



proximity

curated by robin hill

matt ferranto and joe stauber
catherine murphy
theodora varnay jones
joe amhrein
jack risley
susanna heller
jane dickson
caroline cox
susanna coffey
robin hill

essay by hearme pardee

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Proximity is an urban condition: we're constantly crowded together with people we don't know. Proximity on this scale generates fantasies of intimacy or community. It makes such relationships possible, but doesn't preclude isolation, or fear. There can be dangerous proximity or secret proximity - Jane Dickson, for example, has depicted her neighbors peeking from behind lowered blinds. Her images evoke that uneasy no-man's land between public and private space; painted on carpet samples or astroturf, they invade our visual sensibility with an uncanny material presence. Dickson probes the unease of proximity, for at times we merely endure it.

The unexpected tactile appeal of Dickson's images reminds us that visual objects normally keep their distance; vision can be neutral, like proximity, detached from its object. The urban world, the realm of the spectacle, is essentially a world of vision. If it's a world in which we often feel confined, it also provides the occasional panoramic vista, which assures us of the vast and significant enterprise in which we're engaged. Such vastness strains the limits of perception and inspires fantasies of power; removed from proximity, we lose our sense of human scale.

Caroline Cox explores this conflict of disproportionate scales in her playfully titled "Small Town", which could, as she claims, be either a city or a cell. It conjures up the concentrated complexity of urban life in its juxtaposition of disparate objects and materials – mechanical, commercial, optical, organic, ordered and disordered. The teeming proximity of all these things evokes the layering of urban experience, while the piece as a whole tries to circumscribe and master it. "Small Town" is a miniature model that reassures us of some measure of control, even as it bewilders and fascinates us with its endless play of relationships.

Like models, maps extend the range of our vision and of our dominion over space. Mail artists Matt Ferranto and Joe Stauber make playful use of this technique of control by mapping the familiar territory of one neighborhood onto another, a sort of virtual colonization. Their particular concern is to reinforce connections across great distance – to restore proximity and counter fears of isolation. Ferranto and Stauber, like Cox, engage in something akin to children's games in response to the urban situation – like Freud's young patient, Little Hans, who made a toy appear and disappear so as to master fears of his mother's departure.

Baudelaire extolls the heroism of the modern artist adrift in the crowded city. Like him, Robin

Hill and Jack Risley are inspired by unexpected physical encounters. There is absurd humor to Risley's juxtaposition of industrial artifacts. He engineers improbable constructions, hoisted high above our normal visual context, conveying a sense of the logistical functions of modern life gone awry. Hill's objects and installations record the poetry of random epiphanies. A supply of cotton batting discovered in an abandoned warehouse, for example, provides unexpected images of abundance and comfort. Like athletes attuned to the layers and shifting contexts of urban life, Hill and Risley prepare us to cope with its shocks. That these efforts now seem more poignant than playful, in light of recent events, underscores our loss of familiar urban landscapes, both physical and social, and the consequent urgency with which proximity must be renegotiated.

Presence to oneself is the most basic proximity, and it's also a sort of blindness. To merge with the object of vision is to lose it from view. Susanna Coffey deals with this problem of distance through a play of mirrors, observing herself as she changes through time and in the various guises of her self. Moral tradition warns of dangers in such self-absorption, of narcissism on the one hand and theatrical illusion on the other. But Coffey confronts these fantasies with ironic frankness; the formal simplicity of her self-confrontation lends her ongoing game

deeper resonance, as if providing a way to reconcile herself to life's limitations. This is a task Catherine Murphy explores more directly: her limits are self-imposed. In "Against the Light", she inserts herself into the landscape, blocking the view but enforcing attention to the details of her hand. Murphy severely prunes her visual realm, recording ephemeral encounters with mundane objects that claim her attention. She thus defines herself in terms of proximity, and endows her sober realism with lyrical undercurrents.

By painting, Coffey and Murphy seem to internalize objects, to reassure us of their enduring presence. Theodora Varnay Jones, on the other hand, makes constructions that lend distance itself a tangible form. Her juxtapositions of transparent or translucent materials trap light, and provide rich surface textures, which slow perception and appeal to memories of touch or immersion, humanizing their abstraction. Joe Amrhein dramatizes distance in a more literal way. His layered panes of glass create a paradoxical condition of pure transparency, or invisibility; in his art, objects and intervening distances vanish – or, as he would have it, are replaced with concepts and embodied in words, which he paints on the glass so as to render it visible.

In their efforts to visualize the emptiness of distance, Jones and Amrhein remind us that the abstract space of physics is also a human construct - that we, in our fascination with the ideal, have fashioned a scientific universe, purified of all traces of human sympathy. This is also another powerful model of mastery, one that abandons human distance in favor of the celestial and microscopic. It's important to return it to the context of human longing.

