

ARTFORUM

Summer 2011
XLIX, No. 10

CHICAGO

John Sparagana
Corbett vs. Dempsey

At first it's hard to get past the intricate method of slicing and assembling multiple payers of paper (ink-jet prints, magazine pages) that goes into John Sparagana's process. By this I mean that the wow factor—the impressiveness of the works' labor-intensive craftsmanship and the compulsion to figure out how their matrices are constructed—initially detracts from the actual images. At Sparagana's solo exhibition *Between the Eyes*, at Corbett vs. Dempsey, more than a few visitors could be overheard quizzing gallery staff about the artist's techniques. His procedures are too complex to explain full here, but, in short, he takes multiple copies of the same print or page and integrates them into a single, expanded field many times larger than the original. The end-product is not a perfect enlargement but a broken-up (or broken-down) version that results from repeating identical image fragments. And it is, in fact, the resulting image—not the way it was constructed—that is important here.

In works that incorporate magazine pages (from sources including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the German weekly *Der Spiegel*), the image proves unusually resilient. Even before cutting into the glossy paper stock, Sparagana physically "fatigues" the pages, crumpling and unfolding them until they soften in both texture and appearance. Though the slicing and reassembling that follows render the textual components indecipherable—gray expanses scattered with tiny bits of letters—the photographic images, however blurry, nevertheless persist and, to an extent, so, too, do their meanings. For example, in *DS 14-08-09, 2010*, one can make out a woman pressing her facing to a gloved hand, as a crowd appears assembled in the background. Something (probably not something good) must have happened, but the caption and article are mute on this subject, having been splintered into unreadable slices. One might say the photographic message has been liberated from the connotative (or what Roland Barthes called the "parasitic") message of the text. The contrast between now-unintelligible words and still-legible image speaks to the latter's ability to survive both physical assault from the artist's knife and structural isolation from its linguistic counterpart.

The more difficult works in the exhibition—which is to say, the more cognitively demanding—are from a series of large-scale pictures that combine ink-jet prints of news

images (depicting events in such fraught places as Haiti, Afghanistan, South Korea, and Pakistan) with the visual structures of iconic paintings. Employing the same practice of slicing and remixing that he uses to make the magazine works, but overlaying this group with canonical patterns and forms (Andy Warhol's flowers, Frank Stella's stripes, Ellsworth Kelly's shapes, Hélio Oiticica's grids), Sparagana dares the viewer to figure out what, in fact, these modes of representation have to do with one another. The answer lies in a reciprocity of perception by which each layer is slowed down by the presence of the other. In *Untitled BTE #5: Post-Earthquake Haiti/Frank Stella, 'Die Fahne Hoch,' 1959, Hélio Oiticica, 'Metesquema,' 1958, 2010*, the central figure of the image appears in midstride, his head and shoulders leaning forward, as if breaking into a run, while another figure lies twisted in the foreground, either injured, dead, or dying. Painted over this scene are the outlines of works by both Stella and Oiticica. You might think the effect would be overwhelming, too much to take in. Instead, the lines of the painted surface seem to pin the image below, trapping its movement and retarding the normally quick movement of one's eyes over such media photographs. If the optical properties of the work's surface paradoxically slow down our vision—such illusionism is usually fast—the underlying image ensures that we do not experience these effects in a detached or disembodied manner. In this work and others from the same series, we do not have recourse to the floating, noncorporeal model of vision sometimes ascribed to Pop and post-painterly abstraction. Instead, we are brought down to earth by the subjective realities of such things as death, war, natural disaster, and political protest.

— Jennifer King