

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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CHICAGO

Tony Lewis

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In *The "Calvin and Hobbes" Tenth Anniversary Book*, Bill Watterson explains his decision not to commercially license his comic strips as an attempt to preserve the imaginative place generated by the characters: "*Calvin and Hobbes* was designed to be a comic strip and that's all I want it to be." "Pall," Tony Lewis's assured, sharply intelligent exhibition imbued with a nuanced political charge, placed Watterson's strict medium specificity in dialogue with that of text-based Conceptual artists. Lewis presented works from three untitled ongoing series in graphite on paper: nine collages of altered cels from *Calvin and Hobbes* comics mounted on transparencies, a large drawing depicting the word PALL rendered in Gregg shorthand (a stenographic script similar to abbreviated cursive), and two site-specific large-scale drawings repurposed as

View of "Tony
Lewis." 2015.



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sculptures, resting upon a third drawing that spanned the entirety of the gallery floor. Lewis also presented the latest from a series of “wall drawings” made of screws and graphite-covered rubber bands, each of which repeats an axiom from H. Jackson Brown Jr.’s *Life’s Little Instruction Book* (in this instance “Mind your own business”). Throughout, the artist deftly moved between two modes of drawing—as scholastic mark-making evidencing the human hand and as chance-based incident that is removed from that hand.

What unified the show was the omnipresence of *Untitled (Wabash)*, 2015, the drawing that constituted the installation’s literal ground, which viewers traversed in blue scrub booties. The piece—strips of gesso-prepared paper rubbed with graphite powder and taped together to form a continuous surface—echoed a procedure Lewis employs in his own studio, in which he allows graphite dust, the by-product of works in process, to randomly adhere to adjacent materials and supports. *Untitled (Wabash via Van Helmont)*, 2013, a semi-inflated-looking mass of crumpled paper reminiscent of a Claes Oldenburg soft sculpture, and *Untitled (Wabash via Lump)*, 2015, folded and half-disintegrated, are themselves floor drawings from previous exhibitions that Lewis wrestled into new forms for this occasion.

A *pall* is, of course, a cloth cover used to drape a casket. It is also a mood—a pall descends. No doubt such a mood accurately reflects the current state of civil rights in this country. (Lewis recently exhibited another text piece from *Life’s Little Instruction Book: 112: Never argue with police officers, and address them as ‘officer,’* 2015.) Utilizing chance in his procedures is one of the formal means through which Lewis questions any critical tendencies that would position his own racial identity as ground—thus mobilizing “drawing” in an expanded sense to question the cultural production of racially marked subjects. So, too, his reduced approach to materials—graphite and paper—is emphatically multivalent. The collages feature a number of Watterson’s comic strips covered with graphite and correction fluid, leaving specific words and sometimes thought bubbles visible; Lewis then pasted the cels onto transparencies in sequences analogous to those of Watterson’s book layouts. The resulting works prompt a question to fans of the comic: Would Calvin’s impish antiauthoritarianism seem so innocent if he were not white?

Installed in a separate room, the wall drawing 879: *Mind Your Own Business*, 2015, was yet another prod at pedagogical discourse. While risking seeming mannered, the piece effectively distills a social prescription so vague as to seem both true (one should respect difference) and insidious (one should avoid interventions on behalf of others). Indeed, *Life’s Little Instruction Book*—advice offered by a father to a college-bound son in the 1990s—might be seen as a compendium of anachronisms. For Ralph Ellison, writing in the 1960s, anachronism is “that imbalance in American society” produced by injustice “which leads to a distorted perception of social reality.” Ellison went on to argue that Romare Bearden counteracted such cloudy vision, in his collages, by transforming anachronism into “style, a device of his personal vision.” So too—albeit through an entirely different set of art-historical devices—does Lewis.

—Solveig Nelson

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