

Reviews: "Coal for Wine" Brennan & Griffin | Curated by Nicholas Irzyk

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## REVIEWS

### COAL FOR WINE

Brennan & Griffin – Lower East Side, New York  
Curated by Nicholas Irzyk

By Owen Duffy



Peter Acheson, *Eva Hesse*, 2011-2014.  
acrylic and collage on canvas, 12" x 16."  
Courtesy the artist and Brennan & Griffin.

"Coal for Wine," a compelling group show at Brennan & Griffin curated by Nicholas Irzyk, profanes the myth of the artist as shaman and alchemist. Laurel Sparks, Peter Acheson, Vlad Smolkin, Geoffrey Farmer, and Cheryl Donegan all approach the transformation of materials and nature as an accessible procedure without flattening complexities. Nevertheless, these artists inject their own kind of magic into the creative process and complicate unidirectional conversion. The cheap and the prized, pattern and randomness, lore and experience all coexist and sustain a palpable sense of mystery.

Sparks's painting, *Rhinestone Voodoo*, is an accumulation of motifs and geometries. Chain link fences, stripes, and checkerboards rendered in muted pastels and grays interlock and overlap. Superficially, the paintings read as cosmetic, but Sparks's patterns are encrypted referents to occult symbology, divination, and geomancy. While these branches of mysticism allude to the supernatural, Sparks's paintings and their process retain a meaningful connection with the here and now. As part of her process, Sparks collects earth from the American Southwest and pans for gold and turquoise, which become repurposed into her work. The combination of sacred geometries and precious materials edges these paintings toward the transcendent and absolute. In a roguish maneuver, Sparks applies "base" materials to her canvases: rhinestones, glitter, pom poms—a bait and switch that returns the work to the artificial, veneered, and quotidian. Rather than being a one-way process, transformation, for Sparks, becomes a cyclical and contrapuntal movement; refusing to settle on the high or the low.

Now living in upstate New York, Acheson moved into Williamsburg during the late 1970s and '80s along with artists like Chris Martin. As a key figure during this historical moment who witnessed and participated in the neighborhood's radical transformation, Acheson's paintings echo topographical change. He culls scraps from his surroundings and converts humble globs of paint into poetic tribute paintings, such as *Eva*

*Hesse*. The work's abject surface, gloopy and uneven, reflects formal and conceptual decisions that are appropriate for an object devoted to Hesse. There is a precarity to this work; bits of wood are erroneously placed on the surface, evoking a similar feeling to Hesse's sculpture. The conservation challenges of Hesse's work are well-known—Acheson's cobbled-together tribute could have been made from the detritus that Hesse's objects frequently shed. While there is much in this work that suits Hesse, a noted contrast remains between this piece's humbleness and the myth that has been constructed about the post-minimalist through critics' and historians' obsession with her biography.

Smolkin's *Opening in the Smog* is an ambiguous, yet alluring object. Rather than a mere elevation of the low, or degradation of the high, Smolkin transubstantiates glass beads, painted carbon black—comfortably middle brow materials—into a work of art that, depending on one's perspective, can be either lavish or philistine. Indeterminate, grotesque, and otherworldly, *Opening in the Smog* fluctuates between being an arm of rich, sumptuous black caviar and a turd. The stuff of dreams, the work is both weird and deadpan, replete with an elegiac title that suggests a space, an opening, for the viewer's interpretation amid a cloud of nebulosity.

Emerging from the throngs of the summer's endless array of group shows, "Coal for Wine" promises art that transforms. Rather than delivering the usual high/low or low/high dichotomy, transformation becomes a more open-ended and complicated process. Ambiguity abounds and the show's art provides multiple glimpses into the shift between things, framing it as an ongoing process that is never quite complete. There's no coal here; Irzyk's show is a diamond in the sun. ■

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