

**LIST OF WORKS:**

**Ufuk Gueray:** *Parts*, 2013; *Not Good/Good*, 2014; *Market*, 2014, all works oil on canvas.

**Keeley Haftner:** *LBB 1*, Lite-Brite pegs, plastic, paper, light box, 2013; *Grass Painting*, Kentucky Bluegrass sod, grass paint, poplar, 2015; *Black Velvet Monochrome*, black velvet, latex, canvas, 2013; *Industrial Wallpaper*, wallpaper, silkscreen, wood support, 2013.

**Laura Payne:** *Hex VII*, 2016; *Dodec II*, 2016; *Hex XXIV*, 2016; *Hex I*, 2016; *Dec II*, 2016; *Non II*, 2016, all works acrylic on panel.

**Adrian Stimson:** *Post Modern Bison*, bison hide, cedar frame, 2007.

**David Stonhouse:** *Snow Sanctum*, acrylic, latex, plaster, wall filler on wood, 2016; *Pomelo Baby Ccino*, acrylic, latex, foamcore, plaster, found fabric on panel, 2016; *Meat Grid*, acrylic, watercolour, gouache, fabric paint, collage, 2015; *Pure form*, acrylic plaster, 2016; *Sky*, acrylic, plaster, foamcore, 2016; *Slough*, acrylic, plaster, foamcore, 2016.

**Robert Taite:** *never stayed up*, latex, wood, canvas, 2016; *glowy petroleum space*, latex, panel, MDF, 2016; *untitled—Interior Latex Eggshell*, latex, canvas, wood, 2016; *stacked frames*, latex, canvas, wood, 2015; *Reconfigured Modular*, latex, canvas, wood, 2016; *untitled—Ambient Bangs*, latex, canvas, wood, finished maple, 2014.

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Plastic Rhymes*, guest curated by Alex King and features the works of Keeley Haftner, Adrian Stimson, Ufuk Gueray, Robert Taite, Laura Payne, and David Stonhouse presented at the Estevan Art Gallery & Museum, from January 20<sup>th</sup>— February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

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# PLASTIC RHYMES

Ufuk Gueray  
 Keeley Haftner  
 Laura Payne  
 Adrian Stimson  
 David Stonhouse  
 Robert Taite

Curated by Alex King

Estevan Art Gallery & Museum  
 January 20th—February 24th, 2017

Conceptually, aesthetically, and in their making, the presence of both the digital and the painterly exist simultaneously. The work relies on an image-editing program to aid composition, and gives the software the painter’s role of interpreting and arranging colour, but it can only be realised beyond the screen by age-old, labour intensive painterly technique. Payne’s work finds itself poised between painting and the digital epoch of the age of reproduction.

Of painting, art historian James Elkins observed that it can hardly breathe under its own historical weight<sup>8</sup>. Yet for these artists, there is room to be found in the contemporary conditions in which their meta-critical artworks are produced. Associative and phenomenological readings from colour and material choices, arrangements, and critical methodologies propose that painting continues to malleable, contemporary and full of unexpected poetic possibilities.

<sup>1</sup> *Life with Picasso*, Francoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, 1964, McGraw Hill, p.120

<sup>2</sup> Stimson, 2012, p77

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal-Schubert, p.34, *Making a Noise! Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community* by Lee-Ann Martin, 2003, Banff Curatorial Institute

<sup>4</sup> A Eurocentric reading or painting, in particular

<sup>5</sup> Greenberg’s seminal essay, *Avant Garde and Kitsch* (1939) set out his definition of Modernism and remains a dominant and criticised theory. He advocated for the “high art” of “pure” painting, distinguished from the populism of kitsch in the realm of the everyday. Greenberg visited Saskatchewan and was a highly influential figure in the development of prairie modernist painting.

<sup>6</sup> Martin was a painter of minimalist, soaring canvases in gentle colours, pencilled lines and grids. Although associated with a New York coterie of artists in the fifties, Martin was born in Macklin, SK. The open prairie vistas and horizontality is cited as an influence on her work.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Taite email, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2016

<sup>8</sup> Elkins, 2004

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Martin, Lee-Ann, *Making a Noise! Aboriginal Perspectives on Art, Art History, Critical Writing and Community* Banff Curatorial Institute, 2003

This is an abridged version of the full essay, which can be found here:

[www.estevanartgallery.org](http://www.estevanartgallery.org)

**About Alex King:**

Alex King is the Curator of the University of Regina’s President’s Art Collection, in Regina, Saskatchewan. She has an undergraduate degree in Visual Arts from the University of Brighton, UK, and a Masters in International Museum Studies from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has previously curated shows at the EAGM, including: *Hide*, David Diviney and Jamie Wright, 2014; *Work Hard, Be Nice*, Heather Benning, 2014; and *Snowed In Felt Up*, Erica Mendritzki, 2015.

## ***PLASTIC RHYMES***

### **Alex King**

Painting is poetry, Picasso said, written in plastic rhymes. This referred to a system of patterning, or forms that rhyme with one another or with the space that surrounds them<sup>1</sup>. He was talking about the repetition of colour in an eye and a gaping mouth, the geometry of a window frame and the painting’s frame. Such compositional rhythm forms a network to guide visual thinking.

