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**When a Splotch Isn't Just a Splotch**

by [Thomas Micchelli](#) on August 6, 2016



*Sol LeWitt, "Splotch #3" (2000), acrylic on fiberglass, 40 x 144 x 44 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)*

Who can resist a show called *Splotch*? This two-gallery extravaganza at [Sperone Westwater](#) and [Lesley Heller Workspace](#), both on the Lower East Side, takes up the tricky gambit (according to its press release) of featuring "artists whose work involves a methodical and controlled process of creating seemingly freeform or random daubs and spots."

That the title work and centerpiece of the exhibition, “Splotch #3” (2000) — a 12-foot-long row of yellow, red, green, blue, and purple acrylic stalactites — is by the Grid King himself, Sol LeWitt, should tell you something about the dual vision employed by the show’s curator, Eileen Jeng, to parse out the look of a piece from the conceptual platform that went into its making.

The idea of organized chaos or strategic spontaneity is self-contradictory, and can easily result in artwork that is little more than a vessel for superficial effects. To avoid this, a sculpture like “Splotch #3” or the deliriously sensual abstract paintings of David Reed (who is represented by his meticulously notated working drawings) must navigate between the Scylla of disingenuousness and Charybdis of reflexivity. In essence, the work in this show proceeds from the fundamental shift in contemporary art, fully felt by the early 1970s, toward conceptual self-consciousness, but effectively turns that impulse in its head, disguising its logic-prone origins with a seemingly untamed use of materials.

But does it? Not everything, it should be said, supports the curatorial premise as clearly as the works of LeWitt and Reed, as is the case with another of the exhibition’s showstoppers, Linda Benglis’s “Baby Planet” (1969), a nine-foot-long floor piece (here laid across a low, white pedestal) made from large pours of green and ocher latex. Positioned opposite the LeWitt and acting as an earth-toned counterpart to the stalactites’ shiny bright colors, not much about it seems planned other than the preparation of buckets of pigmented latex. From what I understand of Benglis’s process, it is more intuitive and sensual than overly determined. On the other hand, the work is certainly an impressive splotch, and the show would suffer without it.

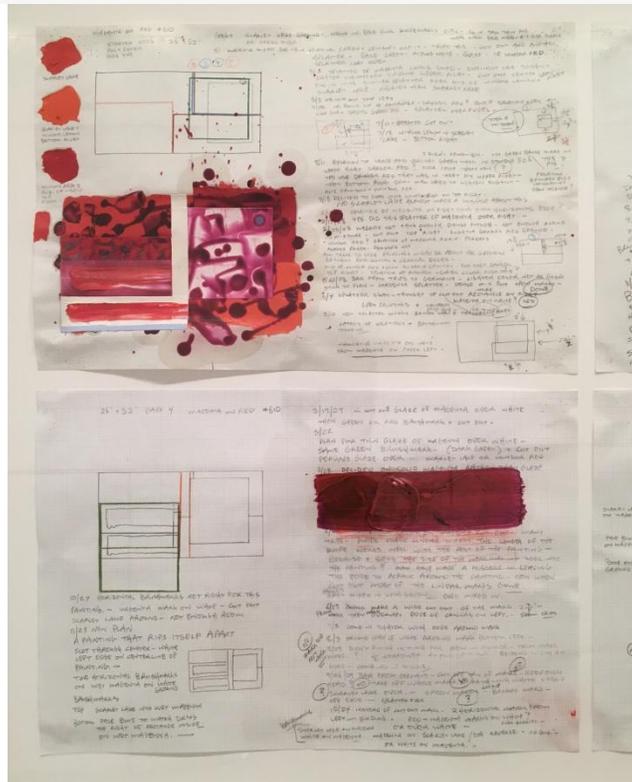


*Lynda Benglis, "Baby Planet" (1969), poured pigmented latex, 1 1/2 x 110 x 24 inches (click to enlarge)*

Still, the precision of LeWitt's and Reed's methods sets their work apart. A glimpse into LeWitt's elaborate procedures can be found on the website of the Metropolitan Museum, where "Spotch #3" and related "non-geometric forms," as he called them, were displayed on the roof between April and October of 2005. The Met's [exhibition overview](#) discusses LeWitt's six-year collaboration with the sculpture fabricator Yoshitsugu Nakama, who would take the artist's hand-drawn plans or "footprints" (two of which are on view at Leslie Heller) and realize them in three dimensions:

LeWitt's designs are scanned into Nakama's computer and refined with a succession of software programs, including one that enables the artist and fabricator to see an illusion of the structure in three-dimensional form. Nakama then slices the image of the three-dimensional structure at two-inch intervals. These "slices" are printed and pasted onto slices of construction foam and then stacked and glued on top of one another. This rough structure is then carved and smoothed using rasps and sandpaper. Epoxy resin and fiberglass are applied to reinforce the foam, and the structure is made smoother with more layers of epoxy compound. Paint is applied

using two or three coats of primers, three or four coats of colors, and six to eight coats of varnish.



