

Forest for the Trees

DAVID MEYER





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June 6 - August 1, 2008

Leedy-Voulikos Art Center

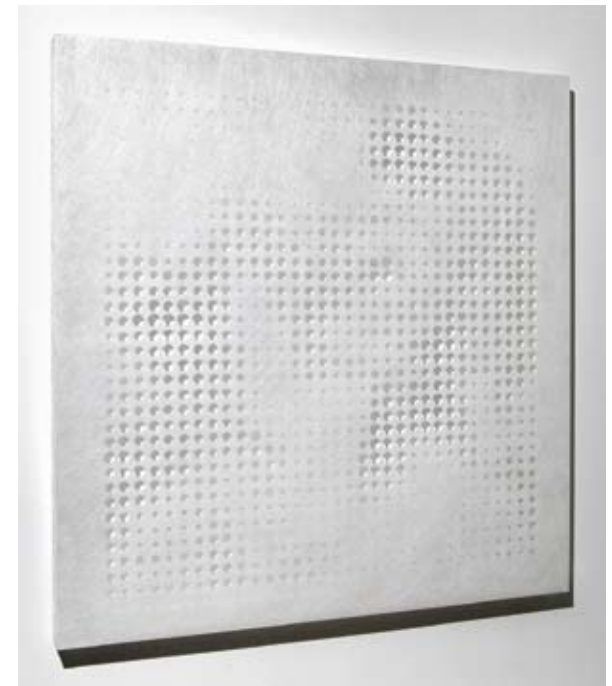
Meeting of the Minds: a missed appointment

Elizabeth Grady

The way we interpret what is seen or said depends heavily on prior experience, on the paradigms we have learned, our competency in the language being spoken, the level of our hearing ability and sight, and a host of other factors. To complicate matters, we as individuals might easily perceive something differently now than we would have done in the past, making even our own conclusions ultimately unreliable. Communication thus becomes a challenge as we try to convey the meaning we have constructed from the data of sensory input. We in turn struggle to understand others' interpretations of what might seem like the same data, but it is unavoidably collected using a different apparatus, a different body: the collection equipment might seem the same, but each set is calibrated differently. David Meyer's work uses both high drama and humor to explore the slips of the tongue and of the mind that betray our inadequacies even as we try to participate in a common discourse.

The smallest works in David Meyer's one-person exhibition at the Leedy-Voukos Art Center in Kansas City approach this conundrum in the most lighthearted way. The *Misnomers* series is made up of modestly scaled square panels of pressed synthetic fabric stretched over thin frames and punctured at regular intervals in a grid pattern with differently sized, perfectly circular holes. Their titles: *Piglet*, *Gates of Hell*, and *Monkey Fight*, to name three, call to mind a host of disparate and seemingly unrelated mental images, leaving us to puzzle over what the possible connection might be. Are we witness to some absurdist joke? Or is there a hidden intellectual mechanism at work here? They're clearly not what their titles suggest. Only the series title offers a clue.

The white color of the fabric from which the works are cut, as well as its swirling pattern of pressed fibers, calls to mind nothing so much as the patterns of clouds. The perforations, differing in size, allow light through the membrane to different degrees, forming a shadow pattern on the wall behind each work. Just as the clouds sometimes appear to take on familiar forms - say, an elephant or a cat - one is tempted to create meaning from the *Misnomers'* apparent randomness. And like finding pictures in the clouds, each viewer is likely to see something new. Cleverly, the artist has decided not to title the works himself. Instead, he asks others to come up with names. The names listed above were arrived at by someone seeing each piece for the first time, and giving her impression of the image represented. The titles take on the power of suggestion as one tries to find the images they describe - often in vain. You look for something you think is there, but don't completely believe is there. Doubt and uncertainty intrude, as you wonder if there has been some kind of miscommunication. You might think: "Is this really the one with the piglet? Or did Meyer get them mixed up?" In trying to untangle this knot we have recourse only to our own experiences, finishing the artist's thoughts in our minds as close friends might finish one another's sentences. We may



Monkey Fight, *Misnomers* series
Synthetic fabric, wood
37 x 37 x 2 in. (94 x 94 x 5 cm)
2008

compare notes with other viewers, and through dialogue try to arrive at some sort of consensus opinion of what hangs before us. In this way, a degree of intimacy is achieved, and the viewing experience becomes a game. Whether we are the players or are being played is up to us to determine.