Extending Picasso’s observation beyond the picture plane, the works in this exhibition rhyme with preceding lines in painting’s overarching verse, but form anything but neat couplets. Painting’s building blocks, process and display are re-evaluated to critical effect, forming stubborn plastic rhymes that redirect rhythm and complicate their relationship to their oeuvre. They do this by expanding form, content and medium, troubling the canon, changing the fundamental usage of surface and support materials and occupying unconventional gallery spaces.

In Ufuk Gueray’s *Market* series, painting is reheated and served up with a sly wink. At a glance, a number of art historical subjects coalesce on his canvases. There’s the impasto Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes, the resolutely two-dimensional planes and geometric boundaries of hard-edge abstraction, and the rich palette that could have been carved straight from an Old Master canvas. These themes are all presented in the iconography of the humble sausage. The sausage, derived from multiple art historical sources, is adapted as a suitable metaphor for the location of contemporary painting within its own broad legacy.

In the paintings, the representational and abstract coexist cheek by jowl. The sausage remains recognisable, but its pared-down cylindrical shape pushes it toward abstraction. From there, Gueray chops the meat this way and that, breaking it down further into numerous bitesize chunks in an increasingly surreal menu of compositions.

Painting’s pedagogy appears in *Parts* (2013) and *Not Good/ Good* (2014). Using the language of the “How-To” manual, Gueray presents an illustration defining the compositionally good or bad in representational painting, paired with a gestural abstract. Despite his subversion of the absurdity of strict rules, these instructional shortcuts claim (however futile) some guarantee of success in the final work. Under the weight of the canon the painter must bear, the presence of anxiety looms. As one of the most traditional media, painting has a particularly close relationship to its own histories and, consequently, its many headaches. Its status as a bourgeois commodity, the supposed destabilising effect of the age of reproduction and critical questions about its continuing relevancy and limitations are all criticisms that have been levelled at the medium. Gueray exploits these painterly neuroses.

Animal semiotics are employed in Adrian Stimson’s *Post-Modern Bison* (2007). Stretched bison hide on a traditional frame establishes a painterly relationship between fur strands and the texture of brushstrokes, and the hair approximates the head of the brush in a double reminder of the animal’s role in painting.

A Blackfoot artist of the Siksika Nation, Stimson’s use of the bison’s potent cultural symbology moves beyond the medium by drawing on personal and communal narratives. A hallmark of his work, the bison speaks to multiple Indigenous histories relating to its material and symbolic uses as an adaptable, durable resource. The harvest of buffalo during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was a strategized instrument of control over Plains peoples, who were left starving. Stimson affirms the slaughter is analogous to the destruction of the people<sup>2</sup>. The bison’s own survival of colonial genocide marks it as a powerful cultural symbol. Here, Stimson monumentalises the bison, the living kin of the Siksika, to honour his ancestors.

The title aligns the work with postmodernism, a movement that Stimson identifies as an emergent retort to the Modernist canon. Historical counterpoints and parodic reimaginings are a major part of his critical repertoire. His gift for the troubling of dominant, exclusionary or otherwise problematic narratives is put to good work, with the title confronting the absence of Indigenous art in the modern canon and beyond. It is of course, a case of marginalization, as Joane Cardinal-Schubert stated, “Our artists have always been here”<sup>3</sup>. *Post-Modern Bison* offers a reminder that the use of hide in artmaking predates modernist painting, and symbolically claims its place. Stimson’s deceptively simple gesture intertwines the genealogies of postmodernism, painting and the Indigenous use of the buffalo pelt, bringing new meaning to all.

As Ufuk Gueray proposes, with painting<sup>4</sup> comes inescapable lineage, and its proponents have always been ready to respond to the medium’s legacy. Keeley Haftner picks up this thread to engage with the work of several major 20th century artists.

Yves Klein’s cosmic ultramarine, International Klein Blue (IKB), coated his intense canvases. The paint’s effect, he believed, was a spiritual experience derived from IKB’s transcendental power, and that the value of art was bound to this impregnated quality. In answer to this is Keeley Haftner’s similarly absurdist motion, *LBB 1* (2013). Stripping the pretensions from IKB, Haftner’s “pigment” consists of Lite-Brite pegs from the popular children’s toy. Klein’s paintings seem to suck light into their velvet textures, transmitting a supposed extra-sensory experience for the viewer. Haftner’s pegs emit light through tinted plastic and claim little more for the viewer than sensory pleasures. *LBB 1* seeks attention transparently, by diverting the eye with luminosity, a childlike gesture befitting the medium. For Klein, whose acts circled immateriality and emptiness, the Lite-Brites are a fitting response.

