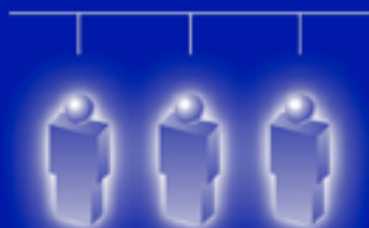


situation room



Published on the occasion of the exhibition

SITUATION ROOM:

recent works by Colby Caldwell, Jason Gubbiotti and James Huckenpahler

organized by the Boyden Gallery,
St. Mary's College of Maryland
January 21-February 27, 2003

This publication is made possible by a generous gift from Christopher Reutershan.

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SITUATION ROOM

texts by

Lorraine Adams

Tyler Green

Casey Smith

Bernard Welt

Introduction

In January of 2000, the Troyer Gallery in Washington, DC presented an exhibition of work by Colby Caldwell, Jason Gubbiotti and James Huckenpahler, the outcome of several months of lively discussion and debate between the three. The show *Signal / Signal* received critical acclaim; the artists moved on to equally successful solo exhibitions and all the while continued their energetic and wide-ranging dialog. *Situation Room* is a poetic reference to the lively and often contentious nature of their long-running conversation on the state-of-the-art and the state-of-the-world. This exhibition reunites them, providing a fresh opportunity to compare works in different media that have been created in a common intellectual ambience and echo common concerns.

Casey Smith

"So long they fail to realize the full inwardness of the situation."

Haue in mynde .. the setuacyon of thy cyte newly fowunded,
A situation in a playne champion countrey,
A pleasant situation amongst fruitfull fields and greene grounds.
A situation far more beautiful than that of Jerusalem.
The situation of the cytie of Saba in Ethiopia vnder Egipt,
The chiefe cytie .. in situacion much lyke vnto the cytie of Milayne
Or Edinburgh, the finest town for situation in Europe.
Beautiful for situation .. is Mount Sion,
A place as eminent in scituation as she in sweetnesse of disposition.

A fire burning in an open situation.
The Spaniards have filled vp the place of the scituation with earth.
Such a situation as might be agreeable .. to the architect.
Pilasters of Stone, and Arches, take up a great part of the situation there.
He views the dismal situation waste and wilde, a dungeon horrible.
Passing these dreadful rocks seemd a wonderfully agreeable situation.

7/Casey Smith/"So long they fail..."

The prison an ancient palace, situation pleasant, buildings stately.
The scituation of this house hath for a long while employed his eyes,
The same must be attributed to the scituation of the land,
Its Native Riches an apt Scituation for Commerce.

Two chairs were placed by the side of this comfortable situation.
He falls to the ground in fear and waits in this prostrate situation for a noise.
This is the way and the sytuacion of famous doctrine:
In a situation of utmost difficulty and peril,
The financial situation is perceptibly clearer.

Examine the situation of my son,
prescribe what you shall judge proper for his cure,
the difficulties of his situation increase.

This ruinous and ignominious situation ..
calls upon us to remonstrate in the strongest .. language.
This situation is a situation of difficulty,
and nothing but great patience can carry us through it.

8/Casey Smith/"So long they fail..."

This scene goes entirely for what we call situation and stage effect.

There's situation for you! there's an heroic group!

Wildly melodramatic, and full of Situation from end to end.

Situation Normal All Fucked Up, not All Fouled Up.

Whan you wil gylte the parchemente,
you shal geve it a grounde or sytuatyon
wyth the white of an Egge or Gomme.

How true is it that men in parallel situations
necessarilly move on similar principles?

That which we esteem a Happiness in one Situation of Mind
is otherwise thought of in another.

9/Casey Smith/"So long they fail..."

