

## ARTFORUM

Grabner, Michelle. "John Henderson at Golden Gallery,"  
*Artforum*, April 2011

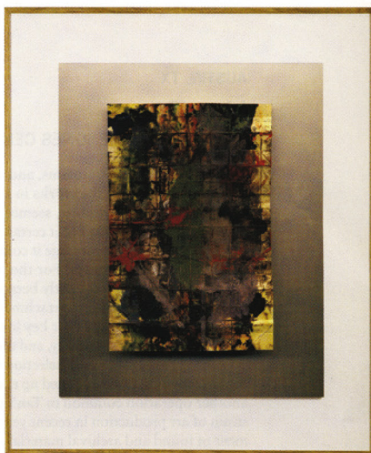
CHICAGO

John Henderson  
GOLDEN GALLERY

"The Frugal Genius," John Henderson's first solo exhibition, offered four small paintings (the longest of which was twenty by sixteen inches), three cast-aluminum reliefs made to resemble paintings, one screen, and one framed photograph. The installation ringed the walls of Golden Gallery's intimate storefront space with works that encompassed the range of painting's many and often puzzling endgame strategies. From sweeping arabesque lines to tight fields of blocky impasto, a mash-up of gestures was represented, as Henderson self-consciously restaged various canonical modes of painterly expression and popular forms of appropriation.

Take, for example, *Cleaning*, 2010. In this nearly seven-minute black-and-white video loop, we see Henderson mopping the hardwood studio floor, making grand swooshes, broad, looping rhythmic drags with the head of a wet mop. It is an unmistakable riff on Janine Antoni's *Loving Care*, 1992, in which she used her own dye-soaked hair as a brush/mop, dragging her body along the floor to make her work on all

John Henderson,  
*Flowers*, 2010,  
framed color photo-  
graph, 15 x 13".



fours. But Henderson recycles not only Antoni's referent AbEx gesture but her feminist critique of Pollock, too. Whereas Antoni places her female body *in* the painting, explicitly instrumentalizing it as a tool of labor, Henderson, like Pollock, maintains compositional control while standing. In turn, Henderson's comment is directed not at the New York School or feminism *per se*, but at the critical terms of contemporary painting through which the young artist is seeking to make his name—a point underscored by the work's delivery method, a video recording of the performance shown on a small flat-screen monitor hanging beside the other paintings on the gallery wall. *Flowers*, 2010—a framed photograph documenting a creased rectangular piece of paper that had been aggressively covered in paint—wields a similar metacritique. The abstraction floats in front of a gray seamless backdrop as yet another artifact of painterly activity.

Complementing these two non-painting "paintings" were three cast-aluminum pieces (each titled *Cast*, and dated either 2010 or 2011), which, mimicking the proportions of a typical canvas-on-stretcher setup and "allover" composition of a midcentury surface were presented as ghostly surrogates of original abstract paintings. Each work is different, incorporating a range of treatments from high-relief impasto to shallow washes with defined brushwork. Here again, Henderson quotes not just an art-historically ratified gesture but also its critique: The cast-aluminum paintings of Tomma Abts come to mind. However, if Abts produces hers when unable to compositionally resolve a conventional painting, Henderson composes a painting that he intends to cast from the start. These three metal "paintings" employ a lost-mold sculptural process that fixes the painter's touch in an aluminum surrogate. Using indexing, seriality, and framing as critical tools to probe originality, reproducibility, and authorship, Henderson adopts a position perhaps more closely aligned with that demonstrated by Allan McCollum's work with plaster surrogates than with the painterly innovations of Abts.

Finally, four actual paintings (all titled *Untitled Painting*, two dated 2010; two dated 2011) made an appearance in Henderson's show, too, and, rendered in classic oil on canvas, they revealed the range of references, networks, histories, and structures that underlie this medium. Conjuring a distilled Guston, a polished Hans Hoffman, and a quick-

witted Rothko, all filtered by way of Blake Rayne, Cheyney Thompson, and R. H. Quayman, the lot was calculatedly varied and had an effect similar to that of the cast-aluminum set, likewise generating a symbolic field of expression. With these "true" paintings, Henderson punctuated his intention with what might be read as a pictorial quotation mark: the photographic technique of vignetting at the painting's edges, so that a hazy border separates the image field from the stretcher's edge. Yet these paintings are slow in their touch, self-reflective, and pagelike, standing apart from the merely conceptual tableaux in the exhibition. Despite all of these winks and nods at critiquing the activity of the genius painter, when a brush is in Henderson's hand, he leaves traces of invention and evidence of painterly curiosity that suggest that "frugal genius" may apply, above all, to him.

—Michelle Grabner