

---

THOMAS SLEET: TRACES

December 2007

---

THOMAS SLEET: Systematic Deconstructions.

Upon entering Thomas Sleet's building to see his new work I was greeted by an impromptu presentation of the paintings for his current show at Bruno David Gallery. He mentioned this was most of the show and smiled when I asked if this area was his studio. It was a common space on the first floor he was using as a staging site for his upcoming show. He invited me downstairs to his fabrication area like a magician offering to show me his secrets. Down a rickety old wooden staircase into a dark and cluttered basement, I was transported into a new space unique to Thomas's work. I soon realized that his works for the show were the product of an involved process having more layers of meaning than I would ever have guessed. He had two large works in progress, but what fascinated me was the writings all over the walls, notes that read like poetry. Struck by a wave of word association, syllogism, allusion and metaphor; I was introduced to the deconstructive theory that is at the heart of Sleet's work.

He told me about a trip he took out west several years ago. On a hike through the woods, he came upon a large system of beaver dams and was taken by the systematic fabrications created by these animals. He showed me a painting that was a series of zones in a loosely organized grid. It was an abstract representation of the pools the beavers had created to trap salmon. It was really about structures and systems made in the absence of man. We then discussed his use of the oval shape in his work after I noticed the orange barrier fencing that he used as stencils to create an organizational system on the surface. He recalled living in downtown St Louis where there was constant construction and urban renewal going on around his home. The fencing would be in the mud and snow and it would impress textures and patterns, and oval forms of mud and snow would squeeze through the spaces. It was a realization that this was the essence of daily life and the unspoken history

upon which the city was built. The ovals are not portraits of people or things, but present a record of the forgotten, the unnoticed, and the abandoned.

Thomas creates minimal works that rely heavily on texture. When I asked him about the materials he uses in cement, he had me examine a large bucket filled with his own mixture. There was the strong smell of wood and solvents. Mixing wood chips and sawdust in cement, he creates an organic medium that takes on a life of its own. As the man-made forms deteriorate, they also grow into a new state of crude uncontrolled beauty, which suggests a duality in the artist's narrative.

The works in this exhibition become a trace, representing an entropic history of the process leaving us to contemplate what is not in the work. The ovals are imperfect and decomposing. They are built and destroyed, celebrated and defaced. Jacques Derrida stated that deconstruction is an "antistructuralist gesture" because "Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented." Thomas Sleet's paintings bring to mind decaying walls, moss, mold and primitive architectural structures. Sleet believes in the processes of nature and he has found a way to create work that is both honest and powerful.

Written by Chris Kahler

Chris Kahler is an artist. He recently had an exhibition at the Bruno David Gallery. He is currently an Associate Professor at Eastern Illinois University

This essay is a series of introductions to the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends