

Art in America

Exhibition Reviews

JANUARY 2013



Peter Sacks: *Six by Six (The Living)*, 2011-12, mixed mediums on canvas, 72 inches square; at Paul Rodgers/9W.

PETER SACKS Paul Rodgers/9W

From a distance, Peter Sacks's new 6-foot-square mixed-medium canvases seem to be composed primarily of a thick impasto. Stand a little closer and the impasto resolves into something like the raised surface of a topographical map, a landscape's geological features expressed in subtle sculptural relief. Move closer still and the geographical scale shifts suddenly to the human: what were landmasses turn out to be garments and textiles of various sorts—clothing, lacework, rags—bunched into shapes, often scorched or otherwise distressed, then painted. Pieces of corrugated cardboard, netting and other found objects have also been incorporated as structuring elements. And then there are the texts: Sacks has typed (and sometimes handwritten) a range of them directly onto the textiles, having forced most of the fabrics through a typewriter's carriage.

The movement across these moments of vision and revision—from abstract painting to the cartographer's bird's-eye view to the intimacy of text and textile, and back again—is not merely phenomenological experiment. In Sacks's work these perceptual shifts are deftly thematized. Consider *Six by Six (The Living)*, 2011-12: to discover that a mass in what looks like a military map is actually the ruin of a man's shirt is to move from the sanitizing abstractions of armed conflict—spectacle, statistic—to the reality of the fragile human body. The texts in Sacks's paintings are always drawn from carefully chosen contexts; in *Six by Six (The Living)*, they are excerpts, mainly whited out, from Civil War soldiers' letters and other historical documents pertaining to the Battle of Gettysburg. As one draws near the work there is a dramatic shift both in orientation (from

aerial to portrait view) and in affect (from the cool to the elegiac). Here it bears mentioning that the South African-born Sacks—now an English professor at Harvard—has written, in addition to five books of poetry, a widely acclaimed critical study of the English elegy.

Sacks's new paintings have force both as elegies and as complex inquiries into the nature of contemporary art-making. His adoption of a serial square format acknowledges an art historical movement toward a more modular fabrication that is in tension with the lacework, weaving and sewing involved in the production of the repurposed textiles. His patient typing out of texts directly onto these textiles stages a drama between the manual and the mechanized, as well as between looking and reading.

The fate of the handmade is a central theme in Sacks's work and can be seen as a comment on the increasing use of machine fabrication in the art world and beyond. One remarkable facet of these canvases is that Sacks has produced large-scale paintings without painting itself serving as the primary compositional mechanism. While he handles paint wonderfully, his manipulation and placement of the cloth and other objects, and his selection and typing out of texts, are *at least* as important as the application of paint—and yet the works have an unmistakable painterly effect. They thus manage to both incorporate and transcend a critique of ambitious, expressive abstract painting. Like the best elegies in any medium, including those for a medium itself, the material achievement of Sacks's art offers a glimmer of human possibility amid the work of mourning.

—Ben Lerner