

ARTSEEN

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AUSTIN THOMAS Drawing on the Utopic

by *Thomas Micchelli*

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To admire someone's ideals is one thing, but to confront what that person does in the privacy of her studio is something else again. Austin Thomas is well known as one of the prime movers of the Bushwick scene, whose efforts to seed and shape a community have achieved a degree of success that is as substantial as it is unlikely. And she has kept at it, building on those accomplishments with a raft of new initiatives. As Sharon Butler wrote in a recent *Rail* profile, Thomas is currently taking her cues from Marfa and Black Mountain College to plan "exhibitions, artists' residencies, art making, and salon discussions in a communal environment." When it comes to prying open the art world, where most of us do the talking, Austin Thomas does the doing.



Austin Thomas, drawing on the utopic (installation view). Courtesy of the artist and Storefront.

And so, sympathetic as I am to her goals, I found myself approaching Thomas's show at Storefront—remarkably enough, her first solo in Bushwick—with an unusual amount of caution. Although I don't know her personally beyond an exchange of hellos at a couple of events, and have seen a few of her pieces here and there, I was wary of wanting to like her work, of allowing the social aspect of her practice to shoehorn her objects into an unsuitable context, of making more of it than it actually is.

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I needn't have concerned myself. The installation, which is divided into four sections ("Travel Diaries," "Studio Wall," "Sketches," and "Conversations"), has an immediate and ineffable charge, the kind that makes you take a step back and reconsider what you're looking at. Most of the pieces are modest in size, humble in materials and self-effacing in effect. The one large work, "Round Placed Square" (2010), is a hyper-busy collage that, but for a perfectly placed swatch of blankness, skates on the edge of disintegration like the paper maquettes for Frank Stella's "Moby-Dick" series. The rest of the show, which gives the impression of having been made from whatever scraps were at hand, has more in common with Richard Tuttle.

But where Stella seems bent on invoking cosmic chaos and Tuttle exudes a laid-back scruffiness, Thomas conveys a quiet, confident serenity. This is one aspect of the spiritual uplift her work engenders. The other is the act of pure invention that each piece represents, and the meaning it lends to the question that, in one manifestation or another, constitutes the nub of contemporary art—how to harness randomness without becoming arbitrary.

The various unit structures (to borrow a term from Cecil Taylor, which, in this case, feels entirely appropriate) that fill the installation are predominately made from shaped, folded, or crumpled paper that is printed, painted, scribbled upon, or drawn over. Thomas joins these disparate elements with such exactitude that they feel simultaneously antithetical and destined for each other, like star-crossed lovers. Their intermix of alienation, accident, and conciliation may not be all that different, conceptually speaking, from social sculpture, but these works are all consummately visual. You don't want to stop looking.