

John Henderson: A Revision at Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin



Installation view, John Henderson, 2014 Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, New York

By CASSIE CUMMINS, NOV. 2014

Often times, when inside a gallery setting, art objects can seem isolated and autonomous, a means to their own end, as though they exist in a vacuum. The sort of art object Chicago-based artist John Henderson produces, however, appears more like a relic, or a token of the context out of which it came. When seen slowly, this manner of representation becomes a reevaluation of the art making process itself.

Henderson's newest collection of work, "A Revision", currently on show at Galerie Perrotin's New York space, follows suit nicely with his previous work, in terms of its aesthetic and conceptual choices; Henderson uses a painterly lens for what (could be mistaken for but) are not literally paintings—save *one* literal painting hanging, like your cool glass of water, at the end of the show.

In keeping with the show's title, each series of pieces has undergone a process of revision—not necessarily for the sake of improvement, but rather for the sake of re-imagining, re-producing, or re-constituting the original intention or movement made. In this way, there is an ongoing movement of the final art object away from the artist's original gesture. One very plain example of this is the series of cast metal "paintings", each titled "Type", which are copper reproductions of actual paintings that Henderson constructs via a casting process known as electrotyping.



John Henderson Images courtesy Galerie Emmanuel Perrotin, New York

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Previously, Henderson has been described as an abstract painter, and while his pieces are abstract in that they do not depict some visually identifiable thing in particular, what is more significant about this epithet is Henderson's literal abstraction *of* his paintings. Each of the bodies of work hanging in the show begins with a painterly gesture, which Henderson then abstracts (or as he says, refracts), causing the final evolution of his piece to take on the form of a different medium altogether—say, a copper sculpture reproduction, in the case of the “Type” pieces. The attention Henderson pays to *the painter*, it seems, is being used merely as an access point for, what seems to be, his ongoing examination of the separability of the artist from their artwork.

In another attempt at “revision”, for the five printed works in the show, each titled “Proof (wall rip, verso)”, Henderson takes a page-sized swatch of linen and adheres it directly to the wall of his studio with sizing (a preparatory substance customarily applied to canvas to prevent it from absorbing too much of the paint). Henderson waits for the sizing to dry so that the linen fuses with the paint from his studio wall, and then tears off the swatch, taking a layer of the wall's paint along with it. The backside of the linen is then photographed at high resolution, enlarged dramatically, and printed onto a 76 by 52 inch piece of polyester fabric.

This body of work harkens back to a video piece Henderson made (“Cleanings”, 2010), for which he filmed himself mopping the floor of his studio, the water markings of which disappear shortly thereafter. In highlighting the role of his studio in the creation of both “Cleanings” and the “Proof” pieces, Henderson could be understood as documenting the relationship between the artist and the artwork. “[The work] is an image of the studio, and therefore an image of the painter, and therefore an image of a painting,” Henderson says. He locates the essence of this relationship in the performance of that relationship: the artist in the studio, the artist making an artwork.

In a few instances, this perspective manifests itself in the form of an actual performance piece (Henderson has shown two videos in the past in which he himself performs). However, typically in Henderson's work, the performative aspect of the artist/artwork relationship is only imbued in the art *objects* that he shows. Consequently, this would seem to render the product (the art object) less significant than the gesture, especially because the physical pieces themselves are first and foremost replications (metal castings of paintings, or photographic sculptures of paintings).



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Lo and behold, though, this artistic intention too is called into question, with the “truest” painting in “A Revision”—an oil paint-on-canvas piece, blue in color, and resembling a more familiar idea of abstract painting) being hung at the show's very end. It acts as a sort of “hangnail”, Henderson says, that complicates his position in the original role-play.

In these ways, which all point to the inherent relationship between the artist and their artwork, Henderson's work is reflexive by nature; his “paintings” are images of themselves in the process of being made, locked in a kind of Socratic dialogue with themselves.

Henderson acknowledges this reflexivity, saying, “There is some sense that the refraction of the artist's expression could close down the read of the work, that it could create a closed loop.” Instead though, Henderson says, he hopes for the process of refracting his own expression to act as a discursive framework. “There is a framework in place, like a stage for action, and then there is variability within that framework.”

For Henderson, this approach to his work is a means to holding “a practice that is unhinged”; in other words, one that honors elements of chance, and that produces objects that challenge the viewer's expectations and call into question the artist's intentions.

And such is in fact the case; the final art objects composing this show embody the element of chance that is always present in the artist's process of making. A great example of this is the one video piece Henderson has for consideration: Hanging across the room from “Untitled Painting” (or the singular “real” painting in the show), is a video showing a straight, vertical shot of the skylight in Henderson's studio during what was a heavy Chicago rainstorm. The framework of the skylight acts like the framework of a stretched canvas, and the raindrops appear like paint.

Consequently, there is an undeniable quality in the seemingly minimalist work that Henderson produces that captures the gaze of the viewer—the closer you get to the art objects themselves, the more confusing they get materially. By inciting this manner of observation, Henderson says he hopes to encourage the “slowness of looking”. His pieces do not function as singular objects that stand on their own. Instead, they appear like something left over, standing *in* as proof(s) of something that happened before, before them, or at the moment of their conception. **WM**