In her confrontation with space on a superhuman scale, Susanna Heller addresses these ultimate questions of limits. Her convulsive cityscapes from the World Trade Center recall Christ's struggle with the Devil as well as the wrenching conflicts now indelibly associated with the towers. But if her images celebrate power, it is not that of capitalist technology but rather of her own poetic urge to see beyond material things. She finds the urban "mysteriously figurative". Thrown back on ourselves by recent events, we can see in this metaphor an image of the way proximity restores a human context for distant views – of the way art can bring what seems so distant back within arm's reach.

Hearne Pardee

joe stauber and matt ferranto

Our studios are a little north of Coney Island and on the Upper West Side, respectively. In September ash fell on our neighborhoods for three days. We couldn't bring ourselves to remove the dust from our belongings, as if this action would somehow wash away the answer to a nasty riddle we hadn't been present to hear. So what is the proper distance to judge action? What unit of measurement, what numbers and marks can we tally up to come to some relative enlightenment? At a loss, we started counting flags. Not because we expected to find meaning in their numbers, but perhaps more as a prayer, the flags being the pluralistic American prayer beads for our godless meditations. As practicing mail artists we are interested in extending the distances over which the pieces travel. In many ways it is this passage, the traversing of time and space, that defines our proximity to our audience.



"Daily Mail", 2000
mixed media, dimensions variable

catherine murphy

My paintings are not about one moment of seeing. My paintings are about time passing. Time is depicted in a very different way than most people even think about time- which is cinematically, and through a camera's eye. You can't see in one minute what a painting depicts. You'd have to stand there and say, 'Oh, there's light on the hand. and there's the light on the leaves. Oh, yes, I see that shadow, but...hey!' All those things happen, and I let them happen in the painting. Conceptually, the reason I make these paintings is that I want things to slow down. Time, that's the subject of almost all painting.

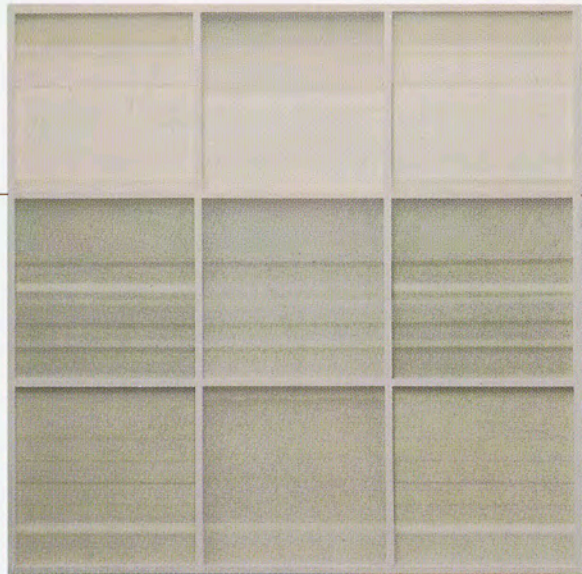
from an interview with Francine Prose, 26 Bomb Magazine, 1995



"Backlit", 1999
oil on canvas, 20" x 24"
courtesy Lennon-Weinberg, Inc.

theodora varnay jones

The principal concern in my abstract works is the relationship between the structural layers of one picture plane and another, and the space that they share. While the structural units have equal importance, there are subtle differences in shape, texture and tonality. It is in this quality of difference where the underlying theme of coexistence resides. The impact of our collective experience of recent events has created a moment of closeness, a sense of diminishing distance. The meaning of the words "here and there" have shifted. This shift plays an important role in my work of two perpendicular structures. Their relevance can only be understood in their relation to each other.



"Transparency #5", 2001
paper, pencil, pigments, acrylic sheet, wood, 36" x 36" x 1.5"
courtesy of Don Soker Gallery

joe amhrein

Robert Smithson said, "One must remember that writing on art replaces presence with absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing." Some of the text I compose is not meant to be read but is used, rather, as a fragmented artifact. My background as a sign painter allows me to use its methods to give language scale and vitality. The materials I paint on, glass and vellum, give me the opportunity to develop metaphorical associations with text — associations of density, fracturing, memory, shadows, and ephemera.



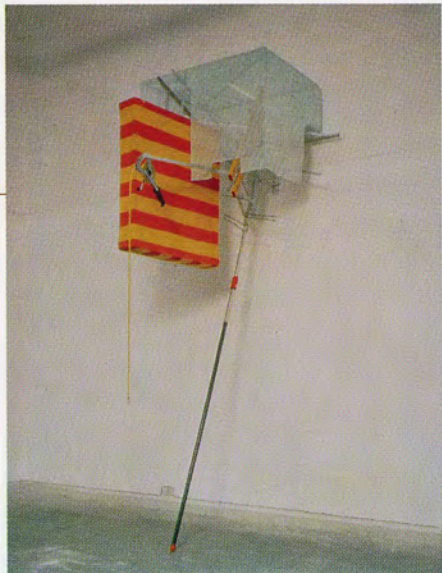
"Source," 2001
gold leaf & enamel on vellum, with linen tape, 24" x 36"

jack risley

24 Alternate titles for the 'Proximity' piece:

Dusted
Close Call
Statue of Limitations
For The Second Time I'm Telling You
Stumped
Close, But No Cigar
Starting From Scratch
You Should Have Known
Twice Removed
A Really, Really Long Stick
Top Down, Bottom Up
The Accelerator and Brake Combo

