

Gaddy, James, "Studio Visit, Ryan Wallace, Artist", SIGHT UNSEEN, 27 August 2012.

Sight Unseen



To get an idea of how Ryan Wallace approaches materials, look no further than one of the walls of his studio, paneled with the kind of slatboard that a Chinatown souvenir shop might use to stack metal shelves full of I ♥ New York T-shirts. When Wallace found the studio last year, it was perfect otherwise — a clean, well-lit space above Paulie Gee's pizza in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, right near his apartment. "At first I thought the wall was kind of gross," he says. But he slowly began to accept it on a purely functional level; the way things could be hung at different heights was ideal for a painter. "I thought, 'What can I do with this?' A thing like that gets planted in my head, and eventually it finds its way into the next thing I'm doing."

If this open-minded approach to materials is the foundation of Wallace's work, an interest in existential scientific questions is its overriding concept. Growing up on the East Coast, Wallace was never particularly spiritual or religious, but he always found himself reading special editions of Time about the latest theories of the universe. His formal education at RISD only proved to him that artists and scientists are more alike than not. "We're both on some sort of quest for discovery," he says. He's been fascinated in recent years by the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, which served as an inspiration point for his one-man show at Morgan Lehman Gallery earlier this year. For "Cusp," he created three new series of abstract paintings — Glean, Atlas, and Tablet — which, as their names suggest, meditate on information overload, geography, and data in different visual ways. From a purely material perspective, they use soft solids like oil, enamel, ink, graphite, PVA, Mylar, artist tape, and cut paper, stretched and bound and sorted and scored into a four-cornered ordered object. As physical objects, however, they are layered and compressed with so much visual data that they become, as Wallace puts it, "a surface that stores information."

To create the pieces in his new series, Wallace began cutting into the paintings and building them from the inside out. The collage-based paintings consist of a fastidious arrangement of hundreds of tiny pieces of paper and tape leftover from other projects. A sheet of Mylar is glued over the whole thing, leaving random-looking air bubbles in pockets over the piece. "The Mylar gives this kind of neurotic process an element of total chance," he says. "If it was just little things arranged on a surface, it would be too design-y for me." But it's also consistent with his process. "I never use anything the right way," he says. "You're definitely not supposed to wrap a canvas in Mylar."

Using materials the wrong way, however, seems to bring serendipitous results. A series of freestanding vitrines for his show at Morgan Lehmann used automotive tints and one-way mirror film to raise some plaster casts he'd made of ordinary rocks to the status of sacred object. "My work's not sarcastic in this way, but I'm using stuff that 16-year-olds put on their Civics to be macho and fancy," Wallace says. "And at the end of the day, I also think they're really beautiful. Whenever I go from painting to printmaking to sculpture, it's always about what can this medium do that that medium can't do."

For Wallace, a little discovery — like how his Mylar paintings ended up having a waxy surface texture — can result in an entire body of work. He even found a couple of 4x8s of his studio's god-awful paneling in the stairwell of the building earlier this year, and he's now begun using it to make pedestals. He even may be beginning to like it. "It's scrappy, it's industrial," he says, listing off a few adjectives he considers compliments. "And it's got this design element to it, but it's a crummy one. That balance of elegance and crum is really important to me."

Last May, he founded the East Hampton gallery Halsey McKay with the curator Hilary Schaffner. On September 1, they'll open the newest exhibition in the space, a two-person exhibition of works by David Kennedy Cutler and Elise Ferguson. For a closer glimpse inside Wallace's own world, however, read on.