

Art in America

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John Houck

NEW YORK,
at On Stellar Rays

by Aimee Walleston



John Houck: *Pine Ridge*, 2013, pigment print, 31 by 23 inches; at On Stellar Rays.

For his second solo show in New York, “A History of Graph Paper,” Los Angeles-based artist John Houck exhibited eight framed, medium-scale color images of artifacts from his youth, including shoeboxes, a stamp collection, crystal glasses and a beaded necklace. To make the works, Houck photographed one or more of the items in still-life vignettes arranged on sheets of paper in different colors. He then rephotographed the items, sometimes in several iterations, on top of their own images, often adding or subtracting other objects in the process. The results, which appear digitally altered but are devoid of postproduction interventions, are multilayered compositions in which figure and ground seem to continually shift, recalling Gestalt images. Houck’s palette consists of charming, crafty-looking tones: robin’s egg blue, paper-bag brown and soft red.

The exhibition began with the appealing *Pine Ridge* (all works 2013), which shows what appears to be a handmade beaded Native American necklace dangling in front of layered images of a black shoebox with a piece of red calico fabric spilling out of it. The most attention-grabbing piece, *Peg and Jon*, was hung by itself on a wall directly facing the gallery’s entrance. Distinct from the other works in its lack of

overlapping images, it depicts an assortment of drafting tools (compasses, protractors, pencils) and shotgun shell casings against a sheet of graph paper. The tools seem to hover just slightly over the paper, appearing as though they could be physically swiped off the top of the image and into the actual gallery space. Houck was born in Pine Ridge, a Lakota reservation in South Dakota, and received a BA in architecture from Colorado University in 2000—two clues as to the provenances of the objects shown in *Pine Ridge* and *Peg and Jon*. Another work presents a white shoebox addressed to Sandra Houck, the artist’s mother, and derives its title, *Baby Shoes, Never Worn*, from the famous line of prose that Ernest Hemingway reportedly devised as a six-word novel (the opening phrase of which is “For Sale”).

The pigment prints in this exhibition expand upon the artist’s 2011 series “Aggregates.” To create the “Aggregates,” Houck, who was trained in writing computer code, designed software that would produce intricate, multicolored grids. For each work, he printed out one of these digital compositions, manually creased the sheet of paper and photographed it, repeating this process multiple times to disturb the programmed perfection of

the original grid. A publication accompanying the present exhibition featured images from both bodies of work as well as a transcribed conversation between Houck and artist Lucas Blalock, in which Houck reveals some of the interests that inform his practice: namely, the writings of Vilém Flusser (the Czech-born philosopher known for his theories on the digital avant-garde) and Tom Gunning's notion of the "truth claim" of photography (the belief that photographs accurately portray reality).

Houck, according to the show's press material, is currently in psychoanalysis, and these works toy with the central question of that discipline: how might the substance of one's childhood produce one's adult identity? The artist has here created an approach to self-revelation that is as layered as the images themselves; poised between abstraction and disclosure, the autobiographical content he depicts invites the viewer to delve further into the images' folds to uncover the works' veiled significance.