

IN MEDIAS RES.

Buzz Spector
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In medias res. We're indebted to the Roman poet, Horace, for this Latin phrase, which means "in the midst of things," but is mainly used to describe artistic narratives beginning in the middle of the action. Carmon Colangelo works this way, mixing collage, drawing, and painting with a repertoire of digital effects in producing the complex, multivalent works on paper that comprise his art. In this exhibition at Bruno David Gallery, we find an artist who stretches the parameters of his history of practice in an installation of twenty-four works, large and small, that attract the eyes while provoking the minds of viewers.

Carmon is nominally a printmaker. Indeed, his more than thirty years of studio practice begins with a rigorous, but conventional, education in traditional printmaking techniques. In "Eyedeas," however, we see images whose procedural origins are hard to decipher. All of the work on view here employs ink jet printing, but it is not clear that all are made starting with this image-making tool. Many of these works also incorporate material supplements—in watercolor, pencil, or ink—but do these physical elements follow after or precede the virtual effects of Carmon's digital printing? We are confronted by an accumulation of embellishments, but what is that is being concealed?

One key to Carmon's method is in the ongoing assortment of sketchbooks, memo pads, meeting notes, and scraps of paper in his studio. This loose record of reveries and inspirations is available for the artist's scrutiny as he works at one or another of the several tables in the space. The floor is another site of opportunity to move images and artifacts around, and at any given moment the walls of the studio are covered with (mostly) unfinished works, often pinned closely together or even partially overlapping in order to draw out unexpected representational dynamics.

A list of words on one studio table offers another aspect of Carmon's art:

"| FEAR | HELL | HELP | FIGURED | HUMOR ME
POLLOCK | GOING NOWHERE | WINDOW |
THINKING OUT LOUD | TOUCHING NATURE |
SLEEPWALKER | SLIDE SHOW | ZERO |
PRANKSTER | L.O.L. | LOVE | SECURITY"

Large concepts and witty turns of phrase alternate here. This list, and others like it, record Carmon's play with language, another medium of interest for an artist deeply concerned with mediating between language and image. "Eyedeas," the punning title of this exhibition, is an

exemplary conjoining of seeing with reading. In works such as *Conversions*, Carmon has used watercolor and graphite to add words and accompanying random letters to the digital reproduction of an interior page taken from an old (1956) issue of *Art News*. Word fragments, including "LIB," "ST," "ALEMA" and "T.WIT" float across the scanned and appropriated page. These letters are not the only supplement here; digitally rendered graphic forms in vivid orange, red, and black emanate from the work's center, with the uppermost rays apparently disturbing a digital grid so that it seems to flutter like a veil in the wind. This "explosion" of color appears to emerge from a circular blotch of tan liquid—not more watercolor but in fact a digitally reproduced coffee stain—left there by a previous reader of the



magazine.

Barely visible at the top and bottom edges of *Conversion* is a portion of the art magazine's cover. The fragmented letterforms at the top can still be read: "ART," but their inverted typographic remainders at the bottom are digitally distorted, with the descenders of the "T" and "R" apparently being sucked into that central coffee stain.



Through all of these effects, the four reproductions on the original magazine page can be seen; images of the dead Christ, painted by Mantegna (twice), Manet, and Roualt, with lines of partially readable text speaking of creation, death, and transfiguration. Other meanings can now be surmised in Carmon's hand-applied letters; "ST," for example, as

abbreviation of saint, perhaps, or else attached to a neighboring word fragment to make "STALEMA(te)." Sense making here may be stymied, but all the while we seek to read, we are in the midst of visual energies of push and pull.

The same distorted title fragment from *Art News* appears in another work on view, *New*, but this time "ART" is right-side up, and its attenuated descenders are apparently being sucked into a vortex at the work's center. Barely readable above this vortex is a distorted and miniaturized "NEWS." Abstracted elements in marigold yellow, scarlet, and green have been digitally distorted so that the original cover art, a Matisse *papier-collé*, is no longer recognizable, and here and there Carmon has added touches of watercolor over a delicately rendered graphite grid to draw our attention away from the work's infinitely receding center. The graphic energy of the appropriated Matisse may no longer be visible, but Carmon's digital transfiguration offers another, a "new" energy, instead.



A comparable repertoire of effects is employed in much of "Eyedeas," but two larger-scale works, *G.R. (GR.E.EK)* and *E.K. (GEEK)*, have been printed on canvas and float framed in white enamel. These as well incorporate a reproduction of a painting by another artist, albeit in highly distorted

form. Carmon has scanned images of a Gerhard Richter color chart (G.R.) and an early Ellsworth Kelly spectrum painting (E.K.) and has digitally stirred them up, collapsing the grid-structures of the originals. The distortions of these grids are dramatic; attenuations of "outer" elements are most exaggerated in color areas approaching the four corners of each canvas, with "inner" elements shrinking in scale as if retreating into a distance. Or perhaps the attenuations are indicators of force moving explosively outward. Both works invite reflection on this representational ambiguity, but their material substrates and frame types are signs of painting; cues for attentive viewers to think instead of the tensions in stretched canvases. The effect here is one of stretching the parameters of printmaking by reference to the constructing of paintings.

Carmon's appropriation of the Richter and Kelly images is broader in scope than a simple commentary on characteristics of their art; rather, he uses these reproductions to examine how the material conditions of an art form demonstrate the contingency of all pictorial judgments. The stretched, pixilated, blurred, and scrambled images in Carmon's work point toward a more fluid understanding that we may gain by paying attention to the physical, as well as the representational, circumstances in which we encounter art. The conditions of viewing are as much a quality of Carmon's work as the virtuosity of his manipulations of studio tools. Such contingent circumstances are central to our engagement with Carmon's work, which we see *In medias res*.

Buzz Spector is Dean of the College and Graduate School of Art in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. In addition to his work as an artist, Spector frequently writes on artists and issues in contemporary art. His critical writing has been published in many journals and reviews since the 1970s. A volume of selected interviews of Spector plus new page art, *Buzzwords*, is scheduled for publication in 2011 by Sara Ranchouse, Chicago.

Images:
Conversions, 2011. Watercolor, graphite, and ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
New, 2011. Watercolor, graphite, and ink on paper, 30 x 22 inches
G.R. (GR.E.EK), 2011. Ink on Canvas, 60-1/2 x 43-1/2 inches

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.