The larger perforated synthetic material piece, *Scrutinizing the Clouds*, is suspended from a bar at the top, so it flutters lightly against the sky-blue wall behind it. Aside from the title, the addition of the colored wall and the lack of four-sided stretcher (and consequent movement of the piece due to air currents) is quite suggestive, and the nature reference is unmistakable. There is a stronger sense of depth here, because of the value contrast between the white fabric and the blue wall, resulting in a more apparent irregularity of the fabric's density, which also suggests the layering of cloud formations. Here we are invited to see our own shapes, as the positive and negative shapes created by the concentrations of different-sized perforations

(all still in a perfectly regular grid). The conflation of the uncertainty of the depth of space, the invitation to “see things” in the work and the piece’s extreme and careful regularity make it seem like a grand metaphor for the creation of meaning from abstraction. The work calls to mind typesetting, where the rhythm of lower and upper case letters, sentence and paragraph spacing, and punctuation at first form irregular but somehow logical patterns on the surface of the paper or a computer screen, until one learns to read and make meaning. Here, we are also challenged to interpret what we see, but are far less likely to be in agreement with the person standing next to us in determining its significance. Like a Rorschach test, an individual’s response acts like a barometer for his or her own psyche. In this way, *Scrutinizing the Clouds* becomes an analogy for the tenacity and inadequacy of language. After all, it is through speech that we try to communicate what we see, and decide on whether our observations are shared by others or rejected.

In reality, the perforations of the work have their source somewhere in between the patterns of typeset lettering – regular marks on a surface – and pure image. They are the tiny dots that make up the half-tone grid of printed photographs, like those found in newspapers. Meyer uses a heavily mediated process of conveying an image, whereby a photograph is blown up to a very large scale, its pigment dots recorded on fabric, then cut out. Further, a similar process is used to create paper screens for plain white baking flour, which is poured and sifted through it onto the floor to replicate the original flat image in three-dimensional form. The title of the wall piece *Scrutinizing the Clouds* implies not only the play of imagination, but research and analysis - the scrutiny of observation, in which bits of information are connected in such a way that a concept, idea, or image is created. As in a scientific experiment, patterns are recognized, documented, and charted for future use. In this way the work alludes to such mnemonic devices as star charts of constellations, where imaginative explorations and visualizations of the forms in the sky become useful tricks for remembering their locations and tracking their movements.

The mediated process Meyer uses to transform photographic images into sculptures is indicated by his title for the installation of several floor-based flour pieces, *Separated by Sight*. The works appear at first to be clouds drifting across a concrete sky, or perhaps islands adrift. As one navigates among them, imagining what their bumpy white forms might be, there is an epiphany: the forms are people. In profile, walking, standing, in as many positions as you care to imagine, these soulless sleepers float together across the floor, but never connect. Their anonymous forms are like shadows - already at one remove from the people who cast them, and inextricably connected “With yet” separate from the personalities of their makers. The surfaces of the sculptures are marked by the same grids as the perforated fabric of course, but instead of holes here we have tiny, perfect, regular mounds that comprise the forms like a mosaic. Light has been translated into image, and then into mass as flour. The scientific law of the conservation of energy has been observed. Or has it? The gorgeously replicated pattern of the grid of the image, rendered in pure and perfect white, seems to embody the notion of mass in some sort of pristine state, but the slightest breath of air, or the nudge of a clumsy toe, is all it takes to disturb these delicate sculptures. We think we know



Scrutinizing the Clouds
Synthetic fabric, blue wall, steel
6 ft. x 20 ft. x 7 in. (183 x 610 x 18 cm)
2008



