

HAW/CONTEMPORARY

read this: a story of waveform nested tapestries and hallucinatory seizures

Will Meier, Will Meier Text, December 5, 2013

Whether manifest as a recursively-structured, digitally-printed pattern-ream, manically dense nests of collage, or a repository, organic mound, the many pieces that fill the space of Read This are unified by their materiality and their evocation of a peculiar state of consciousness. All composed in some way from overwhelming amounts of shredded junk mail, the works on display exist simultaneously as bold constructions and delicate ephemera.

Let's just get the messy part out of the way, because there are so many interesting points I want to discuss about this work, but I can't let it go unsaid that the piece after which the show is titled, read this fragments, bugged the hell out of me. Each in their own oversized frame, the clipped-out words 'read' and 'this' sit like a didactic, overvalued map key (\$550 for a quippy instructable? You've gotta be fuckin' kidding me)—or at least so I thought at first. But when I investigated this impression a little further, I quickly realized how off-base I had been. For one, none of the text really means anything. It's all consumer-culture detritus, full of 'limited time offer's that found their way here instead of to the recycling bin. Whereas usually the text at an art exhibition sheds light on the work, here the opposite is true. So what does Baird mean when she tells us so literally to read this?

Well, what does it mean to read anything? Reading is pattern recognition. It is the hyper-speed addition and decryption of series of symbolic data-points into meaning that occurs so fluidly and consistently in our lives that we usually don't even realize we're doing it. And when we do read with intention, whether philosophy or fiction or news or art-reviews, a necessary and inevitable part of the process is that the words on the page dissolve. They become a proxy to vicariously engage the imaginative arena of consciousness in which we are not present in our physical state but rather somewhere/something else.

But if we further consider reading as something larger and more abstract than the interpretation of written language, then Baird's invitation gets much more interesting. Scientists read electromagnetic frequencies from other solar systems to understand our universe. Hunters read anomalies in their environment to know where to look for prey. Airport security reads body language and facial expressions to anticipate threats to national security. And art critics read the visual languages presented to them to ponder stimulating thoughts. All of the 'texts' read by these various specialists consist of closed systems that necessitate their own corresponding interpretive logic, and once '-literacy' is acquired through pattern-observation, patience, and attention to subtle detail, a richer sense of understanding the world is inevitably achieved.

At first this exhibition appears to be commenting on consumer culture and ecological crises. A closer look yields a wildly more interesting premise.

As soon as you turn the corner into Haw's space, you are confronted with the chronicles, a waist-high, undulating pile of loose shredded adverts, large enough to be hiding one or two adults underneath. The order of the piling of this bulbous form found far more colored paper poured over the top and backside,

while the assumed front is composed of far more white confetti. Perhaps conditioned by the opening night's coinciding with the recent Philippines disaster, the wide, dynamically cresting shape thus calls to mind a frozen, breaking wave. Not ready to pounce like a Hokusai, but rolling in as a steady, inescapable tide. Here the sideways go-green undertones are most explicit, as this collection of strips isn't frozen behind a frame, so it stays closer to being trash. Even though Haw's high ceilings slightly diminish the impact of the scale, when you really think about how many hundreds or thousands or more of printed pages were shredded to create this installation, it produces some anxiety. The tidal wave of information is overwhelming. The only way to process what's before us is to consider it as its sum instead of its parts.

The lefthand path around Baird's wave leads to another anomalous piece of the show (almost all the others are uniformly scaled, variegated products of a series called read this series from the chronicles). I instantly nicknamed the lone vertical digital print the seizure tapestry. Let me explain: One time, I believe I experienced the precursive aura of a seizure. I was sitting up on my couch and suddenly there began this noise that sounded incredibly distant and close at once, like a combination between an ear-bound mosquito and a rumbling train. As the mechanical and bubbly whine intensified, my vision began to distort. Colors started separating into sharp, staticky strips of reds and greens, interlaced like a TV filmed in slo-mo, grating against each other as they pulled further and further apart. I felt like my brain was being pulled in half, but not into two clean parts. Rather, it was like alternating fibrous connectors being torn like a complexly woven sweater. The experience is burned into the retinas of my memory because it was so unique, and honestly terrifyingly intense.

Baird's print might be the first time that something in the real world has reminded me of the aesthetics of that perceptual malfunction. Indeed, question #7 (the real name for the seizure tapestry) is doing something very similar. Whenever a seizure or mental illness or high dose of psychedelics throw us into hallucination, they scramble the way our cognitive faculties would normally interpret the raw information soaking into our brain through our senses. Because the way the brain operates, under any circumstance, is by locating and processing patterns, that still occurs. But the pattern that emerges is inherently not rationally ordered, so the result is an utter foreignness that can only be absorbed on aesthetic terms.

The other six pieces in the show, part of read this series from the chronicles, are assembled seemingly from many iterations of a single print each, cut up here into uniquely shaped fragments that are gathered and composed into new structures. Loosely rectilinear and flat-ish, but thickly textured, these framed pieces engage in a painting dialogue—woven physically much like in the illusion created by the seizure tapestry, to the same schizoid effect. A traditional role of painting for much of art history was to show the beauty of select moments in time, preserved so that typically-less-observant people might be able to temporarily enter the artist's lens of worldly appreciation. But when a single instant is broken to pieces and stretched out to extreme degrees, how does our awareness of it change? Finding complexity in the mundane through a sense of focus created by their radial assembly, they pull the viewer in hypnotically. Like the wave, there are so many competing pieces of equivocal information that there is no choice but to absorb the whole all at once.

I admire most about what Baird is doing here that her process of arriving at a coded totality is as meticulously ordered as a schizophrenic conspiracy theory. Like when an image on a computer

glitches, it still is read by the machine as alphanumerical data, when the brain's pattern-recognition software becomes driven by a virus of psychosis, you wind up with bizarre and complex, yet in a strange way very logical, constructions. But you don't have to be insane to get this. If there is anything that postmodern philosophy was good for, it is instilling the question in us of whether or not there is any 'true' pattern out there to find. We all create our own ways of perceiving the world, in varying degrees of complexity. The meaning of Miki Baird's, as I see it, is way the fuck out there, but like anyone who has ever enjoyed a little brain-blending knows all too well, sometimes the most fun thing you can do in life is ride the wave to the crazy conclusions it takes you.