

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

ARTFORUM

JOHN LEHR "LOW RELIEF" AT KATE WERBLE GALLERY

MICHAEL WILSON

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John Lehr, *Window Drawing*, 2013
Pigmented inkjet print
34 x 46 ½ inches

The nine color photographs in John Lehr's recent exhibition *Low Relief* look like luscious but simple shots of chanced-upon urban surfaces - walls, doors, windows, grates - enriched by incidental wear and tear. And in terms of primary source, that's exactly what they are. But Lehr has manipulated each close-up image physically and digitally, tinkering with both the subject on-site and its record in the studio to achieve a seamless hybrid of representation and abstraction. Concentrating on the subtle enhancement of existing characteristics, the Brooklyn-based artist variously heightens or mutes the hues in each fragment, bringing the result close to a kind of found Abstract Expressionist painting. The works are, in the words of their maker, "based in reality, but definitively imaginary."

Lehr prints at one-to-one scale, so while all the works in the show are modestly sized - they enjoyed plenty of breathing room even in this smallish gallery - each maintains a direct relationship to its subject. Only two works here, *Untitled* and *Double* (both 2013), share the same proportions; the rest vary, and shift too from portrait to landscape orientation. Crisply mounted to minimize distraction, they achieve a window-like lucidity. This is ironic, given that they often depict walls - or, at best, windows without much of a view - but appropriate, considering that Lehr often pursues a subtle layering effect by shooting through glass or clear plastic. In the show's loveliest image, he pictures a Dunkin' Donuts poster fuzzed out of recognition by the intervention of one such plane, focusing on a grungy stratum of wrinkled tape and adhesive residue.

This work is unusual for Lehr, in that it was made in the studio; mostly, he shoots on the street. In *Window Drawing*, 2013, a Twombly-like pattern of pale gestural lines turns out to have been scratched into the paint covering a window; strips of sky flicker through here and there, resulting in an unanticipated dimensionality. Something similar occurs in *Spaces*, 2012, as a hazy pattern of pale blue and gray resolves itself, when viewed at a distance, into a fragment of text. A constellation of dense and sharply focused black spots is scattered across the print's lower half, again suggesting the intrusion of a transparent support.

Records of the motion of the human hand, while not always in the form of writing, were

TEL 212-352-9700 FAX 212-352-9704

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everywhere in *Low Relief*. The silvered indentations that meander across the titular architectural feature in *Grate*, 2012, suggest a rough attempt to etch a desperate message, while in *Phone Booth*, 2012, a spray-painted fragment of prosaic street furniture becomes a gauzy field of white, yellow, blue, and pale orange - a dream of color almost without form. Most primal of all, in *Plaque*, 2013, stripes on a dusty gray-brown surface appear to have been made by a set of fingers dragged downward through the accumulated grime. There are echoes in such images of everything from prehistoric cave paintings to Brassai's shots of graffiti in 1930s Paris. In these rangy real/unreal snippets, Lehr aims to avoid assigning any one subject or image more value than its neighbor, yet themes and motifs, preferences and emphases bubble up nonetheless. Even at their closest to autonomy from the world around them, his images are irredeemably urban. And even when their colors hew closest to the naturally occurring, or their forms seem most dreamily detached, some element - a maplike tangle of lines or a cryptic fragment of battered public signage - invariably pulls them back down to earth, and toward the city lights.

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