

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

John Houck: ‘A History of Graph Paper’

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Published: October 3, 2013

John Houck’s iterative still-life photographs feel old-fashioned in the best possible way. They reach back in time, past the conceptual rephotography of the Pictures Generation and the many young artists in thrall to it, all the way to Cubism and Cezanne.

Even though Mr. Houck does some of his layering and reframing on a computer screen, he also puts a lot of physical effort into printing and reshooting photographs. His final compositions — “aggregate photographs,” as he calls them — are more likely to stimulate painterly debates about space and perspective than to start conversations about reproduction, fabrication and intellectual property.

Empty boxes figure in many of the works, as do sheets of colored and gridded paper that overlap in brain-teasing fashion. Office supplies and desk accessories — like the architectural drafting tools laid out in “Peg and John” — also suggest a rational-mathematical mind-set. (The news release tells us that the show’s title is a nod to the 19th-century scientist Luke Howard, an early advocate of graph paper).

The presence of more personal items — an American Indian beaded necklace, a stamp collection, some fancy-looking port glasses — suggests oblique autobiography, as does the title of “Baby Shoes, Never Worn” (part of a famous “six-word novel” long attributed, probably erroneously to Hemingway). The psychological intrigue doesn’t quite live up to the spatial variety, but it’s there.