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### Interview with Peter Halley

**Peter Halley** The wall pieces in some of your European exhibitions appear to me like simulations of tactile European abstraction. They feel so gestural, but they are totally digitally fabricated, like the piece titled I- (2017).

**Ethan Greenbaum** That work was based on photos of hoarding fences. “Hoarding” is the technical term for construction fences, which is much more poetic sounding. I’m drawn to these as a kind of provisional architecture. They signal either decay or some new development going on—a ubiquitous New York situation. They’re also so voyeuristic with all their mandatory and accidental peepholes. The connection to European Abstraction is definitely part of the work. I’ve always loved abstraction and how it can support multiple interpretations. At the same time, I have a fascination with the specifics of the material and cultural world. I often find myself drawn to places where the two seem to meet—like those details of peeling paint on the fence. Photography is a way for me to collect and index these kinds of resemblances.

**Peter** I really don’t quite have the in-depth knowledge of semantics to describe what’s going on in your work. But you assign depths to the relief elements that are completely different from what they should be in reality. Yet, since low-relief representation is so convincing to us, we read your work as hyperreal, not illusionistic. It becomes a distorted, alternative world. It’s almost like taking a drug—and seeing space in a different hallucinated way.

**Ethan** That psychedelic sensation is important to me. In addition to the hallucinatory experience you’re describing, I remember thinking about how these works reminded me of the misalignment between objects and surfaces in 3D modeling. Many 3D programs use UV textures, which are basically an image skin that wraps around 3D objects and have all sorts of color and visual texture that doesn’t necessarily correspond to a form. I remember seeing this a lot in early 2000s video games—big chunky low-resolution rocks with lots of visual detail like dirt and moss laid on to make them more convincing. I thought about giving my work a similar excess of information, so it had the presence of the real thing while not trying to reproduce it accurately.

**Peter** Ok, let’s go back to the beginning—how did you start making art?

**Ethan** My parents are both ceramicists. It was the family business and what my brother and I did for entertainment, so making art was one of those givens already happening before it was decided.

**Peter** Does your work have anything in common with your parents’ art?

**Ethan** I think so. The pliability of clay—its tactility and the way it can make form, is a relationship I always wanted with art. Also, my father built many of our houses, which had a big imprint: seeing our home, with all the emotions and narratives it accrues, begin as raw materials had a something-out-of-nothing magic that stuck with me.

**Peter** It strikes me that you’ve never been afraid to explore new processes—just like a ceramicist. When I first got to know you, your memories of growing up in Florida were very vivid. Do you still think of it as a formative influence?

**Ethan** Definitely. It’s similar to how I think about my early experiences with clay—there is a physical memory in my body. Ultimately, Florida was a place I was glad to leave and that rejection was formative too. I left this southern, rural existence for grad school and a life in the city.

**Peter** You described that environment as a swamp-like, polluted dystopia — a place that was on the edge of ecological chaos.

**Ethan** Florida has a lot of natural extremes, like the humidity, snakes, alligators and the density of nature. All this is overlaid with suburban spaces, strip malls, and the detritus and garbage those developments generate. I had some pretty formative experiences of taking mushrooms and wandering around outdoors marveling at how beautiful and gross it all was. I feel like there's some connection to that in my art. Much of my work is reconciling the physicality and chaos of the world around me with the distancing power of media. It's like a world under glass.

**Peter** We met when you were in grad school at Yale studying painting. It strikes me as significant, given the subsequent development of your work, that you were in school during the initial phase of the twenty-first century digital revolution.

**Ethan** In hindsight, I recognize that the digital tools that became important to me like CNC carving—which uses a router to make cuts based on a digital file—Photoshop, and smart phones were all becoming ubiquitous around then. It was something in the air and it opened a lot of new possibilities for a fusion of painting and the digital.

**Peter** The show at Pact Galerie in Paris in 2016 was the first to involve a lot of CNC carving.

**Ethan** That was the first show where I focused on that process exclusively. I was creating a lot of work with the help of artist Michael Delucia, who is a real master of that process. With this work, I was using the CNC to make carvings from digital heightmaps of photos. Height Mapping is a way to generate dimensionality based on the lights and darks of an image. Basically, the 3D program translates grayscale values as depth to cut into the surface. This leads to weird results—like shadows that have physical space. I was excited by the way qualities intrinsic to photography—like resolution or value—could be expressed sculpturally.

**Peter** I like the piece with the three wood-grain doors in different scales leaning against the wall.

**Ethan** This piece is titled Cold Frame (2016). It's based on a photo of a plastic door with a wood grain imprint. I was thinking about trying to create a spatial analog for the experience of zooming into an image on-screen. The closer you get, the more it visually breaks down. In each piece, the ratio of the door remained constant, but I zoomed in and scaled up both the carving bit and the size of the work so the smallest door is the full uncropped photo and then each piece progressively zooms in, with rougher and rougher carvings — also each door is wrongly scaled for the body.

**Peter** When you scan a two-dimensional image and print or carve it in 3D, you create almost magical, uncanny transformations of space. It has science-fiction overtones for me.

**Ethan** I haven't thought of it that way, but I like that framing. I was more aware of getting at something surreal or psychedelic. For me it's about the weirdness of all these things like doors or sidewalks that are often considered commonplace backgrounds but are actually quite strange.

**Peter** What does Surrealism as an art historical movement represent to you?

**Ethan** I'm most interested in artists who undermined or transformed the everyday. Rene Magritte's painting *Le Poison* (1939) is a good example. The painting shows an open door letting in a cloud and the door is transforming from wood to sky. All the parts seem straightforward and legible but scale changes and the contradictions between surface and form unsettle that clarity. When we've talked about my work in the past, you've brought up Jasper Johns, who is a big Magritte fan.

