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Written in response to Michael McFalls' exhibition, *Recent Works*, and Kevin Jones' exhibition, *Chemtrail*, on view at 1708 Gallery April 22 to May 28, 2011.



Here is how most reviews of art start out:

Michael McFalls' sculptural works are built from the ground up. While finely polished, something of their final appearance betrays their making. It starts with the haphazard collections of steel that protrude from the bases. Those bases, which at first seem slick and smooth, quickly reveal themselves as a mere cross-section of a repeated process creating a strata of colored plaster. And while they appear composed, these objects and their making quickly declare that the process is leading the artist, who is trying to keep up. Though I have not seen it first hand, from the tiny clues left behind by these works I would not be surprised if McFall's studio was a total mess. These works are the culmination of continually following a rabbit hole, every twist and turn, down through dark passages, peeling off in every direction, followed until we pop up somewhere new.



Conversely Kevin Jones' studio might be filled with notes, corrections, books and references. Rather than dealing with the creation of absolutely new material, his ideas want to stop reasoning in its tracks, to reconsider the considered. In a hard-edged fashion the works present a jumble of information, recognizable silhouettes of animals, objects, and figures in combination with symbols for elements such as Gold, Silicon, Oxygen, and Uranium. Here is an artist taking information and short-circuiting its legibility in order to "question our understanding of the physical world and undermine scientific authority". One can easily pick out the star chart mapping a section of the Northern Hemisphere, maybe even the chemical symbol for Lithium, but presented in groups the train of thought becomes muddled, which might put us right where he wants us, able to identify parts, but not construct correlations towards a whole. Jones generates the rabbit hole for the viewer, but it is filled with dead ends, false starts, and a beguiling number of conclusions.





For those unable to see the work in person, this provides a mostly apt description of the work, but is also mostly devoid of any of the questions that these artists worked so hard to dredge up.

It is the consideration of these two disparate approaches that I found myself farther adrift than when I had started. The viewing of art is not the viewing of television. Art never tells you when to take a break, it often does not tip its hand towards the conclusion, and it almost never sits comfortably within a complete arc. It is splintered, slow, and cruel in the amount of time it requires.



The curious thing about matching artists Michael McFalls and Kevin Jones is how oddly they fall on the spectrum of artists functioning as scientists. We are presented with opposite but intriguing approaches with Michael McFalls offering a practical approach towards materiality while Kevin Jones represents a conceptual model for reinterpreting information. But before I was able to make the statement above, so many more questions were raised, wrestled with, conceded, and let go. Perhaps it is best to start from the beginning:

“What then is the purpose of art?”



We often hesitate to hazard a guess given the elusive nature of art's definition. New work often defines itself as indefinable (read cross disciplinary) and equally often flirts with the unrecognizable. Perhaps our line of questioning is wrong.

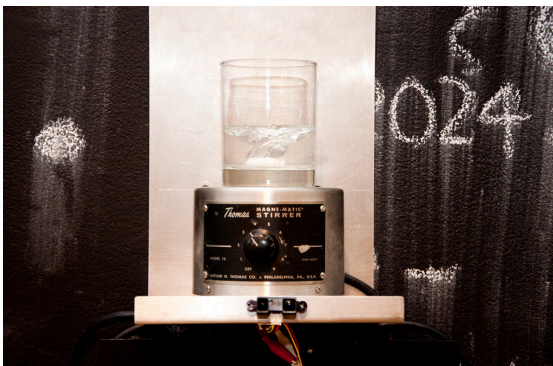
“What does it mean?”

So often asked, this query neglects a simple and more useful question:

“What is it?”

But the answer to the above question is often misleading as well. After all we can be duped by appearances.

“What does it appear to be?”



We are now a bit closer to home (or at least to the line of thought I wish to track), because in not trusting appearances we acknowledge that the artist has left us a gap where we can begin to judge the sum of their choices. At times this gap is like discovering the ventilation duct in the side of a seemingly impenetrable fortress (we were looking for access, and finally have it); other times it is more like a trap door we fall through (we didn't expect it to happen, but here we are).



IMAGE CREDITS: PAGE 1 (top to bottom): Michael McFalls *Arrangement 3 (Space Oddity)* detail, 2010-11; Michael McFalls *Arrangement 3 (Space Oddity)* detail, 2010-11; Michael McFalls *Geoform 5.5 (A Patch of Synthetic Enlightenment)*, 2010; PAGE 2 (top to bottom): Michael McFalls *Arrangement 3 (Space Oddity)* detail, 2010-11; Kevin Jones, *The New Pollution*, 2009; Kevin Jones, *Flow Control* detail, 2011; Kevin Jones, *Flow Control* detail, 2011; PAGE 3: Kevin Jones, *The Culture of Logic*, 2011; All photography by Kathleen Jones

This then leads us to another question:

“Who then are these artists, and what exactly are they up to?”