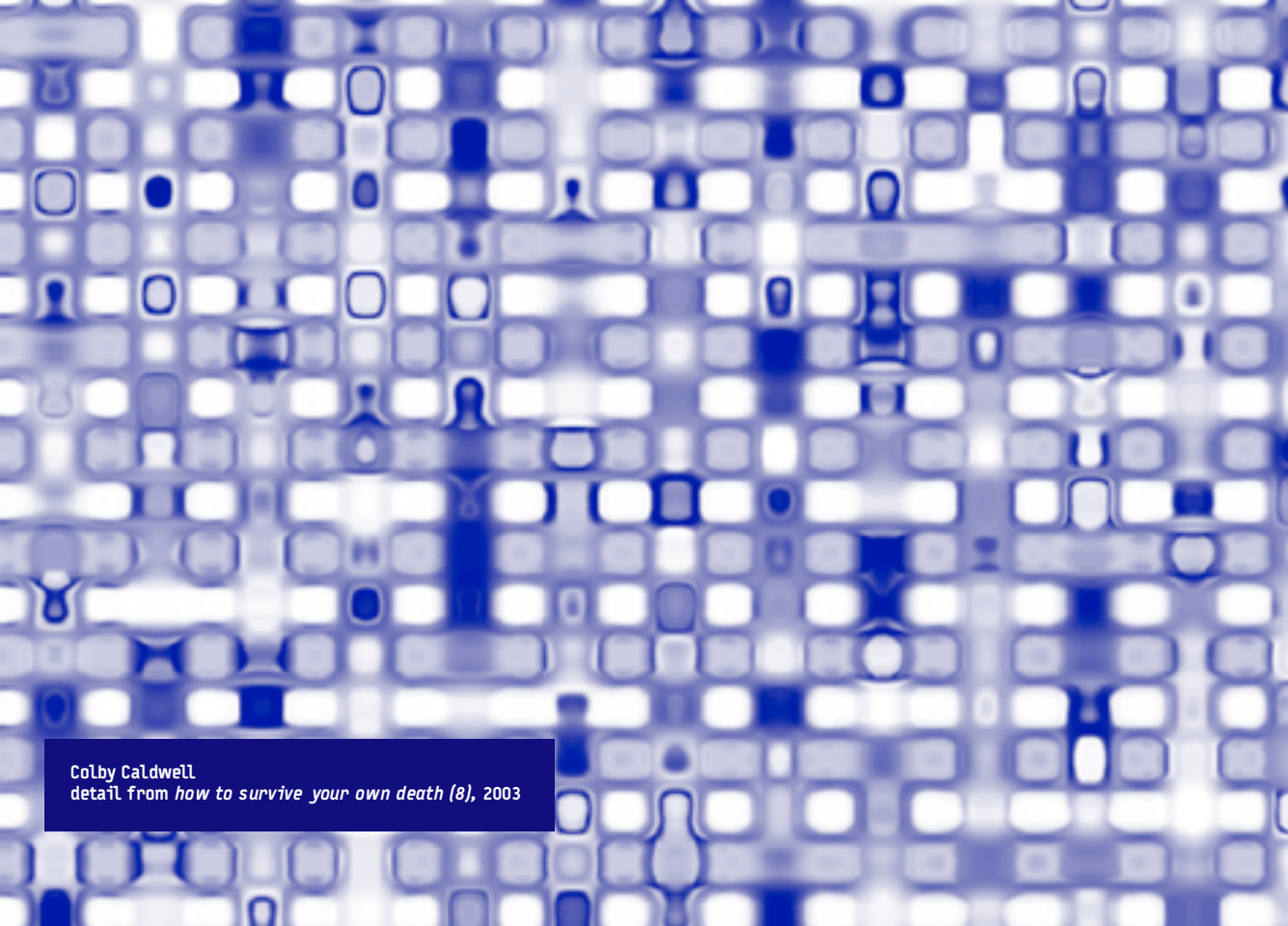
Lorraine Adams
Actual Heavens:
Colby Caldwell, James Huckenpahler
and Jason Gubbiotti

When we describe a process, or make out an invoice, or photograph a tree, we create models; without them we would know nothing of reality and would be animals. Abstract pictures are fictive models, because they make visible a reality that we can neither see nor describe, but whose existence we can postulate. We denote this reality in negative terms: the unknown, the incomprehensible, the infinite. And for thousands of years we have been depicting it through surrogate images such as heaven and hell, gods and devils.

Gerhard Richter: Text for catalogue of documenta 7, Kassel, 1982

At the time the now 70-year-old German painter Gerhard Richter wrote these words, scientific and technological innovations we take for granted had yet to be. Innovation's reach, however, so far falls short of what we need most. We don't know how we came to be and we can't stop ourselves from dying. And yet, even though "the unknown, the incomprehensible, the infinite" remain, we can, in ways unimaginable in 1982, see portions of reality we could not see then. Science—the microchip, quantum mechanics, DNA, et cetera—has changed art making. In the work of Colby Caldwell, James Huckenpahler and Jason Gubbiotti, we are in the company of young artists who are making art in ways radically different from the generation before them. They are constructing actual, not surrogate, heavens, hells, gods and devils.

Caldwell makes visible in his work realities not available to the unaided eye through a process that is his alone. He shoots footage with a Canon G01 digital video camera. He projects that footage in slow motion, at a third of its original speed, and films it again. Dirt, hair, dust, color shifts and other disruptions affect the second film. It loses clarity. It gains texture. It has its own history. It becomes its own thing, rather than a vestige of the landscapes or objects first filmed. He then downloads the digitized film into his computer with Final Cut Pro. He goes frame through frame, and pulls stills for export to Photoshop. He is most interested in the things that most artists, seeking a "strong" or "dramatic" image, would discard. He prints the digitized still on 160-lb. Arches watercolor paper. He mounts the 37" by 50" print on struc-



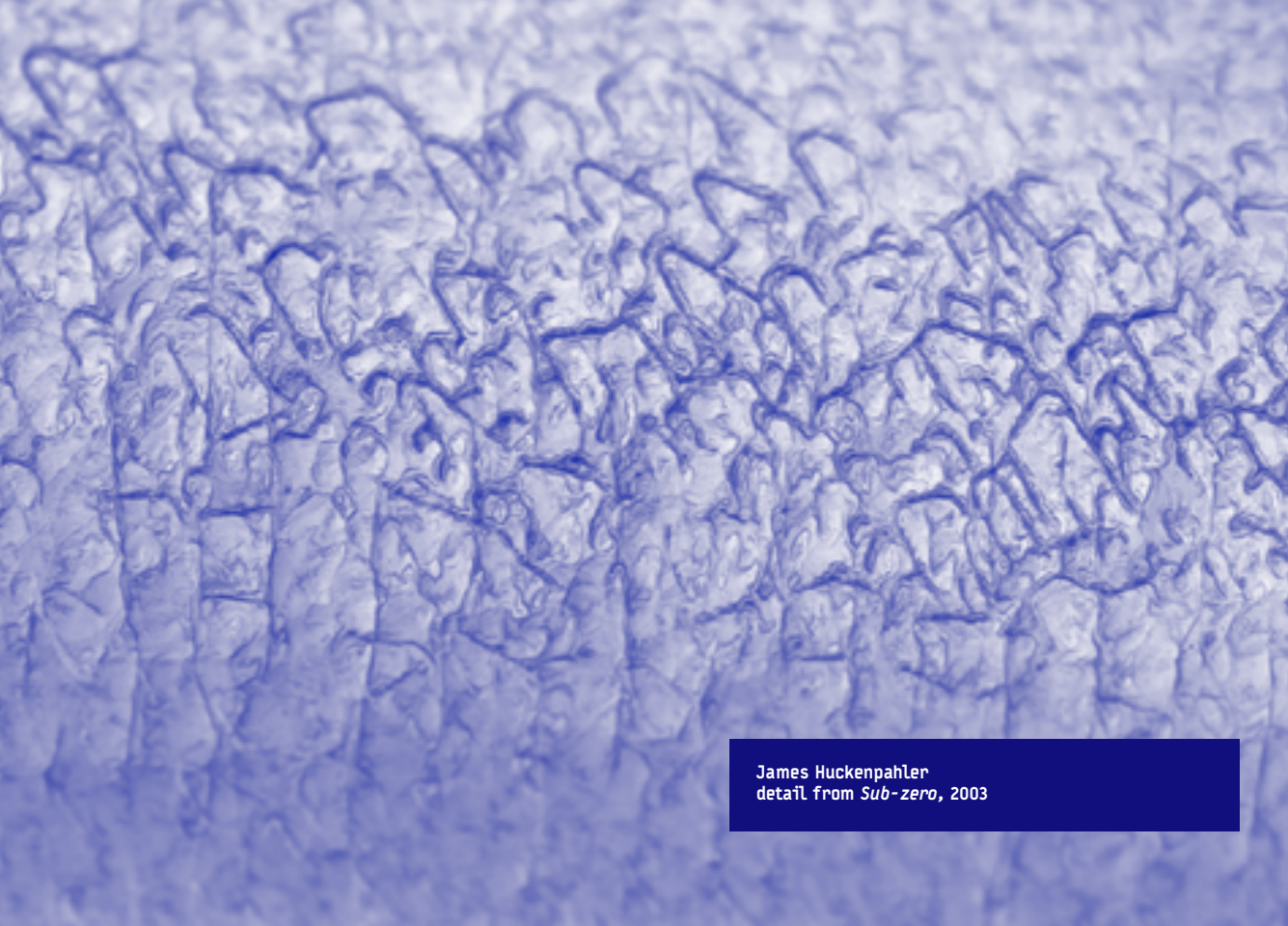
Colby Caldwell
detail from *how to survive your own death (8)*, 2003

tures made of discarded wood, (maple damaged by water, for example.) Every day, over a two week period, he finishes the surface with unbleached beeswax. The result is an object made from the newest technology and some of the most venerable—Arches paper is made from a process centuries old, art has been on wood panels since the Middle Ages, and beeswax dates at least to the Romans.

