

ARTSEEN

MARCH 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2014

## MAY DAY IN MARCH

### AUSTIN THOMAS *Utopian*

by Joan Waltemath

*Utopian*, Austin Thomas's show of delicate constructions and drawings at the Hansel and Gretel Picture Garden in Chelsea is the first part of a three-month collaboration between the Hansel and Gretel Gallery and Thomas's unique venue in the Lower East Side, Pocket Utopia. The collaboration will include exhibitions as well as events.

Considering the variety of things and materials in the gallery space—construction paper, images, voids, books cut and pasted, photographs of sculptural forms—and the way they are installed, Thomas forces us to address the “thing in itself.” Her carefully attenuated placement asks that we look at each piece on its own terms for what it is: a series of angle irons welded into rectangular boxes, stacked on top of one another and painted alternately in black and white; the torn covers of two books butt-ended to form a tripartite tower; the torn corner of another book revealing the aging of its end papers; a photograph mounted with pushpins depicting a sculptural form that has been constructed of a thin translucent and somewhat worn material. After a time, it becomes apparent that what we are seeing in the photograph, “Castle” (2014), is a glassine dust jacket minus the book. Stood on its end, it's been transformed from the banality of its origins to an object of contemplation. This is often how Thomas's work affects.



Austin Thomas, “Data Removal,” 2014. Cut paper, 19 × 17.

# MORGAN LEHMAN

534 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011

The delicacy of the material in two pieces of paper hanging at the front left of the gallery lend a heightened sense of awareness to their overall spareness, suggesting that if not all of our faculties are engaged we might miss something crucial. Since Thomas presents her materials as themselves, she allows the formal aspects of the thing itself to bear the weight of interpretation. A book jacket hanging end to end is treated as relic encouraging a wide-ranging speculation. Titled “The Self Observed” (2013), it allows Thomas to question where information comes from and opens up diverse pathways to “thought.” In the second piece, which consists of a sheet of ruled yellow paper with a few vertical members, the evenness of its browning edges nudged me to challenge the given. Seeking clues to discover if “Untitled (Law of Attraction)” (2013) was an illusion, I found the material evidence unverifiable and sought the checklist to resolve my question.

Similarly modest works hang on the other gallery walls. A piece of notebook paper, installed with a gold pin-up pin inserted through its torn fringe edge, commands the large west wall of the space. Austin’s determined and repeatedly lyrical loop in this small drawing generates both regularity and difference, leaving a lot of space around to interpret what that relationship could possibly lead to. The modesty of her materials puts all the weight on the moment of viewing and sets a clear boundary between what is at stake in these works and the money game. Further up on the wall, it is accompanied by a black and white image of a starburst, which on closer inspection, turns into a dandelion. These two images, both smaller than my hand, insist on the primacy of vision and intent as they poke at the overabundance of production value latent in much of what is seen in the nearby Chelsea gallery area.

The gem of the show is “Dots” (2014), a small colored pencil drawing of circles filled in with different colors drawn on top of each other. Bouncing, floating, fragmented, their playful aura balances the artist’s touch with a rocking sense of surface. I think about how one negotiates space in the world. Each circle is autonomous, though not always whole, and has a respectful distance to its neighbors—not the same distance, but a singular one. This makes all the relationships in the piece significant: although each circle operates within its own sphere, the gestalt of the whole is unified. The relation of the one and the many is laid out in so many marks.

# MORGAN LEHMAN

534 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011

In another small two-by-three inch drawing, “Monday (#1)”(2013), on what looks like a notebook cover, right angled marks are overlaid on top of each other, suggesting both a figure and a curious relation to the rectangular boxes in the center of the room. Diving into the phenomena of orthogonalness in order to ascertain its properties, Thomas reveals depth as a densely layered field.

Perhaps the most intriguing piece in the show, however, is a cut out print or poster that uses the white wall as its form or figure. Upon closer inspection what gives rise to the form becomes both mysterious and a point of reference. With its delicate shifts in color, this work feels like something I’ve never seen before. Titled “Data Removal”(2013), it alludes to what is left when the ubiquitous information we are surrounded with isn’t dominating our field of vision and emptiness expands the conscious moment infinitesimally.

Thomas suggests a subtler world, rich with nuance and precision, with enough room to insert our own narratives or borrow one from the nearest library. The generosity of her ascetic sensibility is stunning and points to a future where hope might reside.