The artist leaves traces, bits of feedback, breadcrumbs that allow the viewer to find the way back to a source. At some point, around the time when artists start signing their work, we begin to see a change as the subject of art became dictated by the artist, rather than by a patron. Though this split between economics and research is not a clean one, around the Renaissance we see more artists and scientists provided license to explore their personal visions, for better or worse. This excursion runs aground with the Catholic Church in the 17th century, but finds itself again with the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries. I find the analogy of artist as scientist as both useful and apt when considering the explorations of contemporary artists. Of course they deviate when

considering the rigor and method, but at the core, the notion of repeated observation in the hopes to make new conclusions unites these camps. Charged with understanding the world around them, artists and scientists are given the free range to consider any problem that suits them.

Yet, here is the rift between science and art, for as closely linked as they can appear at times, they drift apart when considering “discovery” and “creation”.¹ Take Dmitri Mendeleev’s periodic table of the elements, a principle target for Kevin Jones. What is the periodic table? A creation, a discovery, a realization, a truth, or a system imposed on us? What is a scientific discovery anyway? Is the assumption that through strict and constant observation all answers will be revealed? And what about art? Is art true? Beautiful? Sacred? Is art really the product of pure creation, as in it might come from observation but the final artifact is something new and unconsidered? Not bounded by actual “finds”, the publication of creative work is often based as much in fictitious reworking of events as it is observable and repeated experimentation.

The discrepancy between what it means to “discover” something, and what it means to “create” something offer serious questions, especially considering theories of modernism and postmodernism, the trajectory of history and the myth of originality. Is every creation just a discovery, a publication of something already known to the Universe? Is there any creativity in discovery? Are those geniuses just lucky, or is their sense of observation capable of amplifying those less expected bits, allowing them to pursue those more unlikely corners of research?

But the ultimate goal of science, to understand the mechanics of the Universe from macro to micro is a curious one. While science has certainly aided in the development of some nifty and helpful objects (as well as some dangerous and stupid ones), the outcome of a scientist who is observing the cosmos for signs of the beginning of the Universe and of the scientist who is colliding infinitely small particles in the hopes of glimpsing other infinitely smaller particles is nearly useless on a day to day level. And here art and science come back together again. The repetitive observation of the world, whether from the ground level of a species, or from a remote point, provides humans with the constant assurance that much mystery still permeates the dark spots we have yet to probe, and the even darker spots that we don’t even know exist.

So what then does art offer us?

While science makes the argument towards understanding the mechanics of the laws that give the Universe order, art is varied to reflect the multitude of interactions between humans and everything, exploiting the uneasiness of our being here. This is why art is so slippery, so difficult. Though we constantly ask for convenience in life, our continued existence is in conflict. Artists reflect those frictions from macro to micro, from personal to global, because while a unified theory of physics might not answer why we are here, there is no reason that we should not stop and consider those operations that guide us, that hinder us, that remain obvious and yet unanswered.

-Andrew Kozlowski

Check out the Radiolab podcast titled "Yellow Fluff and Other Curious Encounters" for further discussion regarding the pursuit of knowledge, the story of Dmitri Mendeleev and the Periodic Table, and the question of discovery vs creation. <http://www.radiolab.org/2009/jan/12/>

Andrew Kozlowski is an artist, writer, and teacher. He received his MFA in Painting and Printmaking from VCU in 2007 and his BFA in printmaking from Tyler School of Art, Temple University in 2003. His writing has been published by Art Papers, Style Weekly, and NY Arts Magazine. His work has been included in shows at the International Print Center in New York, Transformer Gallery in Washington DC, 1708 Gallery in Richmond, and the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, with solo exhibitions in 2010 at the Philadelphia Print Center and 2011 at Mary Baldwin College in Staunton VA. He was recently awarded a 2011-2012 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Professional Fellowship for his work in printmaking.

The Warhol Project is an on-line journal funded through a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which also supports 1708 Gallery's exhibitions. 1708 Gallery's mission is to promote new art, a mission achieved via a rotating schedule of exhibitions that presents a diverse range of projects. In relation, 1708 Gallery strives to educate the public about Contemporary art and employs artist talks and didactic text panels to illustrate the exhibiting artist's issues, themes, and modes of working. In an effort to further expand opportunities for education, this journal features essays, interviews and other writings that provide context for 1708 Gallery's exhibitions and promote further dialogue about contemporary art. 1708 Gallery works with a range of writers, from graduate students to professional writers, to allow for multiple voices and experiences to contribute to this project.