - fifteen titled *BCEAUSE THE SKY IS BLUE* - and two sculptures (all works 2013). Unlike the letters in the titles, the arrangement of works was anything but jumbled. The centerpiece of the show was a suite of five canvases painted in chroma-key, or blue-screen, blue, hung close together near a corner of the gallery. The first, third, and fifth paintings were seemingly identical, each bearing a set of three diagonal white line segments (actually unpainted primed canvas) that seemed to fall somewhere between the hash marks signifying a cartoon pane of glass and the dots and dashes of Morse code; the second and fourth canvases, also apparently identical, each had two pairs of such segments. In the opposite corner, near the gallery's front window, two slightly smaller paintings (scaled to match the window's height) reiterated the same two compositions, but inverted as blue lines on a white ground. Looking back and forth between these two groups of paintings, one realized that if images of them were digitally overlaid, they would disappear into one another. In a way, the foreground of these paintings is already background, since chroma-key is a tool via which one image may be inserted behind another, resulting in a seamless whole.

The other canvases in the show revealed the same format and strategy, and although their installation in tight groups suggested otherwise, each painting was identified as an individual work. In the past, Cowan has reproduced the abstract markings and patterns characteristic of signs handpainted for bodegas and local grocery stores, challenging the boundary between commercial and artistic mark-making. Here, the uniformity of the compositions and the shift in register effected by the chroma-key paint raised additional questions about abstraction's inevitable imbrication not only with the circulation of digital information but also with principles of universal fungibility and mutual substitution that govern modern social and financial systems. In contrast, other works on view resisted both circulation and documentation. In *Untitled*, a sculpture in the main gallery, a box fan struggled, its motor tangled in the ribbons of a bouquet of slowly deflating colored balloons. Nearby, an essentially unphotographable wall painting consisted of ordinary latex paint - visually indistinguishable from its surroundings - infused with the essential oil muguet, its subtle olfactory component gradually dissipating easy to experience the visual world virtually, such works quietly insist on the importance of the here and now.

In the fields of cognitive psychology and computer science, the term parallel processing describes the ability to simultaneously perform multiple operations and process information of different qualities. Parallel processing is crucial to visual apprehension as well as to the analysis of huge amounts of unstructured information in the age of Big Data. In this context, the exhibition prompted the question, In our hypernetworked society, to what extent is painting, or any art for that matter, encoded as data from the very beginning? Cowan's paintings hint at a day when figure and ground may eventually be replaced by signal and noise, while simultaneously attesting to the complexity and irreducibility of embodied visual experience today.

- Jacob Proctor