Billboard Fricassee
Vertical Slouch
Parking Quandary
Try Not To Notice
I'll Tell You Later
Flat Out
Delivery System
First in Line, Last to Know
Let's Synchronize our Watches
Is That What You were Thinking
Big Minute
Exclamation Point



"A Really Long Pole", 1999
mixed media, dimensions variable
courtesy of Postmasters Gallery

susanna heller

Visually, the World Trade Centers were, for me, magnets, anchors, beacons, rudders. I am now lopsided, adrift, disoriented, lost. As an artist who worked from a studio on the 91st floor, for a time all was measured through my proximity to them. The urban is mysteriously figurative. Mysterious because it provides only riddle-like answers: its "truth" is carried, not located. To paint that travelling experience is my aim. I walk the city to understand the substance of this "truth". Walking is a space of enunciation. For me, walking and painting are both about the 'getting there', and not the 'having arrived'.



"Below World Trade Center with Baseball Field", 2000
oil on canvas, 4" x 6"

jane dickson

My work centers on the psychological and physical space between things; the space between people, the space between light and darkness, between human and concrete, between life and death.



"Taco Giant", 2001
oilstick on linen, 24" x 42"

caroline cox

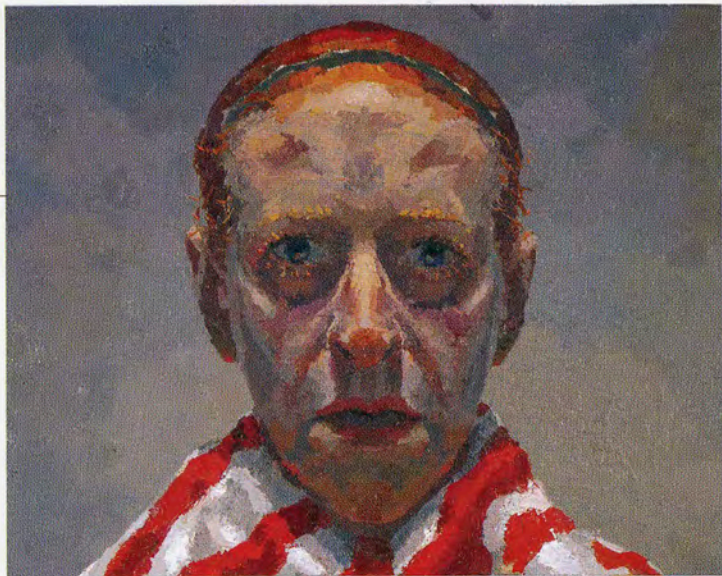
The physical layers of my work yield multiple readings. A range of found objects, from ring caps to glass beakers, are mixed with optical devices such as lenses and reflectors. Through their juxtaposition and recontextualization, unpredictable associations are formed and transformed. Depending on their physical location, these mutated objects are alternately revealed or concealed to echo the mutability of perception.



"Small Town" (detail), 2001
mixed media, 30" x 72" x 60"

susanna coffey

The mirror is near to me as I paint the reflection it displays. I pay close attention as the image of my head and its surroundings constellate into shapes, lines, colors. Over weeks, months, and years I look and try to match the paint on the canvas with those abstractions. It is a kind of failure because I never make the match, the head that eventually appears on the surface is far from depicting its double. I attempt to copy, but the closer I look the more the image unfolds as itself. The resolved painting is both near and far from its source. My self portraits often resemble other paintings, or sculptures, or the likenesses of other men and women. I am as near to these as I am to my image in the mirror. When I am painting I am considering the possibility that one can disappear to oneself, can reconfigure, can be both lost and found.



"Self Portrait (Flag)", 2001
oil on panel, 10" x 8"
courtesy, Tibor de Nagy Gallery, photo by Adam Reich

robin hill

My work assumes many forms. Underlying all of these forms is a response to matter and phenomena in my immediate vicinity: the cotton batting factory two blocks away, an airborne shopping bag drifting into view as I pause at a red light, the flotsam and jetsam of styrofoam debris trapped against the wall of a nearby dam. Making art from these wayward materials speaks about a kind of eccentric recycling, and pulls a thread through otherwise disconnected worlds. What does the airborne bag have to do with me? Nothing and everything. My proximity to these bounties of coincidental beauty is what determines the ingredients of a project. In many ways, what I see already is art. I am merely bringing it to the attention of others.

The idea for an exhibition entitled "proximity" came to me almost as a complete thought following the events of September 11. The parallel between our heightened awareness of geographical proximity (and its deceptions), and the ever present awareness all artists have of proximity as a compositional and theoretical constraint seemed deserving of an exploration of this kind. As life informs art, so does art inform life.



"Lambs", 2001
cotton batting and wood, 39" X 20" X 7"
courtesy of Lennon-Weinberg, Inc.

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