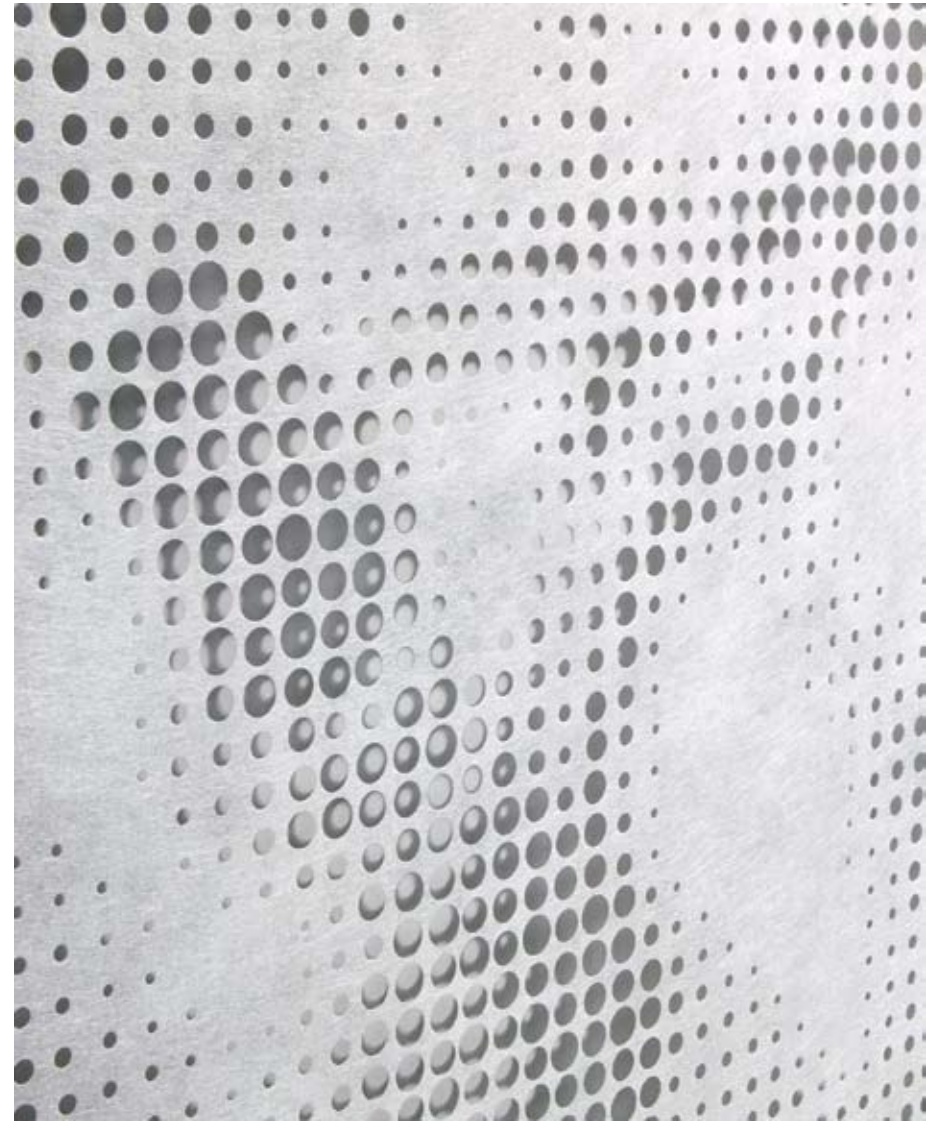
Gates of Hell, Misnomers series
Synthetic fabric, wood
52 x 43 x 2 in. (132 x 109 x 5 cm)
2008

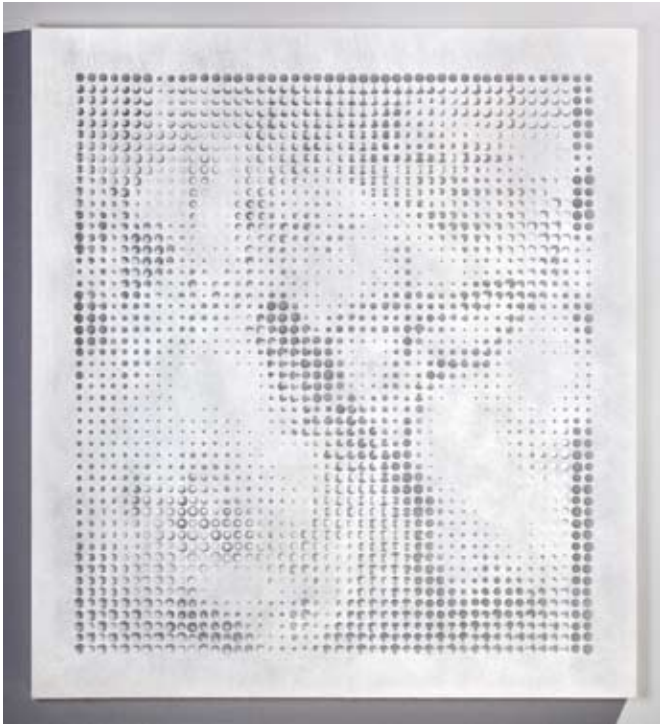
what we're looking at, but it can transform in an instant. The certainty of knowledge is always based on assumptions - like the assumptions that the forms we see are solid and real - but the moment our assumptions are challenged, the paradigm is disturbed and meaning shifts. The tension between control and its loss is as much a theme here as the instability of communicating a common understanding.

