

JOE FYFE *make me one with everything*

by David Rhodes

LONGHOUSE PROJECTS | DECEMBER 12, 2014 – FEBRUARY 7, 2015

In Joe Fyfe's work, the inherent characteristics of any given material are presented foremost and combined with a sense of highly nuanced formal invention. Materials and objects are sewn, glued, tied, or left leaning together; there is no idealization or "neutral ground" sought for painting—and painting and its possibilities is the subject of this exhibition—as medium specific.

Displacement is regarded as a normal state—wood, fabric, and paint gestures are rehomed as fragments of a precise composition. Moving around the exhibition, everything here can be seen as having already existed somewhere else out in the world—be it a banner or a gestural mark, it can also be seen as interchangeable and capable of surprising and unexpected reconfiguration. There are stretched rectangular paintings of different sizes, objects placed against a wall or on the floor. One piece is suspended from the ceiling and several are pinned to the wall, the fabric suspended above or reaching the floor. Framed collages use found elements as well as photographs from Fyfe's travels. A national flag can be a pictorial support, a coat of paint on a fence, a pictorial invention. The idea of the found object, as Duchamp would have it, is turned on its head, as it becomes one more resource for painting. Though Fyfe is primarily an artist, he has also written on art and curated exhibitions.



There is no high and low in Fyfe's work, everything is, one senses, fair game. Though having said this, it is clear that in the particular selection of materials, often objects or fabrics found

out of doors and many from his travels in Vietnam and Cambodia, indicates an interest in the way quotidian forms of urban or rural improvisation—the building of dwellings or fences, decorative and practical use of material—reflect socio-economic realities of local people. Fyfe resourcefully makes use of obdurate materials, whether patching a wall or using collage in a painting. Improvisation, re-use, and reconfiguration are all at play. “Cradle” (2013), a black broken car fender containing a piece of black fabric and an incomplete sign with the letters, “k-i-n,” is situated high on a wall. What the piece is materially is clear, as is the connotation of the title. However, in considering the piece formally and conceptually there is as much humor or gravitas as the viewer decides, given the fractured quality of the constituent parts and the Beckett-like deftness of their piecing together.

In response to a question from Keith Sonnier published in a catalog in 2012—the text of which consisted of 20 questions from artists and writers invited by Matthew Higgs—about the relation of material and concept to form, Fyfe quoted the British architectural critic Reyner Banham, who had defined Brutalist architecture as having three main qualities: formal legibility of plan, clear exhibition of structure, and valuation of materials for their inherent qualities as “found.” Fyfe identified with these qualities to such an extent that he said it closely approximated his artistic program of the last 20 years. Fyfe clearly brings about results very dissimilar to the Brutalist buildings themselves: it is only in the use of materials for their individual qualities together with the clarity of their combination that any aims are shared. Visiting the Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel exhibition at Dia Foundation in 1988 proved crucial for Fyfe, and it’s not difficult to see the connections in this current exhibition—in the directness, lightness of touch, and willingness to work paintings’ formal elements beyond a simple geometric frame.

Returning to the rectangle in some cases, take “Bull” (2014), or “Large Kappabashi Painting II” (2014), Fyfe resolves compositional issues within a shape that he has shown to be optional rather than a given in his own painting, as well as in so doing aligning himself with a tradition of post-1945 French painting, namely the Supports/Surfaces movement, that he has played a part in bringing to the attention of a North American audience. Overlooked in comparison to developments in painting this side of the Atlantic, artists such as André-Pierre Arnal and Claude Viallat—both included in Canada’s 2014 *Supports/Surfaces* exhibition, for which Fyfe provided one of the catalog texts—are beginning to finally get their due.

In terms of assemblage or collage, Fyfe tends to recall the lyrical abstractions of Serge Poliakoff rather than Rauschenberg, say; the fact that they are freestanding objects and wall-based three-dimensional pieces notwithstanding. This could have to do with Fyfe and Poliakoff's pictorial and compositional affinities, rather than an interest in the extension of sculptural forms per se, and an insistence on abstraction despite the many text fragments or photo images incorporated into a piece. In shifting registers between formal precision and street reclaimed material, Fyfe is in fact recasting aspects of abstraction. There is a lightness of touch evident throughout the exhibition that results in a formal balance devoid of overworking. It is in Fyfe's willingness to present found materials for what they are and place them in new configurations that he succeeds in extending ideas about painting beyond the necessity of a rectangular window of space—to its limits, but no further, as painting remains his key subject. To go further would be to forego this.

