

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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modernpainters



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Paul Sietsema

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OUR LIVES ARE a jog through veil upon veil of illusion. Megascreen billboards, altered news photos, political hallucinations played out on 3-D televisions—reality has become so virtual it's no surprise that numerous artists are pushing back with their own deceptive surfaces. Encountering Paul Sietsema's bewitching show, for instance, one is led to ask: What am I looking at? A framed sheet of what seems to be photographic paper, creased and perhaps exposed yet imageless, is paired with a similarly framed and creased photograph of a yawl at sea. Later one finds a series of photograms and, apparently, some messy silkscreens and a monochromatic abstraction. The work is disparate enough that one ponders what could possibly be uniting it all. It's not until one comes upon *Untitled figure ground study (facing German suffering)*, 2011, that an answer suggests itself. The piece looks like a notebook, a pen, a roll of tape, and the top of a paint can all doused in gray pigment and affixed to a sheet of newspaper that has been framed and hung on the wall. Closer inspection, however, reveals the newspaper to be an elaborate drawing, each letter, design element, and photograph meticulously rendered in ink. Soon one realizes that all the pieces are actually drawings masquerading as something else: a photograph, photogram, or collage. Sietsema leads an expanding wedge of trompe l'oeil artists that includes Tauba Auerbach, Heather Cook, and Marc Handelman. Although trompe l'oeil asks viewers to stop and contemplate the hoaxes perpetrated by their minds, Sietsema's versions here are especially attuned to the niceties of representation. To create the composition for *Painter's Mussel 2*, 2010, the artist opened a frame with a hammer and chisel and removed the photograph it contained. The elements involved in this procedure—frame, glass, photo, matte, hammer, chisel—were painted with a resist medium, placed on a sheet of paper, and sprayed with black ink. Sietsema then removed the elements to disclose an image suggesting a photogram. The picture of the boat, too, is actually an ink drawing posing as a photograph. The 14 works in the show are not only astonishingly accomplished teases; they also remind us how forcefully belief pulls us through our visual landscape—the belief that what our eyes report is accurate and what we see in fact exists. That said, the seductions of Sietsema's work are no mirage. —Daniel Kunitz

Kunitz, Daniel. "Paul Sietsema." *Modern Painters*, September 2011, p. 90.