The challenge of communication is thematized rather differently in *Subject of Experience*, a large installation of many metal tripods of slightly varying heights, generally around shoulder level, on which are mounted frames that each hold a single sheet of gold leaf wafting gently on the air currents generated by passing visitors. At the center, on larger stands, we find ten mirrors arranged facing toward the center of a circle, with their reverse sides painted black. Within the circle roughly at eye level hangs a grouping of eleven glass heads, suspended in a cluster upside down from wires bound together and hung from a single eye hook in the ceiling. The heads, even empty as they are, suggest the thought process, but their inversion seems to imply frustration or futility, as though their thoughts are muddled, or they are unable to adequately convey them. There is a tension in the heads all touching that seems to invoke the old saying, "banging your head against the wall." The choice of glass as a material reinforces the wince factor: both hard and fragile, each head is just as likely to cause injury to another as to be broken itself in any confrontation. The reference to human psychology, already tempting simply because heads are involved, is strengthened by the physical confrontation of all the heads.

The figures, lacking bodies, are "stuck in their heads," seeing mostly their own reflections in the mirrored ring, and the viewer is shut out; interaction with the piece and with the heads is partially prohibited. The heads exist in an abstract visual space that is physically inaccessible, rendering the viewer a mere observer. The heads alone imply thought, but the mirrored replication of heads and their images refine this idea to indicate perception. Their perception of the world around them is severely skewed, as their own images are all they really see. All is filtered through their own perception, and appears as they imagine it. The space they perceive is also distorted by repetition, which serves as a metaphor for the repeated iteration of their own thoughts. The repetition of views, and the reflectiveness of the gold leaf tripods throughout the room are very disorienting, and threaten to draw the viewer into the maze of thought in which the heads are already ensnared. We are faced with the basic condition of the human mind, which is the struggle between its interiority and the need to react and interact with others and the world in order to survive. Both exist simultaneously, but it is nearly impossible to indulge in an interior monologue and an external dialogue at once. As in Heisenberg's uncertainty principle (a principle of quantum physics which states that the momentum and position of a particle cannot both be known at once, as the act of observation changes the particle), we vacillate between observations of our own thoughts and our struggle to convey them.

Whether poking fun at our misinterpretations and communication gaffes as in the *Misnomers*, or exploring the darker side of our struggle to understand and be understood as in *Subject of Experience*, David Meyer's thought-provoking work invites an examination of the mysterious mechanism that connects human thought and interchange.





Piglet, Misnomers series
Synthetic fabric, wood
47 x 43 x 2 in. (119 x 109 x 5 cm)
2008



Separated by Sight (detail)
Flour
(approx.) 3 in. x 20 ft. x 50 ft. (8 x 610 x 1524 cm)
2008



Subject of Experience
Steel, gold leaf foil, mirror, cord, cast glass
(approx.) 15 x 20 x 94 ft.. (457 x 610 x 2865 cm)
2001









Scrutinizing the Clouds
Synthetic fabric, blue wall, steel
6 ft. x 20 ft. x 7 in. (183 x 610 x 18 cm)
2008





Separated by Sight

Flour

(approx.) 3 in. x 20 ft. x 50 ft. (8 x 610 x 1524 cm)

2008



Study detail, Flour, 2002
9 x 28 x 28 in. (23 x 71 x 71 cm)

Touch Skin Love Beauty Fade Away . . .

Roberta Lord

“Beauty, I intoned, was the agency that caused pleasure in the beholder . . .”

Dave Hickey

When I think about David Meyer’s work I realize that not only do our senses contribute unevenly across our perceptual range but that they’re not all that distinct and there aren’t really five. Touch is the real sense, arguably the one and only, and vision, hearing, smell, and taste are its subsidiaries. The electromagnetic radiation that is visible light touches 100 billion light-sensing cells in our neural network; sound vibrations touch our eardrums; the molecules that carry taste and smell touch the transducers that convert chemical signals into neural messages.

I think about this because Meyer’s works have skin, like we do, and their skin speaks to our skin. This visceral conversation is seductive, alarming, or, more often, an unnerving combination of the two. Meyer draws otherwise invisible information to his works’ surfaces, and whether this information is revealed by teeming microbial growth or pristine white flour, we feel it in our bodies before we have a chance to process it through our brains.

