

REVIEWS

# Jerry Birchfield: Mr. In-Between

March 12, 2015 by Rose Bouthillier



Jerry Birchfield, *Mr. In-Between*. Installation view. All works 2014. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.

There is a strange, dissolving feeling, hard to describe, when one thing turns out to be another—a space floating between definitions. It is precisely this feeling that Jerry Birchfield crafts so well, and which pervades *Mr. In-Between*, his second solo show at William Busta Gallery in Cleveland. With sleight of hand, Birchfield mines the tension between two and three dimensions, creating works that quietly confound and playfully dodge.

*Mr. In-Between* includes a new series of images and sculptures; I say “images” with purpose, because the word “photographs” or even “photo-based works” seems in this case disingenuous, maybe even cliché. Certainly, the camera has a role; it imbues these images with flatness. The pictures appear to need this flatness desperately, uninterested in how they acquired it. Here “photography” is like a load-bearing column, essential, but standing awkwardly in the middle of a room.

Birchfield's images consist of vertical surfaces littered with debris from the studio—wires, paper, shims—which appear to be covered with sprayed power and paint in shades of black and grey. From afar they read as *trompe-l'oeil* paintings, tricking the eye into perceiving volume; up close, their flat paper surfaces and iridescent tinges reveal them as inkjet prints. Photographs are habitually read as representations: their “realism” lies in indexicality as opposed to verisimilitude.

Today, it would be extremely odd to hear someone remark on how life-like a photograph appears. Birchfield cleverly subverts this: rendered monochrome, shallow, and unfamiliar, the images cling to the “thingness” of his subjects. Further, he aligns the qualities of his subjects and media; the soft, dull coating of the objects echo in the matte paper, inks, and dusty particles fragmented along the lines of pixels. Some of the shapes are traced by very fine, bright, craggy outlines and slightly-off solarization. Birchfield employs a variety of analog and digital tools in his work. I'm not

certain exactly how these are made, and not knowing seems important to the act of looking; there's a theatre to being in the dark.



Art historically, the images call up cubist collage, supremacist compositions, and cluttered rayographs (all of which engage in questioning vision and making strange). Louise Nevelson's sculptures are another visual referent, everyday objects puzzled together and all coated in leveling black. *It's Never Too Late for a Kind Gesture* and *Does Anyone Else Have Any Bright Ideas*, two of Birchfield's works in lighter shades of grey, evoke other feelings and scenes: lunar artifacts, a post-apocalyptic desktop covered with ash, the strange appearance of greatly magnified fibers. While most of the objects are vague in their purpose, *Finally It Has Happened to Me Right In Front of My Face*, features a large floppy bow. In many ways this was the focal point of the show, a pantomime gesture, fluid and presenting. The title is drawn from the early 90s dance anthem *Finally* by CeCe Peniston, a celebratory ode to meeting "Mr. Right." At this point in the exhibition, I let the phrase "falling for" turn over a few times in my mind.

The show's odd one out, *You Scared Me, but I Didn't Scream*, consists of an inkjet print with plaster and graphite affixed to the surface, in peeling layers and Rorschach-like shapes. Next to the perceptual shifts of the other prints, this work felt somewhat blunt, a peek behind the curtain you regret taking. But the affect of its inclusion plays out after you leave the room; this one can be recalled more distinctly, as multiple modes of perception (pictorial, textural, and spatial) and activated. While every piece is still, this one is not frozen. The eye moves over it in a certain way, it can grab onto ridges, rest (while the others are somewhat slippery).



*Basic Figure (Two)*. Jerry Birchfield. 2014. painted aluminum, 78 x 38 x 8.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.



*You Scared Me, but I Didn't Scream*. Jerry Birchfield. 2014. inkjet print, plaster, graphite, 24 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and William Busta Gallery.

While Birchfield's three-dimensional pieces are tethered in varying degrees to the picture or frame, the sculptures assert their independence from the wall. Made with aluminum sheeting, cut out to approximately 1 1/2" bands and folded, they are poised and skeletal, ready to flex or fall over. The surfaces are covered with a milky, pooling paint that resembles the appearance of sketched-in marker. *One and Two (One)* is an austere, standing L-shaped form with three portrait windows atop a wide, unbroken horizontal band and three short legs. *Basic Figure (Two)* is more complex, an unfolding accordion screen. The simple pleasure of these pieces is walking around them and experiencing their structures morph through perspective; lines snapping into place, others disappearing. *If I Must... If I Must... and I Must (Three)* lies on the ground like a curled up version of *(Two)*, with the addition of a blobby spider web. This gag is a difficult read. Combined with the compulsion of the title, maybe it's simply "I couldn't resist!" Thinking about the minimalist quotations, maybe more along the lines of "This never gets old."

Smartly installed in a single room, *Mr. In-Between* was a show to pace and linger. A detail in one piece sent you back to all of the others; you were pulled in, sent back. Inflections shift, punch lines are delayed. In this way Birchfield's work has a durational quality, a sense of timing—things are not quite, or not only, as they first appear.

*Mr. In-Between* is on view at the William Busta Gallery in Cleveland, Ohio from February 6, 105 to March 7, 2015.

Jerry Birchfield was included in the group exhibition *Realization is Better than Anticipation* (2013) at MOCA Cleveland, co-curated by Rose Bouthillier and Megan Lykins Reich.

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