

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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MUNRO GALLOWAY *Belief System*

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Munro Galloway's recent exhibition at Soloway, entitled *Belief System*, begins with a Surrealist prompt and ends with pure pigment, rich and untethered. The show's point of ingress is a photograph of André Breton's acclaimed collection of objects: a shrunken head in front of a hybrid-machine portrait by Picabia, wooden Oceanic sculpture alongside Giacometti's "Boule Suspendue," hunting tools of Intuit trappers, and other flea market detritus. For Breton and his fellow Surrealists, the object was something to be transmuted through assemblage or juxtaposition, eclecticism as an attempt to demystify the art object and open the border between reality and the subconscious. For Galloway, a painter whose work has previously focused on formalism and the painted surface, this turn to Surrealism is adventurous.

Take "65" x 47.5" (What We Talk About When We Talk About Donuts)" (2014), a flurry of patterns, text, and disassembled body parts. Here, the rational and the poetic do not exist side-by-side as in assemblage, but in interlocking layers. Two massive hands press flatly against the surface as if waiting to dine at a table, while overlapping speech bubbles gush from the lips of twin faces in profile. Scrawled lines of text run across the entirety of the canvas; buried beneath layers of pigment, they are enough to make the viewer inquisitive, but their illegibility is precisely the point. Another layer shows a sketchy outline of an oversized brain, alluding to conductivity between the visual and textual but purposefully giving us none. And then there is the title—part Dada and part '90s self-help book—offering slick and ostentatious insight. It is a game of *cadavre exquis* compressed into a single register.

In spite of this Surrealist play, it is investigations of color that seem to truly energize the

artist. “French Nightfall Piece” (2014) presents us with a velvety blue so vivid and piercing that the eye can recall it for hours. It is a hue that can never be digitally reproduced—a mystical, Joseph Cornell blue. “You may want to reach out and disturb the pile of pigment,” Maggie Nelson writes in *Bluets* when staring at ultramarine powder in a vitrine, “first staining your fingers with it, and then staining the world.”

In “French Nightfall” and other works of similar color intensity, one can feel the ritualistic act of painting at work: fleshy peaches scraped down to reveal crimson and umber while swaths of ultramarine bloom and radiate above. There is a very distinct pleasure that arises from looking at such intoxicating pigment, a pleasure the artist pushes to the brink of beauty.

And yet, these paintings are simply pictures on the wall, objects on a shelf, and Galloway takes care to prove the concrete “object-ness” of it all. In *Belief System*, the paintings are not hung but rest on low shelves that ring the gallery walls like molding; in the back, a skeletal bookcase hosts small works on paper and artist chapbooks side-by-side. Even within the work itself, there are subtle challenges to each painting’s autonomy: canvas measurements remain visible; an underlying preliminary grid peeks through the brushstrokes. Paintings are not seamless, independent experiences, Galloway seems to say, but are comprised of multiplicities.

In their ravenous, esoteric installations, the Surrealists of the 1930s and ’40s believed the objects they selected were imbued with inherent possibility—connections completed by the viewer on an intimate, subjective level. Galloway is attracted to this philosophy, possibly because of his background in collage and printmaking, but more likely because of his methodology of color. With each overlay of hue, he asks: What if we begin to think of color as *object*? Such investigations echo the work of Matisse and Richard Pousette-Dart, but unlike his forbears, Galloway’s investigations remain at arm’s length. Like Breton’s wall, he layers in order to leave associations open for various gazes, and leaves us to wonder what flashes behind the painter’s eyes. Will he risk disturbing the pile of pigment, and attempt to stain the world?



Munro Galloway, “65 ~ x 47.5 ~ (What We Talk About When We Talk About Donuts),” 2014. Oil, acrylic and inkjet on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Soloway.