

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

ARTslant
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Meet Paul Cowan: Short Circuits and Metaphors for Painting

by Monica Westin

Paul Cowan, whose work will be featured this fall in a solo Chicago Works show at the MCA, as well as numerous solo and group shows nationally and internationally, is an artist of frustration. His paintings create awkward moments that call attention to the act of judgment. They deflate our understanding of what art is supposed to be and do, often subverting the fetishizing mysticism with which we approach painting. And they often stall or short-circuit our understanding of painting itself. But ultimately Cowan's work is hopeful rather than nihilistic, gently ironic rather than sarcastic, if we can be patient with its easily misunderstood tests and games.

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A short circuit occurs when an electrical device is built with much lower resistance than a normal circuit; resistance in a device is what keeps the current on its intended track in a circuit, and lack of resistance in a short circuit allows a current flowing through it to travel off the circuit's track and through unintended paths. If we can imagine the usual experience between the spectator and the painting as a kind of closed circuit of judgment and meaning-offering, then Paul Cowan's paintings offer up a metaphorical short-circuit. They both call us to study them and speculate about them, but they quickly derail the pathway of quick smooth judgment, deflecting and agitating the circuit—ironically through their own latency and lack of forcefulness, which sends us off a comfortable pathway in our relationship to them. That's why Cowan's paintings can have utterly opposite effects, depending on the viewer's subjective relationship to this frustration: either one of a slowed-down humored speculation on the circuit of judgment itself, or an immediate launch into dismissal.



Paul Cowan, Untitled, 2012, Fishing lures on canvas, 63.25h x 50w in; Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery.

For me, it's the former. Take the fishhook paintings, the first series of Cowan's work that drew me in. Three of these paintings, which are actually composed using found fabric, are currently being shown at the Shane Campbell gallery. Two use monochromatic fabric—a dull maroon and a deep ocean blue—and play on our expectations for monochrome. One has a tropical floral print on black background,

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with a plain silver fishhook like an expensive, artistic earring stuck into it. The larger two monochromes have multiple fishhooks, multicolored against the flatness of the fabric, into which the viewer becomes subsumed, like a fish staring at a lure.

The found fabric, often gaudy, that Cowan uses as color field confuses and momentarily derails my judgment. I can't decide whether I like it or not, then realize that Cowan is humoring my judgments about what it would mean to "like" a piece of found fabric used in a painting and to confront my own immediate bias of whether I "like" something like a color field or not—and how little that partiality matters, or ought to, if I think a painting ought to offer anything more than decorative appeal. The short-circuit game continues in a kind of semiotic meming when I begin to consider the fishhook and its role as an object of interest and speculation. As soon as the fishhook declares itself to be a metaphor, it creates a gentle but quickly unmanageable game of meaning-making. The fishing lures Cowan uses are first an imitation of a fake fish meant to be bait—for whom? As the viewer of the work, I am snared by my interest in the hook, which Cowan uses as a metaphor—a decoy—for painting itself. I have an image of the artist as fisherman, speculating about what will attract the fish. All the theorizing in the world can't answer the riddle about what catches our attention and causes the decisive moment of the audience-art judgment circuit, which Cowan has slowed down through his substitutions.



Paul Cowan, Untitled, 2012, Cypress oil in latex paint on wall, Dimensions variable; Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery.

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We've more or less stopped speculating when we fall quickly into judgment; Cowan's work attempts to resist this quickness. It mourns the lost art of speculation—speculative timing, speculative searching and casting about. When objects of interest are ubiquitous (and circuits too closed), then conjecturing, hypothesizing, musing, wondering disappear. His speculations take on different forms of stand-ins and metaphors for painting: a wall of oddly scented paint, paintings propped up by balloons that will eventually deflate and collapse the work. All attempt to resist or slow down our acts of judgment, to get us to see what we are doing when we look at painting. But all gesture at the structure of art—like taking off the back of a machine to show how it works—calmly and gently, without cynicism of what painting can still do for us.

(Image on top: Paul Cowan, Untitled, 2012, Fishing lure on canvas, 34h x 27w in; Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery)

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