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JAMES HOFF *Skywiper*

by Charles Schultz

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James Hoff makes paintings with a printer. He does not engage in a tug-of-war with the machine, like Wade Guyton, whose means of creating paintings centers on forcing a canvas past ink jets. Hoff's approach is less physical and more oriented in the technological realm, where communication occurs in code. Indeed, his process may be the most interesting aspect of the work. Each painting is created by infecting a digital image with a malicious virus. The resulting image is printed on a sheet of aluminum using a dye sublimation process, and then mounted on a wood panel. There are 11 of these in the show (all from 2014) and they vary in size, although every one of them could be carried under arm.

Hoff's paintings look like extreme close-ups of digitally battered textiles, where one can begin to see the weave coming apart. Horizontal striations are the most prominent characteristic of the works. Their color schematics are held within a fairly narrow range, and the edges of the compositions have an arbitrary quality that induces one's eye to drift. And yet, each painting is remarkably unique. Some have a sense of depth; others appear resolutely flat. A couple even seem to mimic landscapes, but that may simply be the human eye attempting to locate something familiar in an image that reproduces nothing from the natural world.

"Skywiper No. 4" is one of those that is reminiscent of a landscape, be it a rather rudimentary example. From bottom to top the image becomes less saturated, which gives the lower, darker end a sense of gravity. The upper portion of the painting lightens, as the sky might at dawn or dusk. Depth is achieved here through color relationships as much as through form. In this work—where the darks and lights are particularly offset—there is a strong sense of space receding and coming forward.

The codes Hoff uses, Stuxnet and Skywiper, have each been employed in cyber attacks. Consequentially they carry an implicit degree of malice. This gives the work a bit of edge, but what's really at stake here is the aesthetic element produced by these viruses and the ability of an artist to use something inwardly aggressive and infectious to produce objects that are outwardly attractive and fundamentally benign.



James Hoff, "Skywiper No. 4," 2014. Chromaluxe transfer on aluminum, 20 × 16". Courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, NY.

If Hoff's paintings address a specific territory of aesthetics, it might be the aesthetics of the glitch. Beneath a smooth surface of line, form, and color there is a set of data points whose pattern has been twisted and deformed. At their root these are pictures of digital disturbance, the end results of ruptures that have been set in motion and allowed to progress on their own terms. Part of their success is that the distortion has completely wiped out whatever it was distorting, which allows the abstract forms generated by the virus to stand-alone rather than attempt to accommodate a partially scrambled image.

Hoff's paintings straddle an art historical fence in terms of legacy. On the one hand, the process and focus on technological distortion put him in-line with artists such as Nam June Paik and Cory Arcangel. On the other hand, Hoff makes paintings whose formal vocabulary is based on the interaction of line, color, and form. And therefore one is inclined to hold Hoff's work up to painters such as Julian Stanczak, and to potentially anchor his pictures in the color theories of Josef Albers. The problem here is that Hoff's code-infected images are not as visually commanding as anything produced by Stanczak or Albers, nor do they embody any sense of the warmth that develops when a painter works and reworks a picture. They are cool, technical objects.

If this is a shortcoming, Hoff's practice assuages it. In addition to infecting images with code, he's used the same process with sounds to create *Blaster* (2014), a critically acclaimed album of code-infected music. *Blaster* was pressed into vinyl, which gives Hoff's digital sonic scramble a warm, if somewhat ironic, analog presence. Carrying the idea further, Hoff infected a photograph he took of the gallery wall. In the resulting image, the bottom quadrant of the wall disappeared. Correspondingly, Hoff cut out the bottom portion of the gallery's wall, revealing the guts of the space's infrastructure. To stand amongst sites of such careful violation is a little perverse. If only Hoff's record had been spinning, the immersion into his world of infection would have seemed so complete.