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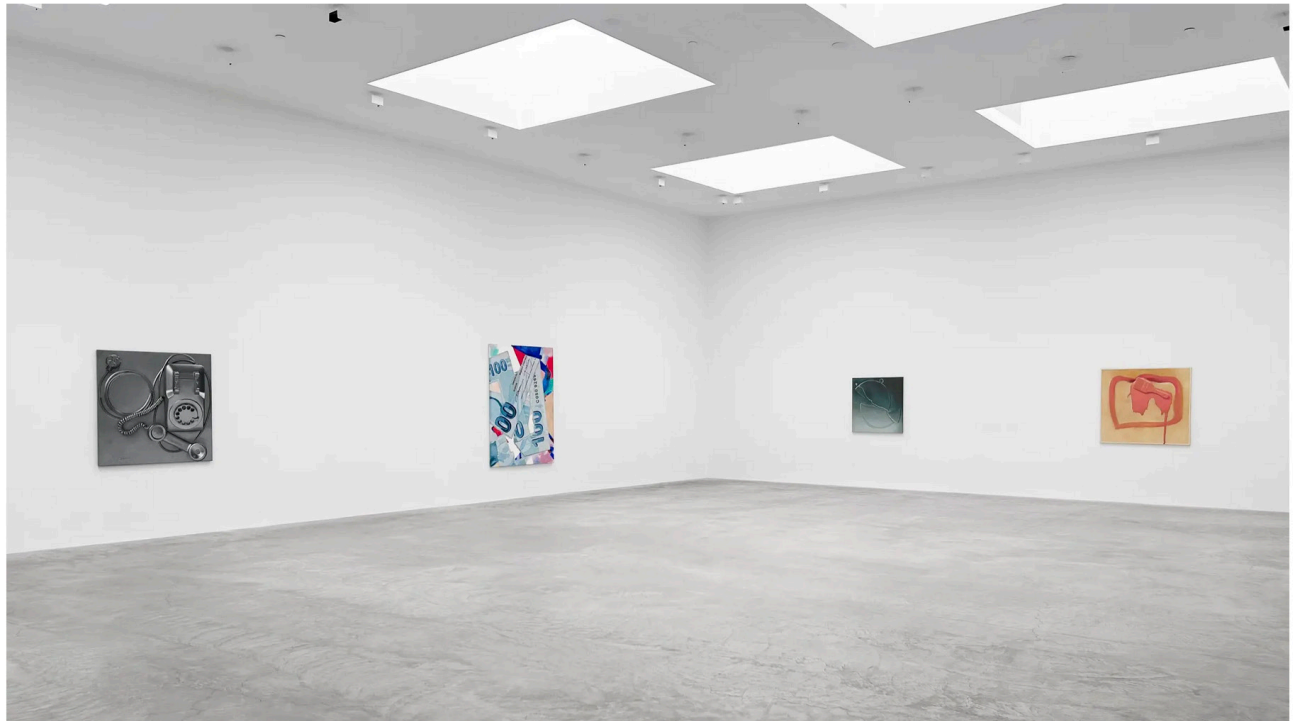
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Paul Sietsema

