

Less is More

An artist erases photographs to create abstract compositions of stunning beauty.

In Richard Galpin's elegant compositions, full of dazzling geometries that suggest fantastical architectural structures, the familiar becomes strange, and the strange familiar. For example, the title of his new work, *Tkts (new york)* (2004), suggests that the subject is the red-and-white booth in Times Square that sells discount Broadway tickets. But is it? Galpin's piece is dominated by an audaciously decorated edifice that seems better suited to a computer game or a sci-fi film. Yet the image is based on the nondescript booth – and no, it has not been manipulated via Photoshop; it was made by Galpin's own hand. Starting with

a photograph he snapped of the structure, Galpin carefully peeled away emulsion from its surface to “draw” angular designs and fashion an intricate interplay of lines and triangular motifs.

Galpin first came upon the idea of peeling photographs by accident in 2001, when he was cutting through a snapshot that he was planning to use as a mask to block out a surface on another artwork. He noticed how the emulsion separated from the surface, and that the image appeared to have been erased, leaving the whiteness of the paper on which the image was printed. “That I was taking away a layer from the image immediately seemed exciting”, recalls Galpin,

who as a teenager served as an apprentice to a relief woodcarver. “My background is perhaps relevant to the employment of the reductive process that I now use, in that I'm cutting away to get the result, rather than starting with a blank canvas.”

Galpin cuts with a scalpel – in fact, he uses the same brand of blades that his brother, a physician, utilizes. He prefers the medical tool because “scalpels have the sharpest and finest points, and offer the most sensitivity; they do not slice right through the paper,” he says. He made his first reductive “drawings” with photographs he had taken of southeast London,

Tkts (New York)
peeled photograph
(41 1/3 x 61 in.)
2005.
Image Courtesy of Roebling Hall, New York.





Richard Galpin
Belas Artes (Sao Paulo)
(39 1/3 x 51 1/2 in)
2004
Image Courtesy of
Galeria Leme, Sao Paulo

where his studio is located. Originally, he was not intending to manipulate these images; now, though, Galpin works with photographs that he took specifically for this purpose. “as the work developed, I began searching for more challenging structures and less familiar cities, and taking the photos with an eye to what I was going to remove / leave behind”, he says.

In his early experiments with this process, Galpin used photographs of the blocks of housing projects in his immediate environment, resulting in images such as *Wood Dene* (2001), which appears to riff on a Modernist architect’s sketch for functional, yet idealistic, designs. Think of the utopian visions of the British architectural practice Archigram, as well as the spare formal approaches of, say, Aleksandr Rodchenko and the Russian Constructivists. These days, Galpin “has begun to exhaust or be frustrated by the

potential for purely reducing things to their essential elements”, as he did in his “Reconstruction” series, which depicts scaffolding and is perhaps the most deliberately representational of his budding oeuvre. He is now pushing the process to the point where his subjects are more imagined than echoed. A clue to what Galpin inserts: the details that appear most precisely cut away from the background, counterintuitively enough, are these elements that are actually the most improvised, but, Galpin adds, are always inspired by factual rather than fictional forms, such as windows.

Galpin’s engaging and elaborate works are often the fruit of many attempts at precision: he experiments with smaller photographs before he commits to larger surfaces, practicing his signature craft until he masters the lines and geometry that serve to construct his imaginative architectural visions. “Getting the

balance between legibility and abstraction is difficult”, he admits. “Sometimes too much is peeled away, and the image falls apart. I work on plenty of photos that never make it to finished works”.

Although he could formulate his compositions on a computer or with an old-fashioned ruler and a handful of colored pens or pencils, the interaction with the photographs he so carefully manipulates is worth the time and risk involved. “On a purely material level, the gloss of the photographic fragments against the rough white of the paper is still really physically seductive for me”, Galpin says. “There is a certain pleasure in the making of these works that I think is important.”

Galpin’s works will be included in a group exhibition at New York’s Roebing Hall in April. A solo exhibition is planned at the same venue for later in 2005.