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Artweek

Allegories of Control

*Jill Sylvia and Laura Paulini at Eleanor Harwood
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The pairing of Jill Sylvia and Laura Paulini at Eleanor Harwood brings together two masters of precision whose painstaking techniques turn the monotonous gesture into mesmerizing rite. Both artists use repetition to numb and entrance – Paulini’s paintbrush dabs or Sylvia’s minutely accurate X-ACTO cuts accumulate and have their effect in sheer, daunting volume. Sylvia excises hundreds of cells from individual ledger sheets, leaving just the fragile outlines of the accounting grid and turning an object of drudgery into airy lace. Paulini peppers geometric armies of tiny egg tempera dots on panels – clusters of bits, then bytes that build into charged, electric abstractions. The viewer can’t help but imagine these artists, bent over their work, enraptured by their meticulous, self-imposed task.

Sylvia and Paulini transform the mundane into the sublime. The movement repeated over and over at first seems forced, but over time (and space) takes on the trance-like redundancy of a rosary. Under Sylvia’s knife, the rigid frame of the ledger (a form inherited from her accountant father) takes on fluidity, movement and shadow. Paulini uses a chopstick as a paintbrush, elevating a kitchen utensil to artistic tool. Both artists submerge themselves in routine, offering up a meditation on what it means to show up each morning and repeat a task over a course of days, weeks or years. Constancy can breed bliss or boredom, but for these two artists the tendency is toward the ecstatic.

In this show, Sylvia continues to reinvent her process, subtly tweaking a technique that could easily fall into self-parody. In her previous work, she cut out the interior of each ledger cell to emphasize skeletal form, but in her latest “Reconstruction” series, she discards the gridlines and assembles the confetti of miniature cells that fall from her knife into mosaics of subtly hued gradation. The pale utilitarian greens and whites of ledger paper become tonal poems.

Sylvia’s “tiles” or “tesserae” are often blank, but some are still marked with the handwritten loops of letters and numbers that once hung together on the page in logical order. Now cut up and rearranged, they offer only cryptic signs and illegible chatter. Flecks of red and blue ballpoint ink juxtaposed in new combinations hover on the verge of revealing a word, wavering between sense and nonsense.

Like Sylvia, Paulini works within a grid, but one of her own construction. She lays the linear framework of her canvas – simple crosses, starbursts or zigzags -- that she then amplifies and thickens with single rows of dots that eventually grow into orderly phalanxes. While Sylvia’s work plays with the subtlest shades of pale, Paulini’s palette revels in color. Her pointillist constructions build slowly – lines of bright orange dots transition to softer yellows, jump to deep navy then fade to baby blue. At a distance, the alternating currents of color lose their pointed precision and give way to an Op Art glow reinforced by titles that hint of psychedelia – “Kaleidoscope,” “Rock Steady,” “Fire and Ice,” “Peppermint Patty,” “Dog Fur,” “Sea Urchin” and “Ziggy.”

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Sylvia and Paulini's precision thrills with its control. The mark of Sylvia's knife or Paulini's paintbrush couldn't be more exact, but as viewers, our focus wanders and our eye seeks imperfection. Sylvia eliminates the center and then the edge of each cell, but the eye yearns for what's not there. Paulini focuses the viewer's sight line on pinpricks of color, but it wanders to the spaces in between. Control may be a slippery illusion, but in Sylvia and Paulini's hands, it is at least a magnificent illusion.

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