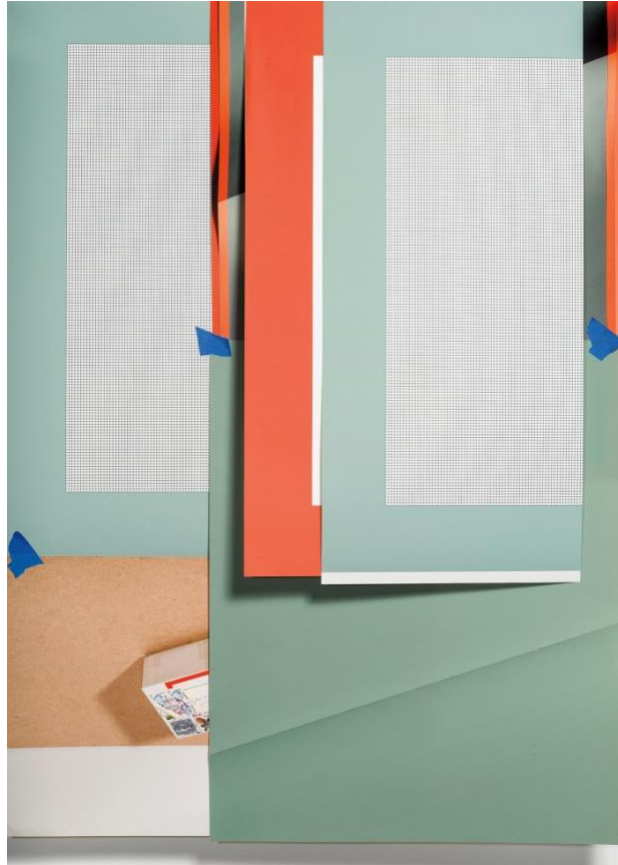


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Superfluous Things

Written by Susanna Newbery

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John Houck, *Pointing Device*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 45 x 32 inches. Courtesy of On Stellar Rays and the artist.

David Gilbert: Coming of Age and *John Houck: A History of Graph Paper* presented the works of two artist photographers who received their MFAs in Southern California and who continue to work there. Their works bear marks of Los Angeles as a site of contemporary art production. Both use the photograph as bearer of information. Both focus on everyday objects. Both train their lenses on surface, and both find humor in the coming together of superfluous things in tableaux portrayed with excruciating technical and aesthetic precision.¹

Houck's and Gilbert's works share another comparison: they both deal in still life, a genre typically associated with painting that searches for humor and empathy endowed within the material biography of things. From the works of Old Master practitioners, like the sixteenth-century painter Juan Sánchez Cotán, to the nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil specialist William Hartnett, still life employs representational exactitude within a reduced medium—tangible things rendered into two-dimensional description—to point toward the cultural instability of vision and meaning. It has historically traded in a hyper-real visuality—a technique of representation that supersedes the technological and cultural limitations of its time to produce an image of coherent impossibility.

Still life is affective. It both encourages and requires its viewer to take pleasure in looking, an experiential act that both distracts from and delights in the suspension of disbelief: flowers that bloom on different continents drawn into a single vase; perennially fresh produce that took weeks to paint; the evocative visualizing of a scene set before you fixed in the eternal present of an image. Still life, that old-fashioned and seemingly self-evident genre, not only incorporates comment on its own processes of fabrication, it also demands the viewer accept the constructed nature of what lies before her—a set of propositions of what was or might have been, lodged in the image's definite present.

At *On Stellar Rays*, Houck's eight prints were hung in three sizes, roughly 24 by 30, 45 by 32, and 20 by 27 inches, mounted, and framed. Their scale seemed appropriate to large-format photography and, historically, to certain types of paintings whose scale, genre, and content destined them for the domestic interior. Each picture offered an inanimate tableau of tools of drafting and deskwork—paper, tape, stamps, protractors, compasses, boxes, and paper scraps—layered over each other and often skewed at seemingly impossible angles. The images look as if their subjects shot into the frame from some oblique but adjacent spatial plane and failed to make contact. In *Pointing Device* (2013), sheaves of colorful paper sit in alignment, their colors and folds and edges overlaid in a kind of schizoid parallax. Is that hovering green-edged graph paper, repositioned several inches to the left, behind a pile of other stuff, the same object, or its clone? Certain clues don't add up. The little tears of blue painter's tape that all appear to be on the same plane fix sheets of paper whose angles suggest otherwise. The butt of a checkbook box, pasted-over with stamps and decals, casts a three-dimensional object's shadow, but doesn't cause the paper over it to buckle and accommodate accordingly. Though the finished products shown in the gallery are flat, framed photographic picture planes, Houck's images feign a spatiality that, on closer inspection, is impossible. Their incongruities must be intentional, as if Photoshop's seamlessly minute layerings and fixes have been diagrammed and undone.

