

JOHN HOUCK



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JOHN HOUCK

by Chris Wiley

The world is in chaos. Despite our divisions, we can all agree on that. Who could deny it? But there is danger in believing that it is we benighted present-dwellers who are unique in feeling the terrible weight of disorder. History, after all, is just a long struggle against the inherent tendency of things to fall apart. Among the earliest cave markings were clumsy stabs at making order: rudimentary grids carved painstakingly in the rock, like the one found in Gorham's Cave outside of Gibraltar, in 2014.

John Houck's work in photography, digital image making, and painting, began with such a grid, albeit a much more complex and technically advanced one. His *Aggregates*, a mind-warping series of optically dazzling grids generated by a custom-coded algorithm, were born out of his past work as a high-level computer programmer. To make them, Houck would input a set of parameters into his algorithm determining a grid size (say, for instance, a grid with three horizontal and three vertical squares), and a set of colors chosen from the hexadecimal color matrix (say, for instance, three). In this example, the algorithm would spit out a larger, superstructural grid, made up of the smaller three-by-three grids, each one sporting a different combination of the three chosen colors, creating an exhaustive compendium. (For those of you tallying up the math, that would be 3^9 combinations, or 19,683.) Houck would then print these computer-generated grids out using an inkjet printer, fold the resulting print on a dramatic diagonal, light it, and photograph it. (Sometimes, he would repeat this process more than once.) Houck would then finish the work by printing out the photograph of the folded grid, and folding it again along an axis that impossibly overlaps the photographed folds. This creates a kind of optical wavering, where the actual fold and the represented folds fight for supremacy in the mind, each attempting to assert their mutually exclusive realism. It's a puzzle that's hard for the brain to resolve, even if you know the trick.

The "Aggregates" are stunning, but like all of his works, there's a lot to unpack behind the seductive scrim of the visual. For more than a decade, Houck has been deeply interested in psychoanalysis, both in practice, through years of his own intensive analysis, and in theory, through the works of famously difficult French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose mathematical approach to the psyche appeals to Houck's technical sensibilities, and the pioneering English psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott, whose work

provided the titles for Houck's exhibitions "Playing and Reality" (2016), and "Holding Environment" (2018). Looking at the "Aggregates" with a psychoanalytic eye, the algorithmically produced grid can be seen as a kind of stand-in for the world of the calculated, the ordered, the fussily rational. (Similar, perhaps, to the primordial grid of Gorham's Cave, though the exact reason for its creation remains a mystery.) This grid's disruption by the paper's folds, then, can then be looked at as a perturbation caused by the irrational, or the unconscious. Furthermore, the work's tricky phenomenology serves to underline this destabilization, reminding us that not only can the rational be interrupted by psychological forces beyond its ken, but also that our perceptions of reality itself are always contingent on our fallible sensory apparatus.

If this seems like a lot of interpretive baggage to freight an abstract picture with, Houck provided ample confirmation that these kinds of concerns are at the heart of his practice with his next major body of work, grouped together under the title "The History of Graph Paper". Like the "Aggregates", this work involved eye-popping photographic slights of hand, but here Houck focused exclusively on the creating of spatially flummoxing still lives, applying his novel technique of layering to tableaux featuring resonant objects excavated from storage in his childhood home. Just as the "Aggregates" suggest that our senses might deceive us, the spatial disruptions that Houck subjects these objects to—drafting tools from his time as an architecture student are doubled up to become echoes of themselves, a childhood stamp collection is scattered and concatenated into confetti-like strata—allude to potentially disturbing fact that our memories, too, are not as reliable as they might seem.

Houck's later works, like those he exhibited in "Playing and Reality" and "Holding Environment", elaborated on this foray into still life by adding painted elements to his increasingly complex compositions. This served to both expand his already capacious definition of what it means to be a "photographer"—in interviews at the time, he declared that he sought to create a "third entity", between photography and painting—and to inject his exacting, highly technical practice with a bit of sloppiness, chance, and play. ("Playing," Winnicott famously asserted, "is itself a therapy.") Befitting the title that they are grouped under, with these works Houck seems to have let his creativity off the leash, allowing himself to roam from painterly exuberance to surreality—a pair of old gloves laid next to an suggestively split open coconut, a figure balancing on one leg, having their preposterously long shoelaces tied by a group of four seemingly identical hands—with a freedom that the tight systems of his previous work had foreclosed.

Recently, Houck has strayed from photography altogether, and focused exclusively on painting. These works, which retain the signature layered elements of his previous photographs but delve deeper into dreamlike atmospherics that recall the Italian



Passe or Retiré, 2016
Archival pigment print
Edition of 2 + 1 a.p.
53 x 42 in
(from *Playing and Reality* series)

metaphysical painters, are the result of intensive atelier-style training, mostly undertaken online during the pandemic. Tellingly, for an artist who has spent his career engaged with both photography's visual exactitude and the invention of complex methods to undermine it, Houck concluded that painting ultimately "felt, to me, more real than photography felt". Indeed, once you understand that reality is far more complex and mysterious than either our eyes or our rational minds can comprehend, photographic "realism" becomes a kind of oxymoron. Besides, in a world become increasingly incomprehensible, what more do we have to guide us than our dreams, our fantastic inner landscapes?

Chris Wiley is an artist, writer and a contributing editor at Frieze magazine.



Untitled #218_01, 3 Colors, #D65921, #599BCB, #4770A4, 2015
 Creased archival pigment print (unique)
 15 x 10 in
 (from *Aggregate* series)



Untitled #218_02, 3 Colors, #D65921, #599BCB, #FAA588, 2015
 Creased archival pigment print (unique)
 15 x 10 in
 (from *Aggregate* series)

JOHN HOUCK

b. 1977. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon

2022 Hallie Ford Fellow

John Houck's work has traversed technical, methodical, and repetitive photographic and hand-altered processes, to painterly gestures, and finally to pure painted surfaces. He shapes playful, subjective works pulled from memory, laying between reality and unreality, and the analog and digital. This conceptual framework is influenced by relational psychoanalysis. Houck received his Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from University of Colorado Boulder in 2000, and Master of Fine Arts from University of California, Los Angeles, in 2007. His work has been exhibited internationally including Dallas Contemporary, International Center of Photography, Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Colombia; the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto; the Jewish Museum, New York; and Los Angeles County Museum of Art. His work is included in public collections at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Milwaukee Art Museum, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; and The Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch

President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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