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Figure Is to Background as Representation Is to Model:
Neil Gall's 'Cut-Outs, Offcuts and Holes'
by Kate Thorpe on May 30, 2015



Neil Gall, "Yellow (Poussin)" (2014), oil on linen, 29.13 x 24.41 inches (all images courtesy of the artist and David Nolan Gallery)

In Neil Gall's newest paintings, which are currently being exhibited at David Nolan (April 30 – June 13, 2015), there is a powerfully coercive interplay between figure and background that veers between the unstable and the terrifying. Uneven, jagged holes, cut out of tape-wrapped canvases, become resting places for large, perfectly white, almost moon-like spheres (as in the all-white "Kitchen (Velasquez)," 2015). Sometimes the orbs are not perfectly round but punched or crunched. It is only on second glance that these prove to be not sculptures but paintings, examples of dazzlingly skillful photorealism.

Gall paints and draws from enlarged photographs of sculpture-like models, with such accuracy that it feels like an exercise of physical force to squeeze their robust three-dimensionality onto a two-dimensional plane. His compelling, uncanny representations of composed detritus materials — mainly Ping-Pong balls and colored tape, but also string, tinfoil, and strands of hot glue — seem to strain, push, or pop out from their surfaces.



Installation view of "Neil Gall: Cut-Outs, Offcuts and Holes" (2015) at the David Nolan Gallery, New York

Gall was born in 1967 in Scotland and now lives in London, and this marks his third show at David Nolan. Even as his work requires masterful techniques, he plays with a particularly dynamic form of bricolage, which lends his pieces the sense of discovery found in a child's arts-and-crafts project. He wraps and layers colored tape around Ping-Pong balls — and other everyday materials from his studio — to create his models. He then precisely lights these off-kilter, almost haphazard sculptures, full of bulges, jagged edges, and angular, misshapen circular cut-outs, and photographs them. His meticulous paintings and drawings of these objects use the photograph as a reference, rather than the original model.



Neil Gall, "Eye" (2015), oil on linen, 36.22 x 29.33 inches

Gall uses materials of assembly and repair (tape, glue, plastic wrap, tinfoil), but also of play. They bear no particular cultural or allegorical meaning. All the more strange and even humorous, then, are the anthropomorphic associations of his work, as when a white, cycloptic sphere seems to stare out from a background of yellow tape in the painting "Eye" (2015). Yet the personification never fully is complete: the materials remain singular enough that one never forgets the reality of colored tape and white balls.

Gall's previous work explored monstrous, creature-like models of taped-together Ping-Pong balls, often posed against plain backgrounds, which called to mind the work of 17th-century painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, as well as the mannequins in the

Metaphysical paintings of de Giorige Chirico, the Surrealist landscapes of Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy, and the biomorphic dolls of Hans Bellmer, and suggested various sexualized scenarios of bondage.

The feeling of bondage in Gall's work continues in this show, but encompasses the background as well as the figure, and in fact confuses and entangles the two. The drawing "Ghost" (2015), its edges pulled and torqued, approximates a diamond. The tape performs two roles: as a background, it subsumes the figures within it (the white orbs); as part of a three-dimensional model, it also acts as the dominant figure in the composition.



Neil Gall, "Allegory (Bronzino)" (2014), oil on linen, 29.92 x 24.41 inches

Gall gestures toward a wide array of painters, from Bronzino to Nicolas Poussin to Barnett Newman, and his tape and ping-pong ball models lend a touch of silliness to a painterly tradition that used sculptural maquettes as preparatory tools. In “Allegory (Bronzino)” (2014), a “solid” plane of tape echoes the blue background of Bronzino’s “An Allegory with Venus and Cupid” (ca.1545), and white balls, some barely visible within the blue tape, are analogous to Bronzino’s composition, where submerged heads and hands eerily emerge from varying depths of the background, bodies twisting and arms reaching, with no one place for the viewer’s eye to rest. In Gall’s composition, the blue material actively stretches, taking the place of the fingers and hands: the background reaches into the figure, and the figure is partially subsumed into background.



