



This Is It With It As It Is

Lora Reynolds Gallery

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The extreme lack of fussiness with which artists handle their works in a gallery setting always stuns me. I was raised to treat gallery visits as something akin to visiting a zoo populated with very still and very dangerous animals. Even when I encounter a work that implores its viewers to interact with it in some way, I'm a little hesitant. It seems so against the function of those white walls and vacant acoustics to interfere by forcing an interaction, even though such works often intend to puncture the typical gallery reverie.

That may sound prudish or at least totalitarian, but it reflects a desire to use the idea of a gallery as a lens, a frame that purifies whatever it contains. But despite my particular opinions on the matter, I was delighted during my visit to the Lora Reynolds Gallery when I overheard artist Dashiell Manley explain the process of making his framed paint-and-glass compositions—glossy, abstract washes of gray and green paint inscribed with circles and flowing lines—to another onlooker. He picked up a work arranged on the floor next to a video, *Night scene (left hand, eight hours)*, of looped backwards-and-forwards numbers to show its reverse side, a geometric abstraction on dark blue glass contrasting the sequence of numbers on its other side, an echo of the film's visuals. He left the back of the work showing before picking up another. The front of the second work looked like a mirror, but was backed with another numerical composition similar to the first. Manley walked away, leaving both pieces facing the wall.

The works' fluid presentation and the casual attitudes about what constitutes their proper display may at first seem like more of the same—art begging for interaction—but nothing about the works invites anyone to examine their reverse sides. Fittingly, the gallery catalog denotes these images either as "side a" or "side b" but doesn't present both. Their depth as objects exists without invitation, reserved and coolly distant. In the gallery's other room, a ladder, a pile of scattered dirt, and the root balls of three plants gesture toward Math Bass' performance of the previous day, something like the fallout after a house party. A gallerygoer curious about the performance that created this tableau has no references to consult except for the aftermath. Manley and Bass insist indirectly that interaction is essential to viewing their works—not audience participation, but their own presence. These works deflect attempts to make sense of them, making them if not human, at least sovereign.

lora reynolds gallery

Barry MacGregor Johnston's installation *Margin Rising* accomplishes the same odd trick using slightly more narrative measures. A disposable camera sits on a concrete bookcase, its lens and viewfinder bound in duct tape, leaving only a bit of the edge near the flash showing. Though minimal, the installation becomes emotionally accessible because it is difficult not to wonder what kind of images the camera might contain. Johnston's other contributions to the show, two bannerlike strips of cloth—a turquoise chain on camouflage and the words "sharpened key" in yellow letters on cloth printed with the American Red Cross logo—hang on either side of the wall separating the gallery space, evoking a passageway between the two rooms. Manley's, MacGregor's and Bass' works conspire to make the gallery feel like somebody's home. An odd home, but one in which each choice—leaving an unexplained pile of dirt at the foot of a ladder or displaying two-sided works with absolute ambivalence—hints at large and unseen reserves of human thought.

Oddly, Eve Fowler's graphic and textual contributions, including the work that gave the exhibition its title, cohere less gracefully with the others. Using phrases from Gertrude Stein's *How To Write*, the works push the viewer through the stutter-step of trying to pronounce them internally, their stark presentation heightening the sequence's angularity. Stein's insistence upon repetition, nonsense and the singularity of its statements, matches the works presented by Fowler.

The artists included share an authoritative disposition regarding the interpretation of their works but nevertheless present legible objects and images. Fowler's works are the least metaphorical here, and while they ably convey and add to the presence of Stein's poetics in the gallery, their seeming candor blares next to the show's nuances. By presenting a series of works that gesture toward interactions with their makers, *This Is It With It as It Is* grounds itself in a moment that produces a tangible buzz of recognition in the viewer even if the moment is inaccessible.

S.E. Smith is a poet and the founding editor of *OH NO* magazine. Her first book, *I Live in a Hut*, is now available.