

ARTFORUM

Critic's Picks

John Houck ON STELLAR RAYS 213 Bowery Street April 10 – May 22

Kaitlyn Kramer

April 2016

If photography is said to provoke factual recollection, painting aids memory's embellished tales. John Houck's recent photographs are made at the dizzying intersection between remembering and retelling. The secrets of their construction slip under the darkened edges of archival prints and the thick lines of paint they depict, where the flatness of each photograph's surface betrays the layers hinted at within. The works take root in Houck's "History of Graph Paper" series from 2013, in which photographic still lifes of personal relics serve as backdrops for those same physical objects, placed atop their printed reproductions, then photographed again. Now he's introduced paint into his works as a quiet intervention—sometimes quite directly, on the surfaces of his prints, but mostly as rephotographed bits of trompe l'oeil. His "brushstrokes" snicker throughout the distorted layers of space and depictions of studio equipment such as sponges, tape, and a spray bottle. A cube painted on the cover of a book, depicted three times, twice open and once closed, seems to carve holes into its pages (*Petals and Interleaves*, 2016). The pale-blue cuff of a dress shirt is painted onto a mold of the artist's hand, completing the illusion of an arm (*Family Crest*, 2016). Clear jars are smeared with red and positioned near the apparent culprit—an outline of a paint tube, also in red (*Incidental and Intentional*, 2015).



John Houck, *Petals and Interleaves*, 2016, archival pigment print, 27 1/2 x 32 1/2".

The exhibition is titled *Playing and Reality*, which is a way of saying the works are about the tumultuous process of creation. As the artist writes on a folded sheet of newsprint that accompanies the show, "Don't ask what it means so much as where does it go. Drawn lines are sometimes representations, but they also lead somewhere."