

REVIEW: Vermont

MALCOLM MORLEY AND RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER

Hall Art Foundation • Reading, VT • hallartfoundation.org • Through December 1, 2019

The Malcolm Morley and Richard Artschwager mini-retrospectives at the Hall Art Foundation in Reading, VT, exceed expectations. There are 37 Morleys that span his career from 1964 to 2016, and 40 Artschwagers that span 1964 to 2011. Both were art movement protagonists—Morley in photorealism (though he preferred the term “superrealistic”) and Artschwager’s use of visual paradox through materials.

As friends in New York, they influenced each other for over 50 years. Artschwager reintroduced Morley in 1964 to the grid for enlarging reproductions into photorealistic paintings, for example. When asked if he invented, Morley wittily replied that he only copied.



Malcolm Morley, *Orange Curtain*, 2003, oil on linen, 70 x 90". Courtesy of Hall Art Foundation.

Morley’s *Theory of Catastrophe* (2004) is a combination of realistic and semi-abstracted jumbled trucks and autos involved in a massive accident scene. He gridded a newspaper photo and expanded it into shaded solids and miniature Mark Rothko color fields. Semi-tractor trailers were rendered with semi-abstraction.

Morley’s breathtaking *Orange Curtain* (2003) channels Gerhard Richter with rich loosely brushed veils of predominant whites, café au lait browns, and blacks on the right. A luminescent hot orange curtain is on the left, with a woman in between in a white niqab holding her swollen hands up to the sides of her head. Morley implores us to question, “Is this an Edvard Munch-like gesture? A sign

of despair? A fervent prayer?”

Artschwager also used the grid, but as an art alchemist, transmuting master crafted furniture into sculpture. *Chest of Drawers* (1964) from a distance looks like a wood bureau. Up close one realizes that the legs and chest are but Formica deceptions on a darkly painted plywood block.

Artschwager’s stunning lidded box, *Four Approximate Objects* (1970–1991), requires close observation. An apparent solid mahogany base holds four sensual touch-tempting geometric objects of chrome-plated brass nestled in green flocked holding cups. After close inspection one discovers that the box’s wood end grain is in the wrong direction. The ah-ha reward is that this must be the Formica illusion of wood—trickery....sleight of hand....magic.

Morley and Artschwager were both witty artists, friends and leaders of contemporary art movements. Kudos to the Halls for buying their best work.

—Jon Meyer

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UNBROKEN CURRENT

Helen Day Art Center • Stowe, VT • helenday.com • Through November 9, 2019

A robust physicality, a feeling that the hand of the artist is present, is a unifying force in each of the works by Mildred Beltre, Sanford Biggers, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Rashid Johnson, Harlan Mack and Carrie Mae Weems included in *Unbroken Current*, the fall show occupying the main gallery at the Helen Day Art Center in Stowe. The title of the show is borrowed from this quote by the writer Min Chen on the work of New York-based artist Sanford Biggers: “History is not a thing of the past, but an ongoing, unbroken current...” The history referred to here is the lingering legacy of America’s past treatment of black people, of slavery, of a shared culture where more than half the population is afflicted with selective amnesia.

Carrie Mae Weems, considered one of the most influential contemporary artists working today is represented by *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96) a four paneled C-

print of appropriated images of slaves from the American South, rephotographed, enlarged and printed through deep blood-red filters and framed with phrases such as “a negroid type” and “you became a scientific profile” etched in the glass. Mildred Beltre, a Brooklyn-based artist who spends considerable time teaching in Vermont, uses 50-x-60-inch machine-made tapestries created from original designs as a support for multi-layered drawings and mixed-media work. The enigmatic walnut-colored figures in Beltre’s digital prints *Absence 1* and *Absence 3* (2017) seem to haunt the surrounding space like a nearly forgotten memory.

Rough-hewn wood serves as the dominant

medium with very different end results in the work of Rashid Johnson and Harlan Mack.



Harlan Mack, *Indentation*, 2019, acrylic & wood, 34 x 34". Courtesy of Helen Day Art Center.

Johnson’s ominous branded oak, black soap, wax and spray enamel *Bleed War* (2011) hangs on the gallery wall like a giant scar reminding us of unhealed wounds from a shared cultural past. Mack, whose more colorful acrylic and wood *Indentation* (2019), a homage to his formative years spent at his Oma’s kitchen table, strikes a lighter more upbeat tone. Represented with five pieces all created in 2019, Mack is the only native Vermonter in this thought provoking, ambitious and timely exhibition.

—Cynthia Close