

# ARTFORUM

## **Critic's Pick: John Houck**

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View of "John Houck," 2017

The title of John Houck's first solo show in San Francisco, "Hands, See Mouth," refers to a dream he had in which a book's index featured an entry for "hands" that said to "see mouth," and vice versa. This circularity is a vivid reality in etymological investigations. Houck suggests perceptual knowledge is equally fraught.

Curated by Jessica Silverman, the show combines work from three series: "Coordinate Systems," 2016–, as well as "Playing and Reality," and "Accumulators," both 2013–. Houck's art often demands attention to the vagaries of representational depth. These pieces depict colored, creased paper that has been photographed then printed, folded, or turned and photographed again, leaving viewers to puzzle out what is real. The "Accumulator" diptychs invite comparisons between halves, each of which is made from two different hues of paper. Determining which fold came first or how the paper was rotated requires a kind of imaginary orienteering.

Much of Houck's recent work takes materials from his past as its source. Viewing the layered compositions of "Playing and Reality" feels like opening a flat file and excavating the artist's history: Paintings, whether exercises in cubism or loose illustrations, are visible beneath piles of colored paper. *Can't Will*, 2017, reproduces a painted rendition of one of Houck's earlier photographs: four hands tying a shoelace.

These photographs allude to the trials of living with the past—difficulties that might also be described as perceptual challenges. How does the living body accommodate memory? How do our current selves fold into their former shapes?