

...might be good

Susan Collis
Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin
Through July 16
by Katie Anania

Susan Collis approaches markmaking as though she were a stranger to the practice. Peripheral, everyday marks (staples driven into the wall) and the foundational marks of artistic creation (graphite scribbles on paper) are given equal measures of her attention. While she states that her new show at Lora Reynolds Gallery privileges this latter type of technique, she unites in this body of work many ways of “making one’s mark” through the methods of enlargement, repetition, coating and tracing.

Central to the show are Collis’ graphite scribble studies, in which she draws several overlapping scribbles and enlarges them digitally on sheets of white paper. Then she outlines the periphery of each scribbled line and fills in all the lines, newly thickened from enlargement with swaths of graphite marks, each inflected differently than the others. The works are an obsessive re-consideration of the time and effort that it takes to scrawl a line: a scribble requires no skill, yet Collis labors here over each line as though atoning for her initial thoughtlessness in scribbling it. Titles like *Think Twice* (2010) and *My Undoing* (2010) indicate the playful poesis inherent in her approach. Of course she thinks more than twice, as then do we. Rather than undoing, she overdoes (and thus deconstructs) the drawn mark.

This laborious overcompensation, extends to works like *Staying Power* (2011) and *Come back smiling (side)* (2011), which all appear to feature foil sheets of precious metals crumpled into balls. Upon further inspection, one discovers that these works began as crumpled sheets of paper whose facets Collis has coated in metal or graphite after wadding them up. Again, she follows a thoughtless gesture with a series of excessively thoughtful ones, seizing a chance mistake as though it were the gesture of a genius. This leaves her viewers unsure of which she values most: the gesture or its deconstruction. She’s an amateur with respect to the concept, but not to the skill.

These works are more or less better than those in her last show at Lora Reynolds, which explored accidental marks like holes and stains. Both bodies of work, though, have the tendency to appear neurotic or precious or gimmicky to viewers uninformed of the particulars of Collis’ practice. She has a kinship with Tom Friedman’s obsessive neo-minimalism and Kaz Oshiro’s pop-ish copies that is a bit hard to take at first, but be assured, viewers, that Collis’ project is much more earnest.

To underscore Collis’ sincerity, Lora Reynolds has installed *Woman*, a series of eight naturalistic drawings by Tom Molloy, in the room adjacent to Collis’ show. Unpacking Molloy’s and Collis’ respective approaches to hatch marks is a detective adventure in its own right, and you’ll find yourself walking back and forth between rooms wishing for a magnifying glass. Tom Molloy uses Vermeer as a starting point for his works, and the virtuosity Molloy displays is both affirmed and displaced by Collis’ careful, repetitive markmaking. Molloy’s pictures are drawn copies of Vermeer’s paintings but with the female figures removed, presenting a political dimension that plays well against Collis’ obsessive, formally inflected gestural works. In fact, the contrast is a perfect teaching moment— one gets the feeling that both these artists are using the same grammar, but Collis certainly doesn’t profess to be fluent in the language.

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