

BROOKLYN RAIL

John Houck: *Holding Environment*

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John Houck, *Accumulator #20, 3 Colors #B2DAE5, #B4867B, #B46E5C*, 2018. Creased archival pigment print (unique). Framed, each: 32 5/8 x 26 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © John Houck. Photo: Object Studies.

Where is the dividing line between painting and photography, two visual artistic media that are often said to be essentially opposed? The long history of very diverse answers to this question is fascinating and revealing. When photography was invented in the nineteenth-century, commentators thought that it would replace painting. Then in the early twentieth century, some modernist painters sought to outflank photography. More recently, still, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and a whole host of more recent figures brought photography *into* their paintings. John Houck's liminal art, which marks and erases the boundaries between painting and photography, offers a highly original extension of this lengthy history.

Houck paints, photographs his paintings, and then sometimes paints over fragments of his photographs. Some of the nine works in this show, all made in 2018, are made by folding archival prints. *Accumulator #21, 3 Colors #829AA8, #8F6B69, #007D98* which consists of two such framed prints, set side by side is one. Others display duplicated painted images. *Unstable Figure* shows two identical bicycle handlebars, seen from slightly different perspectives, one above the other in a single pigment print. *Rejoin* offers a variation on that theme, depicting two pairs of hands. And *Presenting the Past* shows a landscape as if we were looking through a picture window, with

some of the planes of the landscape reflected in the floor of the room. Because all these works are framed under glass, sometimes even after you look for an extended period, distinguishing their painted and photographed components is not easy. The longer you search for boundaries between what has been painted and the photographed elements, the more uncertain you become about what exactly you are viewing. These relatively small, apparently undemonstrative works thus turn out to be oddly demanding. The more you look at them, the more you are puzzled—at least that was my happy experience. Granting that they all combine painting and photography, they do look surprisingly varied. And so they raise also a second puzzle: how, I wondered, should we understand the unity of this body of works? Employing a seemingly narrow format, Houck creates surprisingly varied artworks.



John Houck, *Unstable Figure*, 2018. Archival pigment print, framed: 31 5/8 x 37 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © John Houck. Photo: Object Studies.

Houck has spoken of his interest in relational psychoanalysis, which deals with internalized familial relationships between parents and their children. A “holding environment” is a supportive space, a place where nurturing familial relationships can thrive. That statement, although suggestive, doesn’t by itself explain how to understand his art works, if only because the personal significance of what’s depicted in these paintings and photographs isn’t obvious. Perhaps then, using his title for the exhibition as a clue, we should ask, how does Houck’s art provide a holding environment? To answer that question, I believe that we need to speculate. Now and again—when I am focusing on a puzzling exhibition of contemporary art by a deeply original, but as yet unfamiliar artist—some familiar statement from the past flashes unbidden through my mind. That happened here. “The essence of Modernism lies . . . in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”

Remember who said that? Probably only people of a certain age will find that once-famous statement familiar. Already when I was a young art writer—now very long ago!—Clement Greenberg’s theory of the medium of painting was already passé. It’s been a while since there felt a need for critics to denounce his claims. And so it has to seem surprising that in our present, very different art world, that this statement may be suggestive for our purposes.



John Houck, *The Wild Braid*, 2018. Archival pigment print. Framed: 53 3/4 x 42 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © John Houck. Photo: Object Studies.

For Greenberg, the goal of painting was to self-critically reveal its pure essence. Modernist painting, he argued, is successful because it is critical of its essential nature. By virtue of their announced concern to blur boundaries, Houck’s artworks are, by contrast, essentially impure. And once we recognize that, then we are prepared to understand them. Old master painting projected an illusionism of depth, a process continued (according to Greenberg) in the shallow modernist spaces. Now, however, in a surprising, unexpected way Houck develops a different, novel form of illusionism. Instead of looking *into* the picture space, engaged in the play between literal pigment and illusionistic depth, we are caught in his visually undecidable opposition of painting and photography. These works thus are neither abstract nor figurative, but both and neither, all at once! For Houck, so I am suggesting, it’s the search, not the result when you get there, that matters. Where does painting stop and photography begin? That question is hard to answer. In our art world, concern with the medium of representation has become unfashionable. *Holding Environment* demonstrates that sometimes artistic success depends upon rejecting fashion.