Except that Houck practices no graphics editing on his photographs, a fact that is nearly impossible to tell from looking alone. As he discussed in a 2011 interview with fellow artist Lucas Blalock, the final prints are in fact straight: carefully assembled, lit, and photographed in the studio as physical tableaux, printed, taped to a studio surface, and photographed again. They are photos on top of photos on top of photos, staged, shot, and re-photographed so that the image itself becomes a hovering, recursive *mise-en-abyme* of warped paper, oblique objects, and foreshortened shadows. They are, in a sense, discrete sculptures, spatialities caught in the act of being represented.

The image that comes closest to tipping its hand is the 2013 photograph *Peg and Jon*, in which drafting tools sit at cross-purposes on a ground of graph paper, casting skewed and contradictory shadows. The graph paper itself curves, and is taped to a robin's-egg-blue backdrop, forming a second photographed layer onto which some of the same pencils and pens have been placed. Then this scene is photographed, and presumably adhered to yet another surface, perhaps the previous blue backdrop, though this time the telltale marks of the tape remain out of view. Sagging against an unseen corner, the image curves yet again, as a final staging of pencils attests, bowlegged penumbras tracing the physical positioning of their ground. These are photographs as planar objects, warped over and over again in subtle gradations until it seems the image before us could only exist in the hyperspace of the postproduction digital world. But at the same time, it is not purely replicative—each iteration tweaks its composition so that in the detail of drafting lead casings and protractors, the object furthest from placement in the final print fades and flattens, a past incorporated in the passage of representational time. At once familiar and strange, each photograph frustrates the viewer's notion of reality by assimilating the wondrous with the absolutely ordinary.



John Houck, *Peg and Jon*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 22 x 27 inches. Courtesy of On Stellar Rays and the artist.

This is also a way of understanding the motivations of still life, which, as a historical genre, tended to emerge during moments of profound convulsions of culture both political (like the European imperialism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) and technological (like the scientific codification of optics in the same period). A combination of new materials—matter out of place—and new mechanisms of observation produced far-reaching cultural anxieties.²In the nineteenth century, photography's technical capacity for reproduction proved just such a trigger. Somewhere between magic and science, photography's ease with verisimilitude redirected the course of modern art toward abstraction and skepticism, toward a reading of the work of art as an experiential act of material awareness. One reaction to this phenomenon, some scholars have suggested, was for painting to up the ante, poking photography on its own terms.³ Trompe l'oeil, painting's most concrete answer to photography and a related subset of still life, brings up similar questions of veracity and falsity. As a genre, it pressed a viewer to decide whether the image before her was, like *Peg and Jon*, a "straight" representation or an elaborate ruse. Such works rewarded patience by betraying slight rents in their representational logic, for example, a detail that extends beyond its painted frame or a pencil that does not match its shadow.⁴Trompe l'oeil in this context attempted to achieve hyper-reality, staging both schemes of mimesis—that is, both representation and deception—and the specific points at which mimesis is rendered impossible. The daily ephemera that populate Houck's pictures—his tools of measurement and drawing, materials of reflection and representation, photographs, postcards, stamps—are the very same that, in the nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil painter's hand, trump mechanical reproduction. Tricks of the eye, this close cousin of still life, disoriented viewers for a moment at least, a suspension of disbelief brought on by what the film historian Tom Gunning has called an "aesthetic of astonishment."⁵



John Houck, *Estes*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of On Stellar Rays and the artist.

