

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Paul Cowan: Parallel Processing at Shane Campbell

Generosity is rarely immediately questioned when viewing an exhibition for the first time. It is often a given in the work, in many ways expected, though it is not to be underestimated. In his current exhibition on view at Shane Campbell, *Parallel Processing*, local painter Paul Cowan stages a void – a scarceness of information and material that favors a sparse collection of work, mainly a flush series of monochromes with minimal demarcations. In a very pop delineation of surface reflection, the canvases represent windows. They do not look within, or reflect anything other than their own emphatic presence. - Stephanie Cristello, Chicago Contributor



In the series, entitled *BCEAUSE THE SKY IS BULE* [sic], Cowan's parameters do not eliminate the role of access, but instead present an actual affront to the very concept of generosity. In every moment of the exhibition, the image is held hostage. *Parallel Processing* delivers pure surface, a model for flatness (re: different than a failure for entry) that is far from accidental. If Cowan's motives were not so questionable, the output would be considered quite a feat. Though the largest question that looms is: why work so hard to give so little? It is impressive how inaccessible Cowan's new work is as a whole, the exhibition including only a few of his more well known

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fishing lure pieces. It is not a matter of a lack of content (generosity), or a reason to lack trust in that content (sincerity), but the fact that there is *non-content* – a purposeful negation of the vehicle of painting and its historic importance; a Trojan horse that parades as formal painting, but is perhaps a more conceptual project than we can initially give it credit for.

In order to give way to what the goals of that project may actually be, one has to resist the argument that failure itself is the point, or the entry to the work. An untitled piece near the center of the gallery suggests this read: a variety of colored balloons attached to a non-circulating fan, red, blue, yellow, and green – unsuspected, and left as a symbol of non-celebration. The important distinction to be had is that although the piece falls flat, it does not fail. There are simply not enough stakes for that to happen. This is a theme throughout the exhibition; rather than approach the work by what it lacks, Cowan defers to the viewer to question the exact ways in which it lacks, and how his moves lead to neither a presence or an absence of a phenomena – painting or otherwise – that continue past complacency. While the title of the exhibition refers to the ability to carry on multiple tasks at once, the show only operates on a single platform; its inevitable flatness. Instead of color, motion, shape, or depth, Cowan delivers the negation of those four stimuli on all fronts. What then are we meant to process? And, if anything, how can it be simultaneous, if we grasp to find even just one?



Paul Cowan | *Untitled*, 2013. *Fan, latex balloons, helium, ribbon. Dimensions variable*

Nine canvases total, of equal size, occupy the gallery space. The two white canvases with cobalt blue angular stripe markings, a set of three on one panel and four total on the other, are hung side by side directly to the right

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of the entrance, abutted against the storefront windows. The relationship, between window to “window,” is not architectural in the same sense that Blinky Palermo’s *Window I* installation, 1970-71, would be. The placement is a pretext; the height of the windowpanes remains the only physical tie to the object of the painting itself. While it is not architectural, in a literal sense, the placement of five identical cobalt panels is striking. Tucked against the farthest side of the west wall, or perhaps a better verb is “forced,” the blue panels vibrate and push against the viewer’s optics – allowing for a push, but no pull. Metaphor is pitted against itself, the window Cowan paints is definite and insistent; there is nothing transparent about this barrier, no mystery of what exists beyond the canvas. The obvious joke of course applies to pre-modern painting, a hackneyed allusion to the surface of a painting and its responsibilities to illustrate a portal into other imaginaries, other worlds.



Installation view, *BCEAUSE THE SKY IS BULE*, 2013. Chroma-key blue paint on canvas, 72h x 41w in and *Untitled*, 2013. Fabric, lures, hardware, 71h x 27w in.

Cowan anticipates this read and eliminates it – hanging directly opposite, are the last two canvases in the main space, panels of red patterned vintage fabric with the same cobalt on the surface, although in this iteration the blue has the task of delineating the window gesture. This is the same fabric used for the fishing lure pieces, though none of those objects are present in these paintings. As if to confound his own practice, materials Cowan regularly uses with some level of internal symbolism or meaning are recycled into new contexts, though one has to wonder if this abets his previously arbitrary choice in using those materials to begin with. The strongest piece in the exhibition is decidedly the one that blends into the architecture of the space,

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making the most use of the invisible and over-looked quality that much of the work supplies. Hanging in the entry of the gallery, or exit depending on when you catch it, is a simple curtain made of black and white patterned fabric with a drawstring, with two lures attached. The placement of the piece questions its own use, fittingly eliminating its utility before you can even approach it. As a curtain, it only shades one window, which has already been treated with a frosted covering. Here, the piece states its own uselessness – a level of sacrifice that has appears to have more stakes than the others.

Without posturing, Cowan concedes to the prop nature of his work, maintaining that the bait metaphor is still present, even if only in memory. Is it possible for a project that relies on such seemingly flippant goals to extend beyond dismissal? It is well known that Cowan's work requires patience – but I question how much unrelenting reticence a viewer can tolerate before abandoning the premise of any attention at all.

Paul Cowan lives and works in Chicago, IL. He received an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions, including Chicago Works at the MCA Chicago and DID NOT WANT TO [—?—] HIS [—?—] OF [—?—], at Clifton Benevento in New York. Stephanie Cristello is an artist, curator, and writer who lives and works in Chicago, IL.

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