Haftner also turned her attention to the black monochromes of Ad Reinhardt. Canvases with such devotion to nothingness that even the gallery couldn’t cast shadows, Reinhardt’s work achieved an awareness of “no thing but art”. Haftner’s *Black Velvet Monochrome* (2013) perverts his philosophies by presenting simulacra of their strict formalism as a kind of high modernism for a Pinterest generation. To swathe a stretcher in readymade velvet addresses the masculine dimension of abstract art, suffusing the monochrome with tactility and femininity. And there are of course, the black velvet folk paintings exemplifying kitsch antithetical to Clement Greenberg’s modernism<sup>5</sup>. *Black Velvet Monochrome* (2013) sympathises with this lack of pedigree. It also illustrates that while kitsch has endured an uneven history in terms of its value, it has survived modernism’s best attempts at assassination. In the exhibited works, Haftner selects moments in the history of the monochrome to demonstrate that artists can arrive at it in any number of conflicting ways.

The Prairies were particularly fruitful for discourse and creative production during the fifties and sixties, and for David Stonhouse, these effects persist. The emergence of modernism and the Emma Lake workshops attracted artists and thinkers whose formal and philosophical impressions exist in the work of local contemporary practices in a generational trickle-down. Stonhouse has developed his own punked-up formalist vernacular. His pure abstractions, affairs with the objecthood of his canvases, and a reflexive use of paint are all wrapped up in rambunctious kitsch. In *Meat Grid* (2015) the picture plane is cut up by marbled strips in shades of orange, rose and blood. Between the bricks, mustard dribbles. *Meat Grid* seems to walk a fine line between the abjection of flesh and a carnivorous desire for meat, neatly packaged in an unlikely Agnes Martin-esque<sup>6</sup> orderliness.

Other paintings stimulate the tongue and other senses beyond Stonhouse’s snack-food palettes. Paint is applied from a ketchup nozzle, and on several paintings there are other smooth impasto areas. Flatness is rejected in favour of invasive, built surfaces in three dimensional layers, using the textures of napkins, yoga and baby changing mats to simulate an uncomfortable and detached tactility.

The architecture of painting and the integration of the gallery are brought together in *Pure Form* (2016). Here, the painting becomes a window frame for the wall behind, an overlooked space but one that impacts work displayed within it. Through negative spaces, the soft glow of the painting’s salmon-coloured reverse casts a hue on a wall that is often thought of as neutral and unchanging. Without using representational devices, *Pure Form* acknowledges the three dimensions of an artwork usually only considered in two, establishes an explicit relationship with its surroundings, and appropriates the wall as canvas.

Robert Taite’s work tasks itself with producing every permutation possible from painting’s base materials of wood, canvas, paint and frame. Minimalist shapes correspond to low-energy palettes, usually house paint mistints in shades of buff, olive and grey. The shades seem to reflect their fate as products mistakenly ordered and unwanted; the colour schemes of the quotidian. Taite’s formal concerns tumble from his environments and the things that are available to him. The resulting objects are very much of the gallery *and* of the painter’s studio.

Without losing sight of their static materiality, Taite’s forms act with fluidity. These behaviours make the paintings all too easy to anthropomorphize. Often there are languid actions, or inactions at play, such as draping, sitting and leaning. With this intimacy comes a sense of consciousness. But laid-back behaviours can also be used to hide discomforts, as Taite suggests<sup>7</sup> the paintings deflect the pressure of their public presentation.

For *stacked frames*, the frame liberates itself from its supplementary role. The work reacts to the concept of the *parergon*, an idea debated by the philosophers Kant and Derrida. Kant named the frame as a parergon; ornamentation that forms a boundary around an artwork to separate it from its environment. Derrida questioned this inside/ outside binary and asked to which sphere the frame belongs. *Stacked frames* asserts the frame’s force and drives off this uncertainty. With the wall as its stage, a pile of unruly frames extend over each other and subsume a slim canvas underneath. Responding to their own laws, they are typical of a body of work that has a life of its own.

Laura Payne’s work begins with colour. Precise paintings radiate kaleidoscopic strips, emerging from the Colour Field tradition and later stripy painters such as Kenneth Noland and Gene Davis. Payne’s paintings refer to this legacy, but also introduce contemporary concerns about the visual noise of today’s digital landscape.

In each, the palette is extracted from a single photograph that is then contextually disengaged. Payne does this by selecting a single vertical pixel column, and then using slit-scan photography techniques to stretch it horizontally. In painting the resulting chromal pattern, she translates an aesthetic form originating from the living world and then digitised, back into the world of objects.

Photography’s automation, its digitisation and auto-abstraction is set against a process that reveals itself, only on close inspection, to be one of artistic labour. Payne’s methodical colour bands are hand painted, but resist evidence of it. The original artefact is left with only a tangential relationship to the finished painting, and one that is not revealed to the viewer.

Payne exploits the illusionary gradient effects of colour combinations as they appear to the eye and sets them into geometric picture planes to give a sense of the blurring of a picture in motion. The paintings draw parallels between the disposition of the eye to read text or image left to right, and a computer’s digital scan, an ocular mimic. Pictorial movement evolves as the paintings appear to move in and out of three dimensionality. However, this is a con. They are as resolutely flat as a computer screen.