Houck's contemporary trompe l'oeil plays with a different technologically induced cultural anxiety: how understandings of the "informational" have shifted in a digital era, one in which indexicality is no longer photography's defining operation. The photograph now hovers, like one of Houck's sheets of paper, just above its referent, a free-floating signifier, a self-contained bearer of information to be re-contextualized and changed. Houck is not alone in toying with the validity of photography in this way. But in doing so, the work points to another historical precedent, Leo Steinberg's "flatbed picture plane," used to describe a shift in the orientation and value of images away from a direct analogue of visual experience toward their ability to mimic the operational processes of data collection.⁶As he wrote of Robert Rauschenberg's paintings, exemplars of this new media condition, "any flat musdocumentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane...the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field."⁷Against this plane, Steinberg argued, any image could be pinned, not because it would offer a glimpse of the world, but rather because it returned the image to its condition as an object: a scrap of printed material, a piece of information.⁸ Houck's photographs of photographs—concrete analogues of a digital world—are recursive images that, as Joanna Fiduccia has noted, call into question both visual perception and technical production.⁹By staging and printing the physical print recursively, almost obsessively, against its prior guises, Houck creates an informational multitude within the frame. Each image is a record of what's there, but also a grammar—component, systemic bits—of how it came to be. Each analogizes the passage of objects from real space into, if not the flatbed picture plane, the regime of fungible representation we understand as the digital age before finally, inarguably, creating an object as end-result. It is an updated addition to a constellation of genres—from still life and trompe l'oeil to collage, montage, and beyond—that recruits ordinary objects wholesale into the self-aware act of representation. As Steinberg once wrote of Picasso's *papiers collé*, "If the careers of these papers all began in the trash where Picasso recruited them, their differentiation has been so managed that now each singleton struts unlike its neighbor; not one doubles another's substance."¹⁰ Houck's trompe l'oeil lies less in his photographs' approximation of physical dimensions than in their

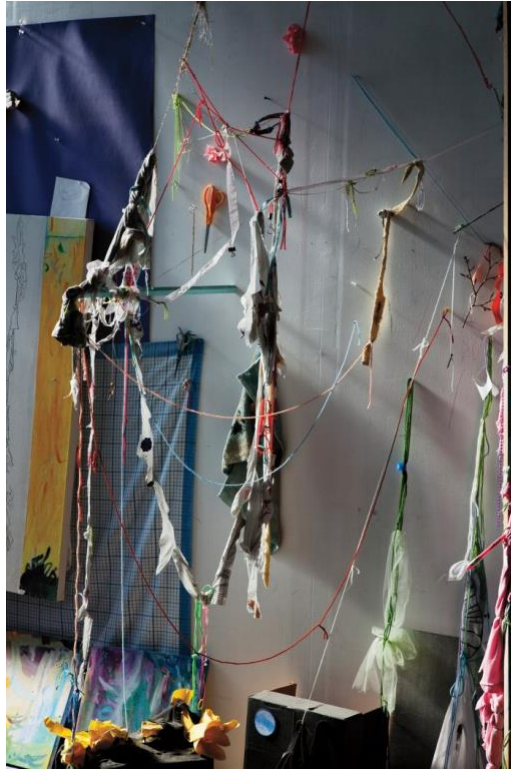
trickery presenting *doubles* as just such a cast of singletons, each iteration differentiating itself from the previous, adding a new imperative to move around within the image, with playful doubt as a patient and wonderful guide.

In David Gilbert's work, the photograph is again the final step in a long process of studio-based production. Here, the photograph itself, while not incidental, serves perhaps a more documentary function. Gilbert's studio is located in the industrial warehouse neighborhood south of downtown Los Angeles, adjacent to active garment, flower, and wholesale districts. It's not hard to imagine that the strings and scraps that populate his images have been culled from this social context, orphan remnants re-settled by a modern-day ragpicker. In his astonishing *Yarnia* (2013), an unframed four-by-three-foot print tacked to the wall, the ragpicker's preference for the everyday comes through. Among the things that made their way in are the corner of a messily gestural canvas, the curve of mauve backdrop paper, hanging fabric gridded over in regular subdivided squares, and a tangle of knotted yarn. The tangle sits in the middle ground, a sculpture backed up into a picture. Pink and blue and beige and black all intertwined, the yarn rises up to meet its dangling friends, surging as if from the puddle of its origin, or air-lifted from the dusty, roughshod platform of the studio floor. On closer inspection, we see the yarn itself has picked up remnants, presumably from its tumbles around the studio space: an upholstery nail, a strip of linted scotch tape. Lastly, a black electric plug and cord lies, out of focus, at the foot of the yarn pile, running out of frame but with its head slightly, curiously, cocked in attention, as if seeing what we see.

With all these hanging, drooping, slinky items—the sheet, the electrical cord, the rubber ring—one cannot help but think of the work of someone like Robert Gober, whose clipped and shortened legs, sinks, and torsos shrugged and drooped in their own spaces of display, or Eva Hesse, another wrangler of sagging evocations. But if in his sculpture Gilbert is interested in the uncanny embodiment of the remnant, what is he after in these images that specifically use the distanced mechanism of photography as their delivery system? In answering this, it is worth making a second comparison to still life—this time a tradition running from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, one in which the visual description of ordinary objects became a kind of parable for both the act of aesthetic creation and for the artist's place in that process.