By David Muenzer

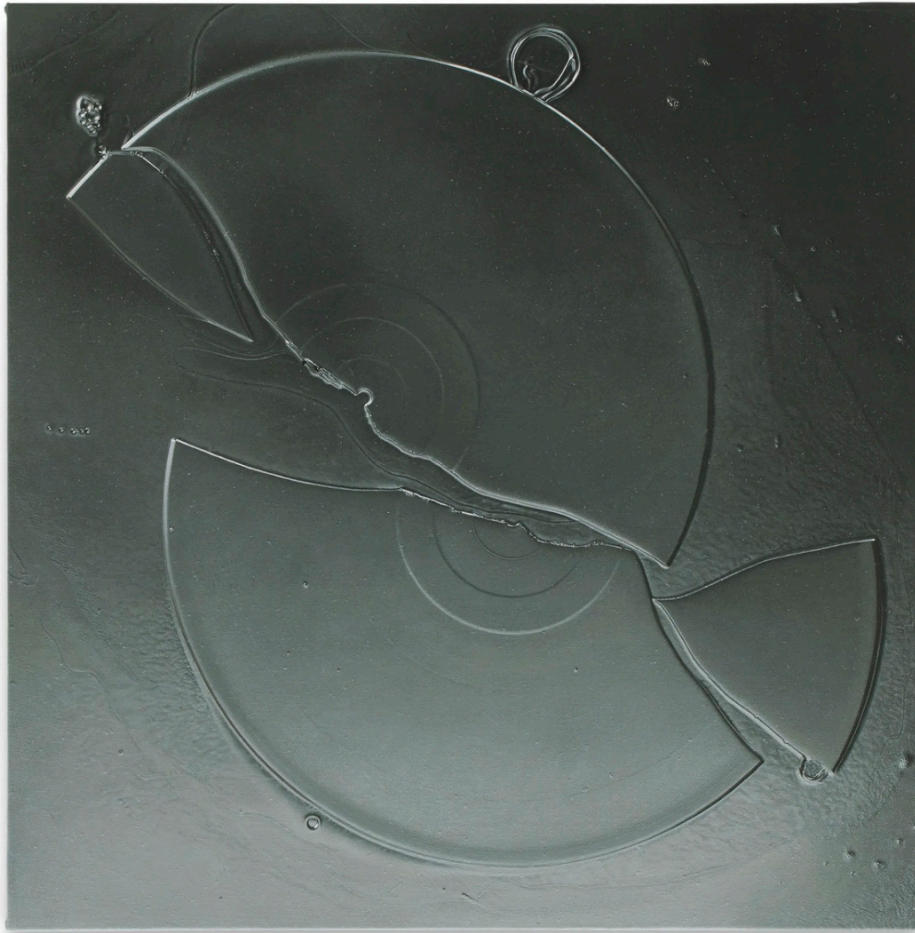


Installation view: *Paul Sietsema*, Matthew Marks Gallery, Los Angeles, 2024. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

On a recent visit to Paul Sietsema’s self-titled 2024 exhibition at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles, I was struck by how assiduously he avoids many of the devices commonly used to hold meaning in place when parsing work. Paintings with divergent imagery share identical titles, while other images, which seem to be in sequence, span two series. A self-titled show is something of a rarity these days.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1964 short story “The Rule of Names” is a parable of nominative power. In the story, one’s secret and true name must never be revealed. I once penned a press release for a friend, beginning with an epigram from Le Guin. The text was rejected—the commissioner was

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Paul Sietsema, *Arrangement*, 2024. Enamel on linen, 37 1/8 × 36 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

magnificently paranoid about the ways meaning might attach themselves to his abstract paintings. He certainly understood the power of contextual framing.

Yet, at the same time, it's hard not to go around naming things when encountering Sietsema's work. The canvases almost beg for nouns (The phones, the coins, the *New Yorkers*...). You could call these motifs and move on, but I think that is missing the point. Sietsema has been working with these elements for over a decade. And he has used titles in different ways in earlier works, as in the memorable, directly named film *Empire* (2002), which takes its imagery from a veritable Russian doll of proper nouns—Clement Greenberg's apartment, as photographed by Hans Namuth, and reproduced in a 1964 *Vogue* article.

A name is not a material thing, but it can be a kind of mental construction. The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified is the first axiom of semiotics, but my fixation on the way things are categorized and spoken about here reflects the profound, even perverse, degree to which the action in Sietsema's *Paul Sietsema* takes place at the level of material and form.

To call these objects paintings stretches the category. On a recent visit to his studio, the color system and plethora of stoppered and coded bottles brought to mind the technical work spaces of model

makers and engineers. In the gallery, the sides of the paintings are bursting with activity, and the close planes on which the complex images unfold feel attuned to their own shallowness or depth in a way akin to sculpture.