To the casual viewer, Caldwell's images look like blurred still photographs. They fall into three recognizable categories: portraits, landscapes and abstractions. There are relatively few portraits. There are a great number of landscapes—derived from just outside St. Petersburg, Russia; wheat and soy fields near his house in St. Mary's, Maryland, and the surroundings of Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. Many of Caldwell's landscapes are strikingly similar to Richter's representational paintings of banal photographs of rural scenery. Caldwell's abstractions strike me as the most original and provocative in his *oeuvre*. They look like abstractions, but of course, they are *not*. There was *a something out there* from which these images were obtained. But our ways of seeing and remembering do not allow for a highly refined mechanical accuracy of capture and replay. Our humanity is what makes us so finely susceptible, at the most fundamental visual level, to loss. What is radically innovative is that by rescuing these images from oblivion, Caldwell has made abstractions that are *not* fictive models.

James Huckenpahler's work also makes use of newest technology. His images are created entirely on the computer, using Strata StudioPro and Photoshop. None of the textures he builds are scanned into the computer, or downloaded from any source. He builds them in a process akin to growing crystals in liquid. In the past, Huckenpahler has thought of the resulting textures as skins. But in his new work, he moves away from that metaphor. His black and white images—also a departure from his previous artificial hues—are sumptuous, lapidary. In monochrome, he finds his way best. He has exalted ordinary repetitions to an intensity through manipulation of focus, light and pattern. With color's absence, and the connotations of skin removed, they possess a visual alacrity that is breathtaking.

These images also frustrate the Richteresque formulations about abstraction. They are abstractions, but it is not clear whether they are postulations about a physical reality. Rather, they are physical realities summoned through extremely sophisticated mechanical means. Like Caldwell's abstractions, they bring forward heretofore unavailable visibilities. And like Caldwell, Huckenpahler is comfortable with the lyrical. Richter, interviewed recently by Robert Storr, speaks of his shame at his yearning for transcendent beauty in the sixties, seventies and eighties. After critic Dave Hickey's 1993 monograph, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, beauty has been emptied of the false charges of sentimentality, frivolity and status quo preservation. In Huckenpahler, it comes clean and clear that work can be new, serious *and* gorgeous.



James Huckenpahler
detail from *Sub-zero*, 2003

Gubbiotti is aware, like Richter, of the painter's dilemma when continually confronted with cameras, computers and other mechanized means capable of dazzling achievement. Gubbiotti has referred more than once to the following observation from the Danish artist Tal R, "As a painter you are a little bit like a guy showing up in a tiger suit at a techno party. So your dress code is outdated, but you might still have the best moves on the dance floor."

Gubbiotti's moves, unlike Caldwell and Huckenpahler's, are on display. He leaves behind evidence of each manipulation. If linen is stapled to a stretcher, the staples are visible. If clear gel glues another part of the canvas to the stretcher, blue or yellow pigment in the gel draws attention to what would otherwise be hidden. The usually covered architecture of the canvas—wooden framing—is almost always exposed. Finally, there is no guessing about where Gubbiotti has applied paint. Much of every canvas is left raw and untouched. What little paint appears is usually in isolation, appearing as ovoid veils, dabs or smudges floating like electrons caught momentarily at one stage of an immeasurably long orbit around a missing nucleus.

As in Pollock or Twombly, there is a record of each gesture or step of a process, but with diametrically different visual results. Where a Pollock or a Twombly exhibits a contained desperation, a Gubbiotti exhibits an uncontained coolness. His curved canvas, *Operated by Others*, one of the most successful works in the show, seems preternaturally unconcerned, its temperature like spring mornings. It is here

that his kinship with Richter *appears* most obvious. Richter, famously impatient with expressionist excess and its limitations on painted space, turned to painting photographs with relief, seeking to reduce drama. But Richter ended up invoking the mystery he tried to escape. His paintings of the most banal photographed objects—a chair, toilet paper on a wall—are unintentionally numinous. They vibrate with loss. It is almost as if the everyday is seen through tears for the ephemera that death makes of all things. Gubbiotti's work, divorced from loss, its capers on display, sees ephemera as the building blocks of a playful universe.