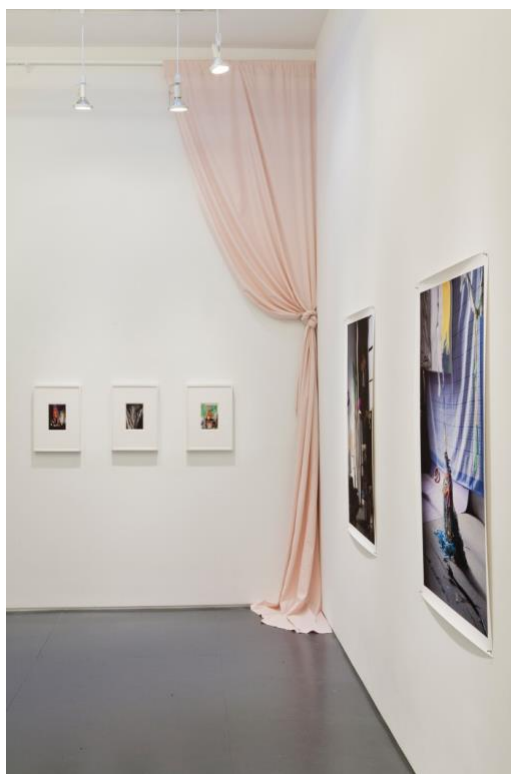
David Gilbert, *Yarnia*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 50 x 33 inches. Courtesy of Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York.



David Gilbert, *Web Site*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 50 x 33 inches. Courtesy of Klaus von Nichtssagen Gallery, New York.

In the seventeenth century, still life was preeminent among a new group of genres concerned with the representation of personhood through the filters of possessions and private and public identity. In a period defined politically by imperial conquest and culturally by the reconciling of unknown exoticisms with the carefully inventoried world of a flourishing domestic market society, painting was often called upon to picture and therefore make sense of the new order of things. Still life, as a category of small paintings depicting objects in a constructed setting, though generally available for consumption on the public market, was destined to be displayed only within the private confines of the domestic sphere.¹¹ As objects, then, still life paintings travelled a course from marketplace to studio, studio to marketplace, and marketplace to home; their lives as objects traced routes of commodity and commodification, so that no work, however inward looking and self-evident, could be considered an exercise in cloistered expression. Classic examples are the Dutch *pronkstilleven*, or feast scenes, whose collected shellfish, pewter, glass, and crumbs tumbled over raised and rumpled surfaces, an interrupted scene of many textures, all catching light from without. Or, later, the silent, hermetic still lifes of the nineteenth-century American painter Raphaelle Peale, whose teacakes and watermelons, cream pitchers and vine tendrils, steaks and carrots, were always on the edge of putrescence or fracture—a bite missing, the center falling out, the muscle bluntly pierced, the glassware frighteningly thin. As the art historian Alexander Nemerov has persuasively argued, Peale’s paintings have an intentional, intimate fragility whose plaintiveness implies an equivalence with the unseen human body of the spectator.¹²

“Objects are carriers of ideas,” writes the sociologist Chandra Mukerji. “[They] help to make autonomous forces out of ideas by remaining in the physical world long after their production.”¹³ One thing the still life remembered was the body of the artist, presented as a figure remaining in the finished work as a guarantor of the things shown. In seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, for example, painters often inserted pictures of themselves reflected in the surface of a glass tumbler or trapped in an overlooked mirror, caught as images reflected in the act of image-making. The figure of the painter’s body was reconciled among a set of specific and perishable objects, themselves coincident with the image being fabricated.¹⁴ Taking pains to associate identities and practices with the craft of image making, still life painters created a visual world where self and art were coterminous, so that any painting is necessarily a portrait of a consumer, of a culture, and of the artist herself—of the very act of representation.¹⁵



Installation view, *David Gilbert: Coming of Age* at Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, September—October 2013. Courtesy of Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York. Photo by David Gilbert.