**Peter** Yeah, I can see that. You're not interested in aesthetics. You're investigating how to subvert our confidence in physical reality.

**Ethan** That anchor in reality is a big reason I started focusing on both photography and more literal subject matter. It was a desire to have the recognizable work as a fulcrum that I could twist into something unexpected.

**Peter** You began to incorporate photographic imagery into your work in 2011. Let's talk about Back Slash (2012), one of your first large photographic works.

**Ethan** That piece was inspired by a flagstone wall I walked by every day on the way to my studio. It's a diptych flatbed printed on large sheets of plexiglass. Using a flatbed printer opened up a way to work with photography more sculpturally as I was able to print on large, rigid materials. It's also a double-sided image—on the front is a life-sized re-creation of the wall, and the back is a scanned image of Formica, a synthetic laminate that imitates stone. The Formica is scanned at so high a resolution that the inkjet pattern is apparent—you're seeing a breakdown of the print.

**Peter** I remember this piece. It's uncanny. The idea of photographic verisimilitude goes askew.

**Ethan** I was thinking about creating a level of visual information that exceeded optical vision—something that's possible with scanning and photography. I photographed the wall in sections and each had a uniformly high resolution. That level of clarity creates a hyperbole, an overload of data. And then the mortar is like looking through a microscope at a material that is already itself a simulation. I wanted to create an object that felt both embodied and somehow virtual or onscreen.

**Peter** In recent years there's been a lot of discussion about how digital manipulation has made photographs no longer indexical. There is no longer a consensus that they are a truthful record of the world they record. This piece seems to respond to that.

**Ethan** I made it during a moment that felt generational, when a lot of my peers were experimenting with new tools in digital printing and image manipulation. It also came out of a painterly impulse for something tactile and visually rich that felt in step with the energy of other images I'd see walking around the city like outdoor signage or high-resolution retail graphics. I was taking photos as reference images, but realized I could reverse-engineer my process and the reference pictures could be central, which was liberating.

**Peter** You made Tongue (2015) with a 3D printer. It's a fragment of a flagstone wall rendered in low relief with an electric outlet set in the middle. The electric outlet is rendered as an impossible amalgam between the topography of a real electric outlet and that of a flagstone wall. You utilize the convincing reality of low relief to present contradictory spatial information.

**Ethan** I started making these at NYU's Digital Media lab, which is run by the artist Taylor Absher—who was a fellow student at Yale. The piece began with 3D scans of objects. The 3D scanner was compelling in the same way as photography, which for me is about finding a way to take something from the world — it's an acquisitive impulse. With the 3D scanner, you can scan an object and recreate it whole.

These pieces were scans of fake foam brick walls, like you'd see in Olive Garden, or other lo-fi attempts at the rustic. The idea came from seeing a light socket inset into bricks. It was this funny recognition that within the space of the 3D program, there needn't be a contradiction—the image could just continue seamlessly across the two surfaces. I also like the way the light switch is an entry point, a way to think about what's below the surface. You can't stick your finger in there, but you know there's a whole network beneath it because of that port. So, analogous to how bricks are a sort of skin that gets thrown over drywall to change perception of the surface, the socket is a sort of imaginary exposure of other systems, a way of thinking about all the things beneath that can't be seen, like electrical wiring. I also like that you can just screw it right into the wall—the screw hole works.

**Peter** In Dens (2015), there is also a complex, contradictory layering of space—flat text, low-relief flagstones, and then text physically cut into the low-relief flagstones.

**Ethan** I made this while thinking about the transitional states of buildings I would see around my neighborhood in Brooklyn. At certain points in their construction, buildings are wrapped in insulation materials covered in logos. I started thinking of them as graphic design time capsules, where branded materials are buried under a different kind of symbolic façade, like glass or marble. It was wish fulfillment, extruding the logo through the stone, so the branding could penetrate through to the surface. The artist Alex Perweiler referred to it as "skipping steps" which I like.

**Peter** I thought about Jasper Johns when I saw this piece. You incorporate materials from the real world of house construction. But the materials are not combined in the way they are intended. Instead you use them to set up a linguistic puzzle. A lot of the new work you are making also reminds me of John Baldessari.

**Ethan** I've been thinking about him as well. I've been especially interested in how he brought language and photography into painting with such a light touch. A lot of my recent work has been coming out of combinations of my drawings and photos. I'm doing more in the studio with my own tools rather than working with fabricators. Another shift is that they are not as unified by a single photograph. In a lot of earlier work, the photograph was a unified image that I would manipulate sculpturally. These newer works use photography within a larger vocabulary of drawing and collage. They are coming from similar sources of inspiration but are more invented. I think they have a greater sense of play alongside my usual paranoia.

**Peter** Your work references places or cityscapes that we are all familiar with, especially details of our day-to-day environment that are incomplete, unstable, or walled off. We talked earlier about how your work is uncanny or surreal. I'm also reminded of Godard's film about a dystopian future, Alphaville (1965). Instead of creating a futuristic movie set, he filmed it in the everyday Paris of the 1960s. He filmed the present as if it were the future—that's how I might summarize your work.

**Ethan** I love that. The state of mind I'm aiming for in the work is a kind of productive estrangement. For me this estrangement is something that I've often felt on a gut level but making art is a way of consciously maintaining it. It's a creative state that is not without terror, but is ultimately worth it because it keeps you alive to the world.

**Peter** What you're saying is very close to what Bertold Brecht called "the alienation effect"—the idea that when you feel estranged or alienated, it somehow allows you to see what's going on more accurately than if you're just a happy camper wandering around.

**Ethan** (Laughing) Perfect.