



Modeling Art: Daniel Lefcourt at Mitchell-Innes & Nash
by Lucy Li

Daniel Lefcourt: Modeler

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Mitchell-Innes & Nash
534 West 26th Street
New York City, 212-744-7400

In a way, a work of art is always a representation of something else, be it an object, image or idea. In Daniel Lefcourt's premier exhibition with Mitchell-Innes & Nash, this seemingly intuitive theory becomes complicated by the artist's employment of simulation techniques associated with theatrical and architectural models. A simulation, by definition, does not attempt to exist independently from or replace its source. Lefcourt's fascinating use of modeling is not about the efficiency of representation, but is itself a simulation and tangible re-presentation of the very process of modeling, and the roles of the materials and rituals that are necessary to build a convincing visual approximation.

Modeling implies replication to some extent, but Lefcourt's practice embodies a distinct, satisfying authenticity as his works do not take after anything that can be directly compared to their physical appearance. In this sense they stand on their own, and cannot be marked as counterfeits. Unpainted, machine polished MDF panels line the gallery's walls and are sometimes used as frames – one piece is even standing alone in the back, like a temporary wall installed for a quick theatre rehearsal. Made by compressing the dusty exhaust of defibrators, the boards, themselves simulating the appearance and function of natural wood, look as finished as they are makeshift. Their presence lends a sense of complementary industrial ruggedness and incompleteness to the exhibit, as well as the surprisingly powerful descriptive energy unique to pointedly modeler structures. In relation to the Drawing Board series of relief graphite drawings installed in MDF frames, the panels also question the autonomy of an artwork and, with it, the politics of display and the division between aesthetic space and the reality beyond the gallery. Curiously, through this erasure of a precise physical boundary, the intensity of these works' conceptual departure from the utilitarian world is pushed into sharper focus.

The paintings in the Cast series have clinical, gently descriptive subtitles such as "Impressions at a Distance" and "Points in a Coordinate System." Created with an industrial paint pigment called PBK31 (perylene green-black) and urethane, the canvas surface appears to have a mossy texture, put into stark relief by pristine, pale birch MDF frames. The surface oozes with what could be masses of microscopic life forms or rich, anonymous activity in a magnified drop of viscous murk. However, this evocation of "natural" fluidity and entropy is mediated by a painstaking digital imaging process, which manages these visuals without overlooking the material's unpredictability. Lefcourt makes visible what is invisible by a series of jumps between digital media and physical construction. Images of transient, microscopic

activity are captured using a macro lens digital camera, and later recreated through a complex combination of digital 3D modeling, sculptural casting, and a meticulous process of adhering a sheet of calculated relief paint onto canvas.

In the Cast paintings numbers and letters in mechanical fonts interrupt the organic fluidity with the presence of machinery. Familiar shapes appear throughout a field of nondescript, undulating surges of paint, sometimes completely buried by abstract debris. The viewer must actively decide to acknowledge their significance as recognizable signs (and whether or not certain letters, like “S” and “O” are upside-down). In this manner Lefcourt challenges us to think more thoroughly about the regulated symbolic and cultural significance of the alphabet and numeric ordering. The Drawing Board series consists of diptych graphite panels installed in fiberboard panels and framed in thin pine. There is a sense of mathematical harmony to the work that hints at possible structural correlations and continuity between each pair of juxtaposed panels, but no identifiable patterns can be readily detected. Like the Cast paintings, the composition and surface texture of the graphite is abstract, resembling a flimsy blueprint of sculptural terrain. This work is wakefully vigilant of its surroundings – the uneven paint and graphite finish is particularly susceptible to the optical effects of light, which describes the coarse and otherwise dark and somber surface with an ephemeral shimmer that adjusts itself according to the varying lighting and the changing position of the ambulatory viewer.

The overall installation, like each individual work, also obscures the limits of where an “artwork” begins and ends. Meticulously planned frames and panels that extend rather than contain serve to mediate between the paintings and the gallery’s architecture, and the works themselves do not seem to be pointedly interested in asserting strict sovereignty. Throughout Modeler there is a general sense of giving and withholding; the viewer’s curiosity and desire for engagement are met with a rich and complex materiality that hide a stern inaccessibility. Ultimately, Lefcourt encourages surrender and acceptance for the simple energy ignited by well-meaning attempts at thoroughly deciphering a dynamic, synesthetic visual experience, and a reluctant return to the “drawing board.”