Gubbiotti says his work is not abstract. At first, this seems preposterous. Where in nature do we see jags of chartreuse on a perpetually curved springboard? We see them in biochemistry, quantum physics, genome mapping and other scientific data. Is Gubbiotti looking at such schematics or data and trying to represent it? No. But he, like representational artists working without living models for portraits, is conjuring plausible likenesses. Those likenesses happen to be culled from our scientific understanding of events at the particle level. In other words, in keeping with the Richter formulation, he is making visual postulations about a reality that exists and that we can, because of science, now see. He seems to understand that the work of his cohorts has obviated Richter's formulations about abstraction. He has managed to invent a new way, without technological help, to make a painting.

Tyler Green

Directions and Risks

Colby Caldwell, Jason Gubbiotti and James Huckenpahler are friends. Their work looks so different that finding any commonalities seems difficult. The connective tissue, however, is there. Gubbiotti reacts against technology, brazenly showing off wood structures, old-fashioned turpentine-thinned oil paint, even 50-year old Magna paint. Caldwell needs technology to create his images but those images so dwell in a mythical past that they reveal a Southerner's ambivalence about progress. Huckenpahler overtly and enthusiastically embraces technology. Still, this isn't so much about technology as it is a show about risks and new directions.

The three first explored their works' relationships with each other at the regionally pivotal *Signal / Signal* show at Washington's Troyer Gallery in 2000. Their familiarity with each other has spawned a sense of safety and in this show I believe that feeling has helped each artist to explore the risks that each takes in his work. Gubbiotti and Huckenpahler have recently taken new steps in their work and this show is the first time that these new directions have been presented to mid-Atlantic audiences. While many of Caldwell's images traverse familiar ground, they remain clearly Caldwellian, one image, *fildhou (7)*, is a demonstration of one of the riskiest things an artist can do. It tells a secret; it is a stripped-down demonstration of exactly how Caldwell creates each of his images.

...

The image shows a close-up, side view of a book cover. The cover has a light-colored, textured surface, possibly cloth or paper. A prominent vertical crease runs down the center, where the cover meets the spine. To the right of the crease, there are several small, rectangular, metallic-looking elements, possibly rivets or fasteners, spaced vertically. A horizontal line is visible across the middle of the cover, intersecting the vertical crease. The overall appearance is that of a well-used, possibly antique or vintage, book binding.

Jason Gubbiotti
side view of *Eight Divided by Zero*, 2002

Gubbiotti's studio is part atelier, part Home Depot demo space. Every surface is covered in sawdust. Chunks of wood litter the floor, cover work tables and are even stashed in a bookcase. There are more tools in the studio (c-clamps, power sanders, a hacksaw, pliers, a 10-inch Power Miter variable speed saw) than there are brushes. To walk around his studio, sliding on sawdust, accidentally sticking a hand in a glob of glue, is to understand the direction in which he's taking his work: Painting has become secondary to building.

Two pieces in this show best demonstrate Gubbiotti's direction. In *Eight Divided by Zero* Gubbiotti declares himself a builder by failing to cover the entire support with canvas, by making the support structure as important as the painted canvas. The sparsely painted canvas covers only about three-fourths of the frame, leaving a wooden window that allows the viewer to see through the piece to the wall. Another, *Operated by Others*, features a canvas stretched around a Gubbiotti-constructed L-frame, the result being a painting that has one side affixed to the wall and another side jutting out into the room.

The risk Gubbiotti is taking is clear: he's redefining what a painting is by making the painted part of the painting secondary to the structure. Frank Stella built new and unique shapes on which he mounted canvases, hid the structure and thus maintained the primacy of the painted surface. Gubbiotti rejects that nod to traditional painted beauty by urging us to look first at

what he has built. Both *Operated by Others* and *Eight Divided by Zero* can be seen in two ways: the viewer can look at the painted canvas surface and focus on the ‘painting,’ or the viewer can walk around the piece and see the wooden structures that Gubbiotti has built. (And, naturally, both the construction and painting can be seen together as a cohesive unit. However, at this point in his work it’s often hard to find the relationship between the structure and the composition.) Gubbiotti’s focus on the structure results in the artwork becoming intentionally exoskeletal.

Whereas Stella emphasized the supports of his canvases and also talked about “making something,”¹ he used materials (such as aluminum) designed to discourage the viewer from looking past the surface of the painting. Robert Rosenblum described Stella’s mix of material and surface as “irrevocably shut metal doors,” and David Hopkins extends that line of thought to point out that Stella wanted to “‘repel’ attempts to ‘enter them’ visually.”² Gubbiotti does the opposite: he invites us to enter his pieces by both showing us what he’s built and by thinning his oil paints so extensively or painting his surfaces so sparsely that the bumpy canvas shows through the paint and never loses its tactility. He’s inviting us inside the artwork, turning it inside-out in an effort to make a painting a more comprehensive art experience.

While emphasizing the structure is a risk unto itself, over-emphasizing the structure is riskier. I believe that if Gubbiotti is going to continue down the builder’s path, he must not let the exoskeletons get too far ahead of the painted surfaces. In many ways, exploring structure before exploring composition is the convenient risk.

When Caring is Greedy

Jason Gubbiotti
detail from *Ant Brains*, 2002-3





Colby Caldwell
detail from *the weight of air (12)*, 2002

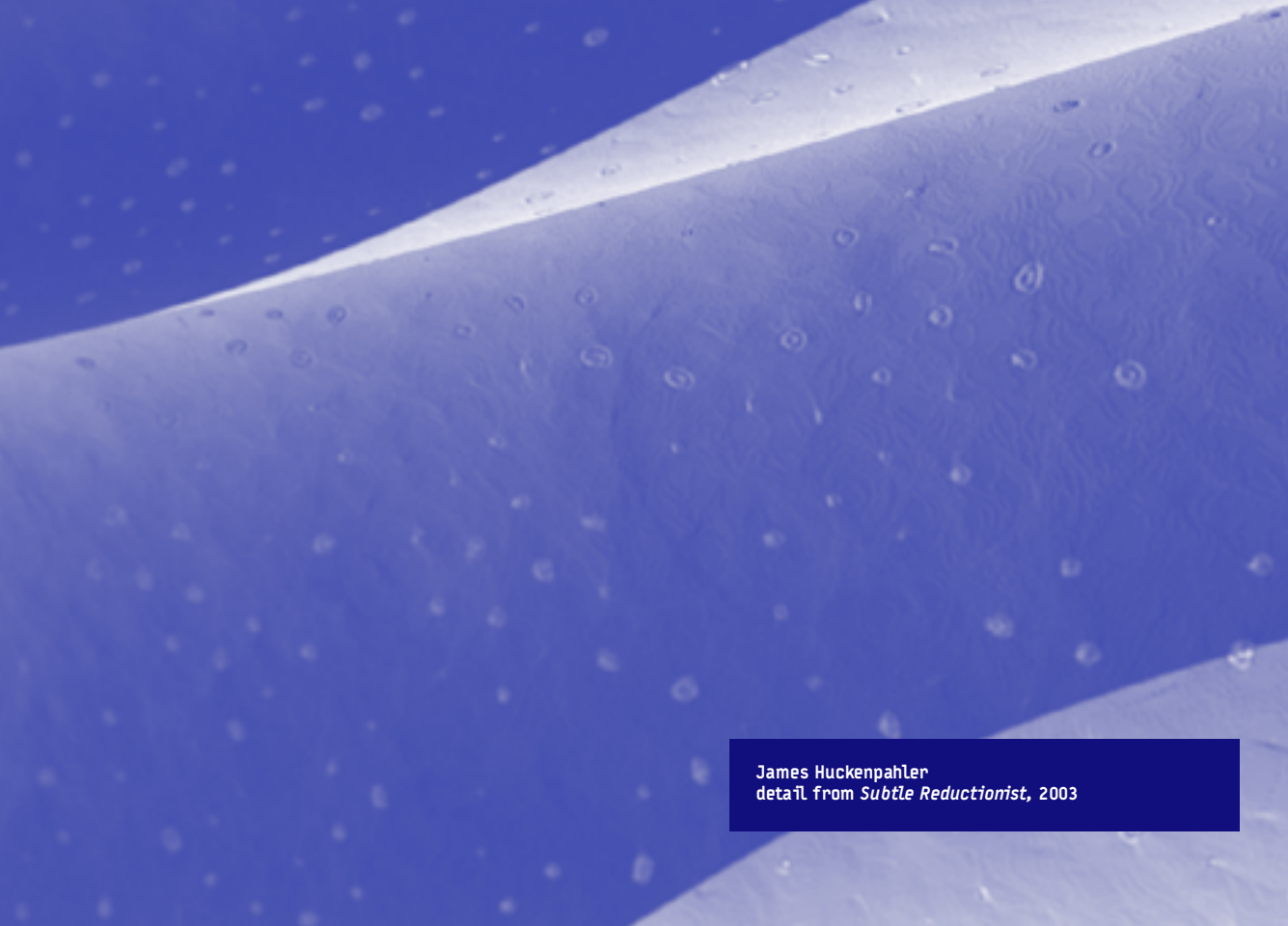
There is less of a tradition of building paintings than there is of painting paintings so Gubbiotti can freely experiment with structures before re-focusing on composition, on the painting part of the process. In *Eight Divided by Zero* there is such drama in the structure that the minimal composition almost looks like an afterthought. Whether the composition becomes more minimalist or less minimalist—and both directions have possibilities—Gubbiotti must not neglect the painted surface.

Eight Divided by Zero is Gubbiotti's riff on the most important Caldwell piece in this show. Compare the way Gubbiotti addresses vertical progression in this piece to the way Caldwell addresses it in *filldhou (7)*. *filldhou (7)* succeeds because the emphasis is so squarely on the image; It reveals everything about Caldwell's formal process, which is built around the vertical progression of an image through a strip of film. In this image, he strips away the ostensible subject of the film, leaving just the abstraction.

The image is really a Venn diagram of two film cells, complete with the thin black horizontal strip of film that separates the two cells. Many references to Rothko are here: the way the two halves of the image hover in their black border, and the sizing and proportion of the top and bottom of the image recall the proportions of Rothko's floating rectangles. With *filldhou (7)* Caldwell rejects the lushness of, say, *filldhou (14)* to place the emphasis on process. If allowed, the image would continue to work its way up the wall.

But as I look at some of the images in this show, especially the landscapes, I wonder if Caldwell is nearing the end of this formal path. Some of the pieces in this show are so polished, so thorough, so complete that it's hard to see what more Caldwell can extract from this process without repeating himself. Take *the weight of air (10)*, *the weight of air (4)*, or *the weight of air (5)*, images that directly refer to both Matisse and Rothko. Each image features the horizontal banding so central to early Matisses such as 1908's *Bathers with a Turtle*. In that canvas, Matisse uses one strip of horizontal color to indicate land, another strip to indicate the sea and a final strip to indicate sky. In each image Caldwell uses a series of bands to make many of the same references. While Matisse flattened out his fields of color, firmly anchoring them on the canvas, Rothko took fields of color and made them hover. Caldwell does this too—the light bleed that he achieves through his multi-generational process helps his images hover as well. Matisse's fields, Rothko's ephemerality, where next? I sense that Caldwell too wonders about this. He gives us a mix of subject matters (abstractions, landscapes, digital grids and people),³ never focusing in any one area.

Caldwell seems to be at a stage that Huckenpahler reached in mid-2002. After Huckenpahler's *Age of Loneliness* show at Washington's Fusebox gallery, he decided that he'd taken digital skin creation as far as it could go. With only one or two exceptions, the images in *Situation Room* have very little visual relationship to the skin pieces.



James Huckenpahler
detail from *Subtle Reductionist*, 2003

When Huckenpahler was creating skin, the pieces seemed to be completely self-contained: of themselves, about themselves and referring to the non-digital world only because Huckenpahler repeatedly called them skin. In the new pieces Huckenpahler uses his computer-based process to examine other objects and forms. In *Fabulous* Huckenpahler references a book, a hundreds-years old communications tool. Usually an outside source illuminates a book, allowing us to read it. In Huckenpahler's take the 'book' is self-illuminating. And in a reference to the long history of book publishing, Huckenpahler's 'book' is cracked with the passage of time.

There is a recent trend in photography, explored by Ann Lislegaard and Jason Falchook among others, to photograph images with a rain-covered pane of glass in the foreground and abstracted layers of images in the background. Huckenpahler seems to take on this image in *Subtle Reductionist*, showing that through his process he can create both raindrops in focus and a background in focus. The background of desert sand dunes only reinforces the visual trick.

