

refusal of representation altogether (think of Frank Stella’s early black paintings).

However, Speh deals with representation when he paints over a logo—a logo that is itself a representation and doesn’t cease to be one after being painted over. Within these abstract paintings are zones of figuration, even realism. I would go so far as to say there is a *hyperrealism* in them. What can be more real than the trace? (Tracing was cheating when we were children—too real, even when clumsily done.) The answer is, of course, the real thing, lying just below a thin skin of paint, a skin of paint that has taken on the form of the ground on which it sits.

This hyperrealism is not continuous across the painting’s surface. One might say that just off the logo or word, just off the print, the paint turns decorative. It is no longer figurative, but abstract. In this way the painting’s surface forms a collage of figurative and abstract zones. These paintings take in banal, everyday material and imagery in a way that continues the logic of Pop Art. It also expands and updates these forms, mimicking contemporary media in a formal way. Where is “reality” represented figuratively and where abstractly? Where does the camera represent what is happening on a “reality” show like *Survivor* and where is a scene staged for the camera? When does the abstractness of darkness stand in for cheap thrills?

—Aaron Van Dyke



Andy Warhol, *Storm Door* (1960)

Scott Speh

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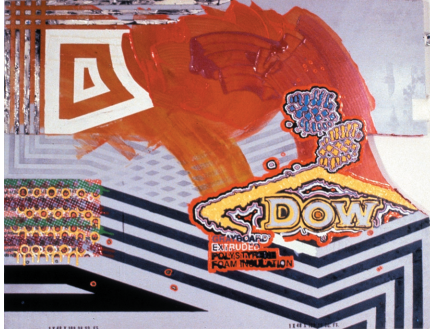
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## Pop Material

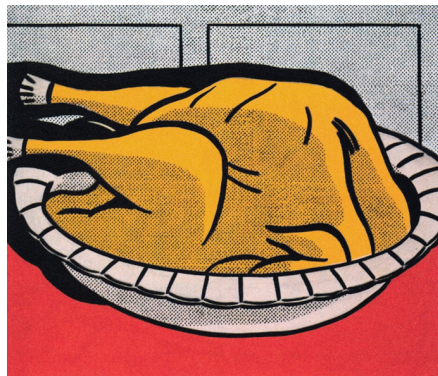
Scott Speh has been painting on found building material, mostly styrofoam insulation board and tyvek, since 1997. His touchstone is Pop art, but his paintings relate to Pop Art in a complicated way, sometimes undermining traditional ideas of what Pop is, and sometimes playing out its logic beyond its original expectations.



Scott Speh, Grayfoam Painting 5 (1999)

On its arrival Pop had, like most art movements in the twentieth century, a certain shock value. Abstract Expressionism had been the dominant form of high art for a decade before Pop's emergence. Figurative art had been all but banished as far as the avant-garde of high art was concerned. Speh's work is, at least on its face, decidedly abstract. This contradicts Pop's initial impulse toward the figurative.

Some of Pop's earliest impulses concerned a straightforward representation of what was right in



Roy Lichtenstein, Turkey (1961)

front of your face, the banal and everyday, and because of its growing presence, this often meant the commercial. It also always seemed to mean the

reproducible. Whether this meant Rauschenberg's proto-Pop paintings using silkscreen reproductions of "masterpieces" and press photos, the paintings of ads done by Warhol, or Lichtenstein's paintings of enlarged comic strips reproducing benday dots, Pop Art was almost exclusively dealing with life reproduced. These concerns are also seen in Speh's work.

In his early styrofoam board paintings, Speh was first drawn to the logos on the material. These logos represented to him a type of public or commercial speech, but one that was, ironically, soon to be muffled beneath the siding of a house. In one sense this is precisely what Pop's subject is: public/commercial speech, the dialogues that gain enough power, attention, or "juice" to matter, at least enough to make it into some form of reproduction.



Scott Speh, Tyvek Painting One (2001)

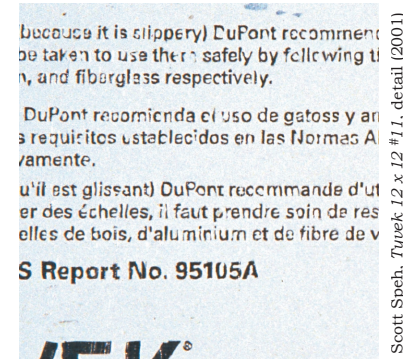


Scott Speh, Blue Tyvek Painting (2000)

This is where Speh's dialogue with Pop gets complicated, and interesting. Speh is an abstract painter, but Pop is not an abstract form in any traditional sense. The conflict lies in the play between abstraction, representation, and referent (the object, or in this case text, depicted). Speh's paintings never rest solidly in abstraction

because they always structure themselves on a preexisting and figurative ground, that of the printed surface of the Styrofoam or tyvek, with its logos and text. The paint weaves its way over, between and around printed elements. Speh's paint handling visits many of the twentieth century's historical techniques, and varies from skillful tracing to willfully clumsy, often coming to rest on what I can only call decorative (and it should not be forgotten that the decorative is also abstract). This is more evident in his earlier styrofoam board paintings, usually very colorful and sometimes verging on gaudy.

Later he painted monochromes, all pink or all blue paintings, still readable only because of the varying textures in the paint left by the brushstrokes.



Scott Speh, Tyvek 12 x 12 #11, detail (2001)

Speh's latest paintings, his last if we are to believe his "Farewell Tour" declaration, are not just monochromatic, but white monochromes, even leaving behind almost any evocation induced by color. Speh has described his later works as "Pop monochromes," an ingenious, if seemingly oxymoronic term. Nothing seems as antithetical to Pop Art as the monochrome. The monochrome is unique in its ability to represent abstraction. In fact, no other painting type seems to lend itself to such varied readings in this regard, from depictions of the spiritual, to representations of alienation and disaffection, to a