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/////mediated matter in the perpetual present/////

An Essay in response to *Gleaners // Informers* by Elizabeth Kauffman

"As an artist you always make work from what's around you and money was around me." –Damien Hirst

As obnoxious and full of "douche-baggery" as the above statement is by Mr. Hirst, there is some truth in it.<sup>1</sup> Artists are often like sponges. They soak up their surroundings and make artwork from the gathered material, be it physical, conceptual or emotional. In curator Liza Coviello's exhibition, *Gleaners // Informers*, the artists' surroundings are a reflection of contemporary life and its industrial underpinnings. The title however, is reminiscent of the pre-industrial, nineteenth century painting by Jean-Francois Millet, *The Gleaners*. Millet first presented *The Gleaners* in the Paris Salon of 1857, and immediately drew harsh criticism for what people at the time saw as a glorification of poverty, insinuating socialist propaganda. What was seen as an overtly political painting at the time is now seen as a bucolic scene of a lost pre-industrial world. The political implications have retreated to the background. Today we can gather a potentially more accurate experience as intended by Millet, aesthetics first and social message second.



Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, oil on canvas, 33" x 44", 1857

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<sup>1</sup> Hennessey Youngman's term from his video, "Art Thoughtz: Damien Hirst" where the above Damien Hirst quote is included.

(page 2)

Coviello similarly describes the curatorial jumping off point for *Gleaners // Informers* as a consideration of art that subtly hints towards the socio-political machine. The artists included in this exhibition, Heather Riley, Mauro Zamora, and Brian Spies, collect materials, images, and ideas from the world around them, just as the subjects in Millet's painting collected the leftover crops missed by the harvest. As Millet's painting points to the economic class-structure of his time, oppositional issues of poverty and "progress" can also be found in these contemporary artists' works.

In her exhibition narrative Coviello points out that "we often expect art to be the impetus for causing concern and developing unexpected feelings, for educating ourselves socially and politically." This could perhaps be doubly true for *contemporary* art, because to be contemporary is to be in special relationship with the present. As Giorgio Agamben wrote, "those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it."<sup>2</sup> Seeing contemporariness as a critical viewpoint, at once immersed in the present and at a distance to it, echoes Boris Groys' idea that the "contemporary is – a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay."<sup>3</sup> This delay for Groys is caused by the "doubt, hesitation, uncertainty and indecision." This defines the contemporary as a reconsideration of the past or present, and indeed we can find many examples of contemporary art, which are essentially that.

The works by Riley, Spies, and Zamora that comprise *Gleaners // Informers*, are more suggestive than overtly critical of contemporary industrial culture. These artists, soaking up their surroundings, make work informed by industrial materials and practices, and a sense of beauty and nostalgia pervades. Riley culls objects from her everyday life, such as pieces of wood discarded from anonymous urban building projects. Her works, such as *Stay*, are clearly made of materials that were once something else and give new life to jettisoned remnants, suggesting landscape as well as personal narrative through carefully placed minimal elements. In this work the materials shine because of the lack of adornment and Riley's sense of economy; and she reminds us less is often more.



Heather Riley, *Stay*, 14.5" x 11" x 1.25", Wood, oil, thread, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "What is Contemporary?" in *What is an Apparatus?*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux journal* no. 11 (December 2009)

(page 3)



L: Mauro Zamora, *blowout-preventor*, acrylic latex enamel and ink on canvas, 28" x 20", 2011

R: Brian Spies, *Due East 4*, Archival Print on Rives BFK, 10" x 8", 2013

Beyond objects themselves, Zamora extracts imagery as well as the forms of the construction trades like chain-link fencing or the bright orange of extension cords and traffic cones. In his painting *blowout-preventor*, neon colors and crisp dark lines referring to pipes or poles twist over and through, in one area, looser paint that feels like a spill or splatter of something noxious, and in the others, gouges into the earth. This work, while abstractly striking, indicates something violent and pernicious, like a work-site maiming or a chemical spill. Finally, Spies gathers information about fracking and presents it alongside black and white photographs of rural Pennsylvania where this controversial method of natural gas production is growing. His photographs feel like memory they way most black white photography does, but the element of memory is further emphasized by added text documenting the artist's personal notes. For *Due East 4* he writes: "I've always been fascinated by the little known fact that the economically deprived neighborhood of Newberry Pennsylvania, once its own municipality, was almost the original county seat of Lycoming County. Due to some sabotage from neighboring Williamsport Newberry would be denied that coveted position and all of the economic benefit afforded such a designation. Williamsport would eventually annex Newberry but its economy would never equal Williamsport's. As the shale business pushes development in the county eastward I wonder if Williamsport will eventually see its fates not that different from Newberry's." Spies takes a very social and political issue and turns it personal through his narrative style of documentation. By showing his hand he removes the notion of universal authority making his take less confrontational because it is clearly couched as opinion rather than fact.



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(page 4)

Each of these artists collects in order to inform both themselves and the audience concerning the present we are all immersed in. The present is full of baggage and history where these artists are busy unpacking the heap of human actions, questioning the residues that shape our lives both literally and figuratively. Clear misgivings about the present state of things are evident in each artists work, though these anxieties are cloaked in—and perhaps soothed by—aesthetics. From Riley’s accumulated materials, to Zamora’s dense compositions, to Spies’ piles of documentation, they all seem to imply that the world is full of shit, both literally and figuratively.

As curator, Coviello sees a commentary on human progress evident in each artist’s work, particularly the ways in which this progress has negatively impacted the natural world. She refers to the “artist-citizens” she has included in the show as speaking “the same language in different dialects.” The “artist-citizen” label is to distinguish these three as socially engaged artists rather than out right activists; like Millet they are occupied with beauty as well as message. The beautiful is also a contested space however farther from the front lines it seems, yet these artists work well within accepted artistic forms and parameters. Their work, instead of pushing the boundaries of the white cube, rests comfortably within them.

As the title suggests, *Gleaners // Informers* is a two-part equation. Like a similar equation, consumption/production, the two sides cannot be separated and form a perpetual cycle of back and forth. What is gleaned shapes the information produced, and as that information is assimilated, the next round of gleaning will shift as a result...like a feedback loop that changes with time. The present takes its place with past and future in a circle. History repeats and progress is impossible in the circle, yet constant change allows us to separate before and after. Returning to Groys’ version of the present, an “infinite period of delay”, *Gleaners // Informers* seems to acknowledge this trick of time and therefore question the notion of progress. This questioning is a suggestive whisper not a loud interrogation, which seems a more effective tactic. After all, if we are trying to do more than preach to the choir it is much easier to tempt bees with honey; meaning that if we are truly trying to enlighten those who do not already share our views then a soft coaxing would be more effective than a loud and angry yell.

*Elizabeth Kauffman is an artist, curator, and educator living and working on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Educated in Cincinnati, Ohio, she received her BA in Painting from Xavier University and her MFA and MA in Art History from the University of Cincinnati. Her current research and studio interests include representation, time, Buckminster Fuller, social practice, and the relationship of text to image. Kauffman is currently Assistant Professor of Art and Director of Galleries at Salisbury University. For more information on Elizabeth, please visit [www.everydayuncanny.com](http://www.everydayuncanny.com).*



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