Ultimately, *Situation Room* demonstrates where these three artists are in regard to taking risks in their work. In recent years Caldwell has embraced a set of risks so completely that they became inherent to the finished pieces. The work has reached a level of maturity and it's not clear to me where Caldwell will go next. Huckenpahler's risk was to abandon skin and to create terrestrial two-dimensional objects, and he's beginning to discover if that works for his work. He has more explorations he can take along

this line of risk. Gubbiotti is just beginning to explore a risk, the inclusion of underlying structure as part of a painting. The *Signal / Signal* show gave us hints of what was to come from this trio over the next several years. This show does too.

¹ Robert Rosenblum, Frank Stella, Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1971, p. 57.

² David Hopkins, *After Modern Art 1945-200*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. p. 133.

³ Recently Caldwell has produced some images of people. They did not make the final cut for this show.

Bernard Welt Invention

The function of poetry in a Machine Age is identical to its function in any other age.

Hart Crane

If you want to imagine the future as a zoo, or a silver box,
Or a speeding train, that's OK with us, or after you die
You can become part of the rainbow. We're not about
To make any trouble about that kind of thing. We only got
Into the habit of describing it because we weren't sure
What else to do with it. But if you want to look into the future,
You'll have to do it with the future's eyes. We can tell you now
It looks pretty much like the world as you know it,
Except with the lights turned off, and of course
Everything in your life dumped into one huge pile
You have to sort through when you want to retrieve a memory,
Or reflect upon an experience, or initiate conversation. Often
What comes to hand isn't life at all, but a quotation—rarely
An apt one. Push this button, the result is pleasure. Push this one,
It's pain. It's funny, though, because most of the time,
Pushing the button in itself starts to feel good. Or bad. Or both.

So it seems they solve no problems at all. But just as we had to learn
You can get by perfectly well in this world with no brain at all
To speak of, now a kind of heartlessness comes to seem like
A purpose for existence. That field, for instance, may look empty
To you, but to us that emptiness looks like a whole lot of something
You just don't recognize because you've never seen it anywhere else.
If you were to see the moon for the first time, you might take it
For just some hole in the sky, letting unnatural light through.
This world is only a shore at the edge of an ocean you and your kind
Never will sail on—but that doesn't mean you can't try. It doesn't matter
So much what there is here, just that there's someplace else to go.
These themselves are not even sentences, not in the ordinary sense,
And these words are no more words than they are pictures. They're like
The weather today, which is different by definition from the weather
Tomorrow—which seems unthinkable now. At one time we found it
The easiest thing in the world just to remember things, but we have
Lost our knack for it. The fog rolls in just as the slide show begins.

When next we meet we may just recognize each other; what we lose
Above all is our sense that something is lost. For now life requires us
To slough our skin and fix our attention on the passage of moment
To moment, as if the moments couldn't get along without us, as if
The future would never come along unless we prepared for it
As for a wedding or funeral, as if we had never walked together
For hours without speaking, playing the same tunes in our heads
That cold day on the beach.

Lorraine Adams is a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist who writes about books, culture and the arts for *The Washington Post* and other publications, including *Slate*, *The American Prospect* and *The Washington Monthly*.

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Casey Smith is a member of the adjunct faculty in the Academic Studies Department at the Corcoran College of Art and Design where he teaches writing. His work has appeared in various publications, most recently in *ArtNews*, *Bill Newman: Peripheral Vision*, and the WPA/C catalogue, *DB Sides*. His current project is completing his PhD dissertation, *Books Changing Bodies: London Literary Publishing, 1885-1900*.

Bernard Welt, Professor of Academic Studies at the Corcoran College of Art and Design, is the author of *Mythomania: Fantasies, Fables, and Sheer Lies in American Popular Art*. His work has been included in numerous catalogues, including the *Corcoran Biennial 2001*, *Raymond Pettibon: A Reader*, and *Splat, Boom, Pow! The Influence of Cartoons in Contemporary Art, 1970-2000*. His poem "I stopped writing poetry..." was included in the anthology *The Best American Poetry 2001*.

The Artists would like to thank:

Lorraine Adams, Tyler Green, Casey Smith and Bernard Welt

Christopher Reutershan

David Adamson, John Hughs and all at Adamson Editions

Ken Ashton

Corinne Charpentier

Sarah Finlay, Patrick Murcia and all at FUSEBOX

Susan Glasser

Carole Greenwood

Paul Guerra at Hands Moving Workshop

George Hemphill, Kimberly Gladfelter and all at Hemphill Fine Arts

Eric Judyci and Jessica Wolfley

William Newman

Sherene Offutt and John Offutt

Robin Rose

Sally Troyer

