Kate Shepherd: Figuring Something Out

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On a recent visit to the studio of Kate Shepherd, I noticed a paperback copy of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* lying on a table by the door. A dog-eared page indicated that Shepherd was still in the middle of the reading it. Nevertheless, I felt the need to discuss with her the book's closing passage. There, after masterfully charting the shift from the classical to the modern episteme, Foucault argues that the category of "man" is a shockingly recently invention, barely dating back to the eighteenth century, when the arrangements that once determined what was knowable and sayable had dissolved and then recrystallized. "If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared …," Foucault writes, "then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."

Foucault doesn't specify what might succeed the modern episteme, since, well, how could he? When the representational scheme that currently situates human subjectivity at its center gives way to some whole new system of thought, the transformation will likely be both monumental and invisible. That isn't to suggest, however, that it will be utterly undetectable. As art historian T. J. Clark observed in a reent essay on Picasso's murals, artists often behave like canaries in a coal mine. They are sensitive (and susceptible) to minute changes in the atmosphere. What compelled me to ask Shepherd about the conclusion to *The Order of Things* is that at least one such canary-like moment of intuition is evident in her own career. In TK-YEAR, Shepherd was drawing the portrait of a friend, and she simply couldn't manage to fill in the face. The head was nothing but a blank bubble, devoid of eyes, ears, cheekbones, as if the figure's human features had failed to emerge, or had all been washed away.

Much of Shepherd's subsequent career has been devoted to "figuring out" the implications of that missing face. She has repeatedly confronted the strange break in representation that rendered her academic training in draughtsmanship suddenly problematic. All the while, she has sought to retain or renew the touch of her hand, and, with it, those ineffable qualities typically identified, however insufficiently, as elegance, élan, or esprit. Thus, in both strategy and sensibility, her work shares an affinity with the

early experiments of Ellsworth Kelly. As Yve-Alain Bois has importantly argued, Kelly was, like many American artists living in Paris during the 1950s, stymied by the overwhelming and omnipresent achievements of Pablo Picasso. How does one contend with an artist who has invented everything? Kelly's solution was to invent nothing, to submit his creative impulse to the monochrome, the grid, chance, commercial paint chips, and "already made" shapes (the sources of which he kept to himself for many years). Shepherd has employed many of the same methods, though, in the present era, she is confronting not a single indomitable personage like Picasso, but the ubiquitous transformation of human vision through digital technology.

Of late, Shepherd has produced several series of unique prints, all of them run through a single silkscreen with a simple pattern, of two "sister" rectangles lying side-by-side. The rectangles share the same approximate dimensions, but each has different blank sections cutting into their overall shape. The extractions lend the rectangles a passing resemblance to the arcade avatar Pac-Man, his mouth in mid-chomp. That is, Shepherd's broken geometry meets the minimal requirements for rendering a figure—like an 8-bit animation, or a crude sketch in the sand. The degree to which individual prints of these rectangles conjure the profile of a face is a function of choices Shepherd makes in the production process. Working with master printer Luther Davis, Shepherd applies her single screen to each sheet multiple times, using a variety of inks and angles. Each application triggers a play of transparency and overlay, and generates an unpredictable mosaic of secondary and tertiary hues. Shepherd repeats the process until she deems a print complete, then cuts the paper into two. The visibility of the silkscreen's "sister" faces fluctuates from print to print, emerging out of, or disappearing into, an orderly riot of pattern and color. Shepherd thus achieves a supple form of figuration by means of a mechanical process alone.

Previously, Shepherd has printed series with red, blue, and yellow as the dominant hue. Here, Shepherd has experimented with shades of violet, achieving an expansive range of effects. When viewed in rapid succession, the prints instill an impression of dusk, of rapid subtle shifts unfolding in the last moments of a day's dying light. As the colors brighten and darken, pulse and push, a few dim spectral figures appear in sudden bursts. Just as quickly, they fade away.