The sides of the canvases are their own arenas: illusionistically unctuous (false) enamel overspill, rendered in transparent thin layers (*Arrangement*, [2024]—the shattered vinyl painting with that title, not the other one); the sticky-looking and intensely chromatic enamel extensions to the three “Phone” paintings (all 2024), in which the renderings carry through onto artist frames; and, perhaps most heightened to me, the even split in *Blue painting (chalkline)* (2024)—with no undulations—between the thick navy blue and inset white paint and the unblemished pique of the raw linen from which the paint juts out.

The play between the imitation of chance (as in the artfully selected coin flips in works like *Double coin painting* [2024]) and the steadfast reproduction of seemingly accidental digital artifacts (see: the thin contouring green lines in the two *Carriage paintings* [both 2024]) animates much of the work, and the edges are no exception. The fact that such painterly edges might typically be the place where intention gives way to accident only emphasizes how intensely they are here, in Sietsema’s work, vectors for thought and labor. I have barely touched on image circulation and economic thinking—two important and consistent touchstones for Sietsema’s work—but this imitative play



Paul Sietsema, *Gray Chase*, 2024. Enamel on linen, 44 1/4 × 44 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

with accident and chance, and its particular forms, has everything to do with making a thing distinctive and an object of desire. *Gray Chase* (2024), says it all: what appears to be the residue of an action—swiping a credit card around a still-wet monochrome—is a carefully choreographed image of seductive viscosity, both more and less gestural than any index.

Granted, to spend this much time on the edges of paintings—parts of artworks that do not always warrant official documentation—verges on irresponsible eccentricity. It is certainly a personal projection: I have been making reliefs myself and considering their history. On another level, it's the most staid kind of art historical analysis, nodding to Sietsema's influential teacher Charles Ray, with his own recent and ongoing interest in shallow space. But, whatever foibles to this approach, I think that the broader disposition of the paintings can be assayed through this morphological detour.

Sietsema has commented that painting felt available to him as a practice, in part, because it is outmoded. In today's avowedly history-averse art market (a particular feature of Los Angeles, where we both live), this quality may be slightly less pronounced.

An exceptional attunement to shifting temporalities is an enduring feature of Sietsema's work. It brings to mind T.J. Clark's memorable analysis of Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) in his 2000 essay "Origins of the Present Crisis," in which Clark emphasizes not the mechanically reproduced, commercially-minded aspects of the iconic work, but instead:

How handmade and petty-bourgeois [Warhol's] bright world of consumer durables now looks! How haunted still by a dream of freedom! So that his *Campbell's Soup Can* appears, thirty years on, transparently an amalgam—an unresolved, but naively serious dialectical mapping—of De Stijl-type abstraction onto a founding, consoling, redemptive country-store solidity. How like a Stuart Davis or a Ralston Crawford it looks, or an entry from the *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues!*

Clark's essay was occasioned by considering the so-called end of modernism, and repeats the exact title of Perry Anderson's essay from over thirty years earlier, which was published within six weeks of Greenberg's Vogue special and Le Guin's "Rule of Names."

That "naively serious dialectical mapping" appears in Sietsema's judicious use of pre-existing paintings as substrates for his *Carriage* loops of torn currency. I see an appreciation for the qualities in each of these repurposed artworks, as well as a sense of how their modes of meaning-making still sustain, or fail to. This is different from the obvious, flattening distance of irony.

The remarkable renderings of torn and overlapped currency in the *Carriage paintings* are thick, almost slab-like. The fraud-protection patterns are painted carefully, but not, to my eye, mechanistically—I see some wobble of the hand in each raised line. Is it the power of the scanner that produces their fidelity? Or is it the pattern-recognition capacities of the mind? To me, the piled slabs of rendered currency recall the emphatic embodied abjection of Chaïm Soutine's *Carcass of Beef* (1925).

After the extensive attention to surface in postmodern, hammering depth out of a plane is one way of conceptualizing relief, with all that focus on making thick what had been thin.