



HUGH SCOTT-DOUGLAS: "The Mechanics of Money – In Conversation with Hugh Scott-Douglas"

Written by Josie Thaddeus-Johns

May 5, 2014

At the American artist's first ever show at Gallery Weekend Berlin, Sleek caught up with Hugh Scott-Douglas at Croy Nielsen to talk about the value of the image and interacting markets in his most recent work, based on banknotes and the "chopmarks" found on them.

"This is a newer series of work for me that I started showing in Switzerland. So far, it's untitled but is referred to as "chopped bills", which is the direct name of the phenomenon that's occurring visually on one level.

My first interest in these "chopmarks" is the anti-counterfeiting. A company called Digimarc, founded by an American astrophysicist, who developed this technological platform of stenographical imaging – invisible digital watermarking. Originally, he did it to stop people pirating some photos he had taken of Jupiter – he didn't want to jeopardise the artistic integrity of the images by imposing a direct watermark on them, so he created this invisible way of anti-counterfeiting. The practical application of that now is that it prevents the counterfeiting of money. It presents itself in a number of different ways – the most visually obvious one is a specific set of dots – called the EURrion constellation. If you try to scan a bill and put it into an editing program, it will shut itself down, as a way to prevent counterfeiting.

That's the mechanics of the bill, it's not an image that allows itself to be appropriated. If we think of Photoshop and the scanner as contemporary tools of the photographer, with Richard Prince, for example, as a precedent, those images are protected on an intellectual level from copyright: their ability to be appropriated is epistemologically black and white. My interest in working with currency in this way is because there's something physical that prevents its appropriation, that is directly interfering with the tools of the artist.

The second area of interest comes from the marks: the firecracker, the toxic logo, this star shape. For this show I've focused more specifically on graffiti-oriented ones, but there are others that are more clerical in their form. My interest in those marks isn't what their purpose is, but in the fact that their purpose is so oblique. They're put there by an unknown assailant – banks, casinos, drug dealers, graffiti – it could be any number of things. For me, the real point of interest is more from our lack of ability to understand what they are. They're a purely speculative moment.

Interestingly enough, this completely random act of mark-making, when combined with this structured image, creates a breakdown in the structure of the bills. Both visually because they have this organic quality, but also because in adding this foreign element to the bill, it stops the bill being recognised as currency. The project of the artist becomes one of formatting and framing the graphic content so that the mark occupies enough of the visual space that scanners no longer recognise it as a bill. The images are authored by their contingency.

Paper currency represents something so abstract, so broken from any material foundation: all economy is abstract. In my previous work with cyanotypes, I liked creating a container of value that was also hollow, in the sense that I was making blueprints that were finished works and then disseminated as such. This work, by contrast, isn't so dependent on its material, it's more about the image as material, and that would be the image of currency.

These paper sculptures are being shown for the first time here. If the other works are authored by contingency, these are authored by debt. These are made of newsprint posters, with 48 unique images, all taken from this website, Delcampe.net, a website that is like Ebay for old paper. These are the first 48 images for a specific search term. I have old transport tickets, which are actually really beautiful, and the others are old invoices and commercial documents. Each represents this specific moment in time, the particular things that are for sale, but I'm also really interested in how it's a resource that's continually in flux. It's in flux because of the markets of availability and demand. To take it and make it into a static image makes it possible to redistribute it again, so you have one market which is the digital online economy of ecommerce and then there's another in the gallery.

These papers are available to be taken for the duration of the exhibition, but at the end of the exhibition it becomes frozen – acknowledging the debt that it's incurred by sitting here. I see this like the time of exposure: the image-object develops through its exposure to the acquisitive hand. All the paper artefacts we work with are all expended containers of value in some way or another, like a stamp or a transportation ticket. There's something interesting to me in reinstating value to something that claimed a particular value at one time or another. The economy of collectibles in general really reflects market demand – for example people who sell a specific issue of 5 euro notes for 8 euros apiece. It's inflated and then deflated and then reinflated as a collectible and then reinflated in the gallery to a degree that's even further from its original value!"