David Reed, "Working Drawing for Painting 610" (2011), detail, mixed media on paper, each 10 7/8 x 16 7/8 inches (click to enlarge)

Reed's notes, swatches, and diagrams offer an interior monologue about a painting's progress, commenting on a magenta that is "not thick enough, dense enough — not enough alkyd," or observing that a "new splatter works better than I thought." It's intriguing to note that the dated entries on the six sheets on display, collectively titled "Working Drawing for Painting 601" (2011) begin on January 23, 2007, and continue for four years, through February 14, 2011, attesting to the epic deliberation that went into the work. The process is more like that of a film editor than a conventional painter (Reed's engagement with movies is well known) in its painstaking dissection of every detail. Miraculously, there is nothing in the finished work that feels rehearsed or overparticular; his mesmerizing solo show at Peter Blum earlier this year, composed of a

continuous frieze of paintings — which my colleague John Yau, in his [review](#) of the exhibition, likened to a tracking shot — was a tour de force of paint as subject and medium.

In LeWitt and Reed, there is a heightened disconnect between the conceptual and the visual, a friction that makes for a species of works different from those in which forethought plays a part but execution is fairly straightforward. Perhaps Jeng envisions the paintings and sculptures in the show along a continuum, with LeWitt and Reed on one end and Benglis on the other. In between we find artists such as Otto Piene and Matias Cuevas, who use fire to create shapes and patterns; Andreas Kocks, whose “Untitled, Paperwork #1150G” (2011) presents a wall-mounted splotch assembled from contoured pieces of graphite-covered paper; and Terry Winters, whose vertically bisected oil painting “Standardgraph 3” (2003) features a column of black circles running up the middle as irregular girds and curves unfurl on either side.



*Trudy Benson, “Blue Cell” (2016), acrylic and oil on canvas, 43 x 47 inches*

Trudy Benson’s “Blue Cell” (2016), in oil and acrylic, is an austere, tough-looking work from an artist who often revels in painterly flamboyance. There are black coils twirling around the

surface — her characteristic device of pumping thick beads of paint directly out of the tube — and two sets of sharp-edged, seemingly cutout shapes, one in black and white and the other in a harsh, uninviting shade of blue. In the openings between them we peer into deep space convincingly portrayed by curling lines of black spray paint.



*Mary Heilmann, installation view: "Pro Tools Remix (2014), oil on canvas, 20 x 32 inches; "Yellow Spot #3 'Sunny'" (2012), glazed ceramic, 10 1/4 x 12 inches; "Annie's Red," (2012), glazed ceramic, 8 1/4 x 7 1/2 inches*

It's a "methodical and controlled" composition, as per Jeng's premise, that nevertheless retains a zing of spontaneity, as does "34 Gatherings" (2014) by Emil Lukas, a squiggly grisaille abstraction produced by fly larvae slithering through ink across the canvas. But what about Mary Heilmann's "Pro Tools Remix" (2014), a fetchingly asymmetrical green diptych with red lines forming a trapezoidal shape and colorful blobs that bear a striking resemblance to Lynda Benglis's floor pour? Given the painting's title (Pro Tools is an audio editing and mixing

software) the blobs could be derived from the shape of sound wave vectors, but they could just as easily evoke biomorphic forms.



*Lucky DeBellevue, installation view: "Untitled" (2014), acrylic and printing ink on canvas, 25 x 21 inches;  
"Untitled" (2014), acrylic and printing ink on canvas, 25 x 21 inches (click to enlarge)*

It is hard to gauge where this painting — or Heilmann’s other two contributions to the show, lopsided disks in glazed ceramic from 2012, one red and one yellow, delightful though they are — fit into the curatorial theme. The same can be said of Lucky DeBellevue’s exuberant installation of two abstract paintings in acrylic and printing ink mounted on a wall, which the artist stamped all over with orange rectangles like oversized confetti. Other contributions in this vein include Elizabeth Condon’s splashy, quasi-botanical “Fear of Life Can Be a Subtle Thing” (2015) in acrylic and glitter on linen; Jian-Jun Zhang’s brushy, black and white abstract monoprints; and Walter Biggs’ muscular and lustrous monochromatic mounds of graphite, sand, acrylic, and oil on linen stretched over a panel.

It wouldn't be fair to say that these pieces, along with others in the show, render the premise irrelevant, in that any good work transcends its methods and making. But if the selection errs on the side of inclusiveness, it does so in the interest of formal strength and material beauty, a juncture where making a point takes a back seat to indulging the eye.

*Splotch continues at [Sperone Westwater Gallery](#) (257 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 9 and at [Lesley Heller Workspace](#) (54 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 19.*