

MARTOS GALLERY

Chamberlain, Colby, "Jessica Vaughn: Martos Gallery, New York," *Artforum*, February, 2018

ARTFORUM

Jessica Vaughn

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Jessica Vaughn, *Learning From the Work of Others*(detail), 2017, ink-jet prints, photocopy, Plexiglas, 76 × 48".

In his book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, 2016, Darby English adopts the term *representationalism* to critique the tendency among scholars to analyze the abstract paintings of black artists by seeking out coded affirmations of racial identity—relating, for instance, the layered compositions of Joe Overstreet to the hair weaves at his mother’s beauty salon, or characterizing Ed Clark’s use of a broom to spread acrylic over his canvases as an homage to janitors. This tendency, English contends, foists onto abstraction precisely the sort of static definitions it aims to elude. This past summer, representationalism came to mind as a potential objection to “Invisible Man,” the group exhibition that inaugurated Martos Gallery’s downtown location and that was curated by its director, Ebony L. Haynes. The nod to Ralph Ellison in the exhibition’s title bore the implicit claim that the very absence of figurative representation in works by Torkwase Dyson, Pope.L, Kayode Ojo, and Jessica Vaughn was itself a form of representation, a means of figuring the subject rendered invisible by structural racism. This reading was bolstered by the juxtaposition of Jessica Vaughn’s *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005*, 2017, a wall-based grid of navy-blue seat parts collected from the Chicago Transit Authority, with Pope.L’s *Pedestal*, 2017, a water fountain turned upside down and attached to the ceiling. One

review after another interpreted the works as allusions to the segregation of buses and drinking fountains during the civil rights era, thus tethering their significance to a commemorated moment of protest now fifty years past.

Six months later, Vaughn installed an alternate version of *After Willis* at Martos, this time for her solo exhibition, "Receipt of a Form." The repetition occasioned a consideration of how similar works, set in the exact same space, can be inflected by differing discursive frames. Whereas "Invisible Man" gestured toward assigning the scuffs and tears on the seats of *After Willis* to a specific social identity (namely, that of the African American communities living along Chicago's Blue Line), "Receipt of a Form" resisted any stable distinction between figure and ground. Most of the exhibition barely rose above one's ankles. In a row along the floor lay several scraps of fabric sourced from chair manufacturers, each named for the trademarked pattern of its design: *Boomer Blue No. 340 #2*; *Pacific Grey No. 48306*; *South Beach Blue No. 389* (all works 2017). The scraps were factory leftovers, the remains of rectangular swaths sliced up and separated to upholster the quasi-organic curves of plastic seating. Vaughn's only addition was to back the scraps with Plexiglas to ensure they lay flat.

A few of the resulting cutouts were legible as armrests or seat backs, but most remained inscrutable, the flimsy index of an impersonal logic determined by ergonomic standardization and capitalist efficiency. Anyone seeking further elucidation might have been drawn to the seven photographs of carbon-paper sheets and one photocopy hanging on the wall, *Learning from the Work of Others*, described in the exhibition's press release as the record of notes Vaughn made to herself in the studio. Yet any trace of Vaughn's handwriting was obscured by the dark crinkles of the carbon. The photographs did reveal, however, a great deal about Vaughn's markedly particular stationery selection, a vintage 1960s brand called Nu-Kote, emblazoned with a jaunty midcentury-modern typewriter logo and distributed by Burroughs Corporation—the business-machine company famously founded by the grandfather of William S. Burroughs, Beat novelist and proponent of the cutup method.

Vaughn chose to place *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #008* on either side of the gallery's entrance, seemingly so that visitors would see it on their way out. Alongside *Boomer Blue No. 340 #2* and *Learning from the Work of Others*, where signs of human intervention are overwhelmed by the marks of institutions, the metonymic function of *After Willis*'s abrasions became much less certain. Instead, the scratched surfaces appeared as a point of contact between an elusive social body and the state. Yes, under the right conditions, rubbing yields an image, but first and foremost, it is a process of generating friction.

—Colby Chamberlain