Neil Gall, “Kitchen (Velázquez)” (2015), oil on linen, 29.13 x 23.82 inches

That these depths and shadows emerge from feats of photorealism lends them a seriousness as well as a strange ambiguity.

In a recent interview with Amy E. Brown in *Curating the Contemporary (CtC)*, Gall describes his creation of models as playful and childish, while his painting and drawing feel more like the “work” of an “adult.” Indeed, the technique of framing these bound compositions into the secondary frame of the two-dimensional canvas or paper surface gives them a weight, a “substantial” quality (a word that Gall mulls over in his interview). The images appear to bulge and press outward, but not towards a separate allegorical meaning, as in some of the metaphorically-resonant images from Gall’s earlier work – “Wildflower” (2008) includes images of flowers, while “Stitch in Time” (2008) includes trees, and “Consider Her Ways” (2007) includes images of the facade of a house, clouds, and grass. Rather, they seem to seek escape from the forces of representation itself.

Yet one also feels for the obsessive impulse evident in the tape-become-background: after all, isn’t tape used to hold things together that threaten to fall apart? What structure threatens to collapse? These painted sculptures evoke messy, haphazard, hurried, desperate taping jobs on well-worn boxes. In “Yellow (Poussin),” trails from a glue gun hang. The horizontal yellow tape makes it all the way across, but vertical pieces (gesturing at a grid) stretch across the top half and end in the middle. In most of the gaps left by the yellow tape where Ping-Pong balls push outward, there is white tape, and beneath that, bits of pink and blue and a tiny hint of red, brown and, in the upper left quadrant, a black gap. The textures and depths of these compositions defamiliarise the camera’s perspective, exchanging the ordered, known, and mathematical for another kind of depth — the lost or neglected, depthless space of a shadow that falls on an imaginary surface.



Neil Gall, "Ghost" (2015), colored pencil on paper, 51.97 x 39.96 inches

The soft, exposed pencil lines of Gall's drawings — displayed at the back of the gallery and in a small adjoining room — reveal immediately their two-dimensional status and offer greater nuance in terms of layers and colors than his paintings. Colored pencil lines overlap in crosshatched grids; light reflects from the translucent plastic wrapping; the edges gradually fade into a purple haze created by gridded red and blue pencil lines. Up close, these works seem perhaps more attuned to the details and intricacies of the materials dangling and overlapping in uneven borders. A few strands of string or yarn wind in curlicues. Whereas brushstrokes are not visible in Gall's paintings, here pencil lines are apparent, creating a feeling of intimacy with the work as a crafted thing. The figure blends into its background, and the composition merges into the white paper

surface. The represented folds in the drawn object echo the actual folds of the material paper.

What Gille Deleuze calls an Exogamous force in his 1988 book, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, is here in full display: we see an outward system (strips of tape) acting on another system (a rectangular frame, Ping-Pong balls) to form and shape it. Half-deflated balls reveal the impact of this external force. Or is this an endogamous system — of folds revealing other folds, existing coherently as a structure and form in itself? Is this background a living landscape, full of forces intrinsic to it?



Neil Gall, "Sky Hole" (2015), oil on linen, 18.5 x 14.76 inches

Gall's work seems to model, even literalize, such ambiguities of figure and background. If one struggles to define and separate the two, then the white balls, as they seem to pull away from the taped bindings, physicalize this very struggle. Perhaps Gall's paintings and drawings do not allegorize contradictions of figuration so much as illustrate and physicalize them. Figure battles against background and background against figure in a finely and precisely-depicted morass of contradictions. Indeed, so skillfully does Gall paint and draw that the illusion of three-dimensionality vies against the viewer's certainty of the painting's flat surface. Viewing these works incites an internal war between illusion and materiality where the two-dimensional illusion *is* the tactile reality and the three-dimensional material model is illusory. These pieces confront us with the tensions latent in mimetic representation and in the boundaries between painting, sculpture and photography, in that they put all three mediums fully into action. Gall's newest work also refuses to let the viewer rest as a mere spectator or voyeur: it extends beyond the imagery's borderline, subsuming and entwining the viewer in its strong, sticky embrace.

Neil Gall *continues at David Nolan Gallery (527 West 29th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 13.*