Still life therefore creates its objects and spectators as part of a beholding community with biography its hidden center. With his customary wit, Gilbert implies the same in *Coming of Age*, hanging his *Drama at Sunset* (2013), *Intermission* (2013), and *Small Erotic Picture (Spring)* (2013)—riddled with penises, pansies, probes, brushes, rumpled and stained cloth, swags, and bunting—in the gallery beneath a large pink curtain. Swept back and pegged, the curtain evokes Rembrandt’s theater drapes, Peale’s Veronica veil, and, perhaps best, the vulval, cleaved folds of Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the ultimate referendum on the act of painterly beholding.¹⁶ Gilbert’s work, this exhibition makes plain, hinges on similar issues of “the reveal,” not of the mechanics of staging, but of the humor, sorrow, and palpable affect material objects bestow on a viewer, even in photographic representation. Carriers of ideas, corporeal pendants, Gilbert’s stagey remnants permit the image to enact “a pleasure in material things by allowing understanding to be a performance of imagination.”¹⁷

Finally, I am reminded of the friendship between Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt. Hesse was another artist famous for drapery, droopy studio works, and LeWitt the consummate master of eternal, investigative permutations. Her art looped through and around straight lines, countering the erect tension of built forms with the corporeal accretion of the pathetic, material, fallibility of living things. His bartered with precision and chance, using both to program an action with aesthetics as the consequence. If still life is always, necessarily, a *memento mori*, we could consider this the final in a series of comparisons framing Gilbert’s and Houck’s works as things planned, revealed, stilled, pinned—beheld, preserved, and understood. Neither photographers, nor makers of still lifes, Hesse and LeWitt nonetheless played with skepticism and biography, materials and things, and the productive, unstable line between how the work is made and what it shows.

If Eva Hesse had a rag doll, and she slowly, deliberately picked at the ends of yarn it had for hair, and, pulling, teasing, obsessed over it, wondered at the ligatures whose deft embrace held one strand to the next, at the knots tying colors of hair to colors of skin, to colors of sweaters, of shoes, of eyes, of ears, of lips; if she tugged, and pulled, and searched the turns and stitches and eddies and features each yarn took, if she followed its course with the pained, compulsive need to resolve by undoing, if she devastated its body from figure into an irreparable nest of snarl, if she quested to understand, testing its strength, its body and makeup, against the certainty of a floor, the uncertainty of a forgotten

corner; if she unraveled a figure into a pile, sat back, and photographed it, she might have made a work like Gilbert's *Yarnia*: a portrait of making, of being, stilled in an image. If LeWitt stacked up all his lined papers and wall drawings, his instructions and pencils and books and tchotchkes one on top of another against the studio wall for storage, or display, his *Autobiography of Sol LeWitt* returning the studio to context, it might look like Houck's *Pointing Device*: obsessive permutations of an idea instructing how to make art. If still life has in the past been downgraded to decoration, an uncritical acceptance of an image's submission to representation, the works of John Houck and David Gilbert suggest, in different ways, a very contemporary rebuttal: a place where both biography and skepticism reside in the embodied inventorying of superfluous things.



David Gilbert, *Drama at Sunset (Summer)*, 2013. Archival pigment print, 8 x 5.33 inches. Courtesy of Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery, New York.

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FOOTNOTES

1. I borrow the phrase “superfluous things” from the art historian Craig Clunas’s excellent book, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).¹
2. The art historian Jonathan Crary has produced two comprehensive studies of precisely this dynamic. See Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).²
3. See, especially, Michael Leja’s *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).³
4. Victor Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49.⁴
5. For a discussion of late nineteenth-century still life painters’ engagement with cultures of trickery and Gunning’s “aesthetic of astonishment,” see Michael Leja, “Touching Pictures by William Hartnett” in *Looking Askance*, 138.⁵
6. Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 84.⁶
7. *Ibid.*, 88.⁷
8. *Ibid.*⁸
9. Joanna Fiduccia, “John Houck: A History of Graph Paper” in *John Houck: A History of Graph Paper*, exh. cat. (New York: On Stellar Rays, 2013), n.p.⁹
10. Leo Steinberg, *Cubist Picasso* (Paris: Reunion des Musees Nationaux, 2007), 169.¹⁰
11. For an example of how this dynamic played out within the gendered space of the home, see Elizabeth Honig, “Desire and the Domestic Economy,” *Art Bulletin* 83:2 (June 2001): 294–315.¹¹
12. Alexander Nemerov, *The Body of Raphaelle Peale: Still Life and Selfhood, 1812–1824* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).¹²
13. Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 15.¹³
14. Celeste Brusati, “Stilled Lives: Self-Portraiture and Self-Reflection in Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Still-Life Painting,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 20:2/3 (1990): 168.¹⁴
15. *Ibid.*, 170. Roland Barthes, too, weighed in on the value of still life, rendering it akin to the space of the studio—one of arrangement, collection, and subjective mastery that is in and of itself a portrait of its maker, expressed through the residue of choices and actions. See Roland Barthes, “The World as Object,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 62–73.¹⁵
16. See Pablo Picasso’s *Two Nudes* (1906) and *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907).¹⁶
17. Elizabeth Honig, “Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 34 (Autumn 1998): 183.¹⁷