

HYPERRALLERGIC

Communal Spirits: Artists, Advocates and Unlocked Rooms

Thomas Micchelli | February 22, 2014

Austin Thomas is another Brooklyn mainstay who has made community an important focus of her practice. As the founder of Pocket Utopia, she became one of the catalysts of the Bushwick scene, providing a social setting around which the disparate artists populating the neighborhood could coalesce.



Austin Thomas, “Untitled (Law of Attraction)” (2013), lined paper, 12 1/2 x 8 in (ed 1 of 10)

That project closed after a planned two-year run, but Thomas reopened Pocket Utopia in 2012, this time as a commercial venture on the Lower East Side in partnership with the Upper East Side gallery C.G. Boerner.

As an artist and gallery director, Thomas continues to branch out, melding community networks on both sides of the East River. It seems appropriate that the gallery roster includes artists who are also influential writers, curators or both (Sharon Butler, Paul D’Agostino, Kris Graves, Ellen Letcher), further decreasing

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the degrees of separation among those drawn to Pocket Utopia's varied schedule of shows, which have ranged from a selection of 17th- and 18th-century French prints to a single self-portrait by the painter Matthew Miller.

Three years ago, I reviewed *Drawing on the Utopic*, Thomas's solo show of collages and drawings at Storefront in Bushwick, where I felt that each piece represented an "act of pure invention," which managed to navigate "randomness without becoming arbitrary." I also mentioned the collages' kinship with the work of Richard Tuttle, but observed that while "Tuttle exudes a laid-back scruffiness, Thomas conveys a quiet, confident serenity."

That serenity, and confidence, is on full — if somewhat disorienting — display in *Utopian*, Thomas's solo turn at Hansel & Gretel Picture Garden in Chelsea, which is billed as a collaboration with Pocket Utopia. The latter gallery will remain empty during the run of Thomas's exhibition, but a series of happenings will take place at both spaces as well as off-site.

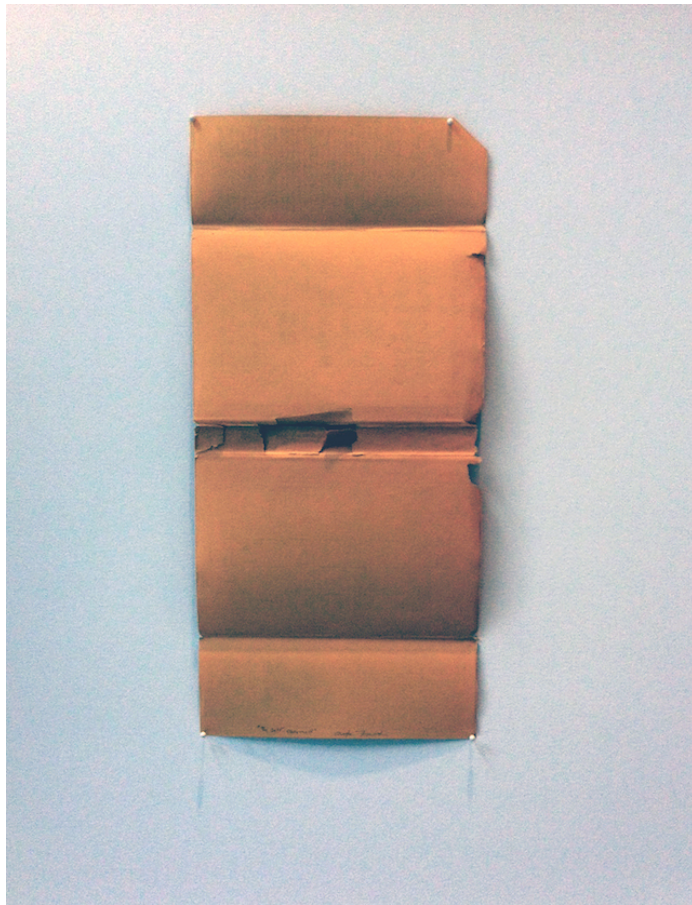
The work at Hansel & Gretel — as sparsely hung as the salon-style *Drawing on the Utopic* was packed — embraces an anti-art aesthetic that is so minimal and non-invasive that it makes Tuttle's assemblages of cardboard and wood scraps look positively baroque: a sheet of acidified paper from a yellow legal pad is pinned to the wall; blue construction paper hangs indecorously from a blank book cover; a page ripped from a pocket-size, spiral-bound notebook and stuck to a large expanse of wall is covered in wave-like loops of blue colored pencil.

It is easy to feel a little lost among these works, as if they've pushed the impoverishment of Arte Povera to a point of diminishing returns. But the audacity of their abjectness is just as difficult to ignore.

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What opened up the exhibition for me was the three-dimensional quality of the blank, vertically oriented book cover titled “The Self Observed” (2013). It conveyed the kind of sculptural objecthood that I found so compelling in a number of Thomas’s collages from three years ago, with their folds of colored or drawn-over paper projecting off the page.



Austin Thomas, “The Self Observed” (2013), book jacket cover, 19 1/2 x 9 in

In a conversation prior to my visit, Thomas referred to the new show as a follow-up to *Drawing on the Utopic* — a thought I found confusing when I first entered the gallery. It soon became apparent, however, that the asceticism exemplified by “The Self Observed” signaled a deliberate pushback, a stripping-down of the artist’s previous visual lexicon to an unapologetic rawness. The decisions are not so much what to do as what not to do, a process of letting go that is perhaps most fully realized in the exquisitely rendered “Data Removal” (2014), in which a sheet of paper decorated in blue and purple

shapes is reduced to biomorphic strips framing a void.

The work in *Utopian* represents a tamping-down of agency, a self-effacement that allows the materials to speak for themselves, as well as an

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impenitent Duchampian assertion of yes, an untouched sheet of acid-tinged yellow legal paper is art if it is presented as art.



Austin Thomas, "Data Removal" (2014),
cut paper, 19 x 17 in

It is just such a withdrawal of agency — once all the pieces are put into place — paired with an audacity of vision, that allows for a successful social space, the first step toward creating a community. By emptying out her artwork — and her gallery — Thomas is entrusting the imaginations of others to mingle among the rooms she's left unlocked.

Austin Thomas: Utopian continues at Hansel & Gretel Picture Garden (511 W. 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through March 15.