Meyer shares the dyslexia common among those whose pursuits require heightened spatial awareness – architecture, engineering, sculpture – and through his lens a page of text is first an array of filigree hovering over a pale void. It’s only when he tightens the screws on the perception he’s been taught to exercise instead of the one he really experiences that the dynamic fretwork reluctantly resolves itself into letters and words that settle down on the two-dimensional page and let themselves be read as only code for something else.

Because Meyer’s initial perception of words is to their material format – neural connections in the brain, webs of graphite or ink on paper, strings of binary digits stored on a computer chip – he is less vulnerable to the Platonic (and UFO enthusiast’s) insistence that The Truth is Out There: that truth is a sanctified realm of knowledge assembled somewhere beyond mortal physiognomy. Meyer is a sculptor and he can see that much of what we call truth is itself a sculpture – constructed piece by piece from exchanged electrochemical signals, figures contrasted against fields, zeroes set in opposition to ones – and the more compelling the sculpture, the more inclined we are to ignore what it’s constructed of, or even that it’s constructed at all, and to perceive it as a disembodied message from an immortal, immaterial consciousness.

He explored the materiality and mortality of accepted knowledge in a number of works between 1998 and 2003. In *Patterns of Probability* (1999), he selected several dozen pages

from a hymnal and a civics book and overlaid the pages with black and white images of insects, snakes, constellations, and subatomic architecture. He coated each book page with a gelatinous substance and sealed the coated pages between two sheets of glass. He mounted the composite plates at varying heights on delicate steel tripods so the collective formed an uneven topography. Microorganisms quickly rooted themselves on the pages and revealed in disturbing blotches and breathtakingly brilliant pools of color the life that was otherwise invisible in the gallery atmosphere.

In *Affective Aspects of Consciousness* (2000), he set four venerable old books – a mythology, a history, a book linking anatomy to consciousness, and a law reference – on the lawn of the Delaware Museum of Art and covered each with a glass cover that bore a single word – SYMPATHY, APATHY, CONSCIENCE, and COMPROMISE. The mini-greenhouses trapped moisture and fostered microbial growth that rapidly covered the books’ pages with its own version of the facts of life.

Meyer shifted his focus from the illusion of immortality carried by text to the illusion of immortality carried by sculpture itself in *Plausible Certainty* (2002). The work was a ring of eleven hexagons, each about seven inches high and 13 inches across. From a few feet away the hexagons looked like carved slabs of white marble but they were in fact made of tightly compressed flour on clear acrylic bases. Individual words pressed into the top of each hexagon spelled out the sentence: YOU ARE PART OF THE SYSTEM YOU ARE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND.

In *Affect or Effect* (2003), white flour compressed on a white pedestal bore an embossed pattern of concentric circles. Because the flour is so fine, the surface appeared fluid and malleable, as though the concentric circles were waves spreading away from a single drop in a viscous liquid. Two years later, in *Detach* (2005), he pressed an array of semi-spherical indentations into the surface of a similar work. The cavities were of varying diameters and depth and the overall pattern looked like inverse Braille or a microcircuit diagram.

If left untouched, the blocks of flour fissured as the moisture trapped during compression evaporated. Rarely, however, were the pieces left untouched. The desire to touch them, presumably to know for sure what they were made of, trumped gallery decorum: visitors routinely left with guilty looks on their faces and streaks of flour on their clothes.

Response to the defiled books and the compressed flour is equal in level of engagement – we can't look away – but opposite in impact – disgust vs. desire. We're afraid to be touched by the life that's parasitizing the books but it's hard to keep our hands off the flour. It's interesting that the flour pieces so resemble marble, which for the early Greeks was the earthbound equivalent to the Platonic truth represented by the disintegrating books. Marble's soft translucence is as close to flesh as stone can be, yet we can imagine it's microbe-free (not true) and seemingly immortal.

In his most recent work, Meyer sifts flour to form shapes on the floor. He makes stencils from enlarged halftone images, punching holes through the halftone dots, and then incorporates the stencils into boxes he uses as sifters. The tiny powdery peaks that result from this painstaking process – dozens to thousands depending on the scale of the sifted form – vary in size based on the dot diameter of the original image, and, as is the case in a halftone print, this size differential lends tonality to the flour form. Much of the beauty in these pieces is in their vulnerability; our bodies recognize that any movement in the space, even our breath, puts the works in peril.

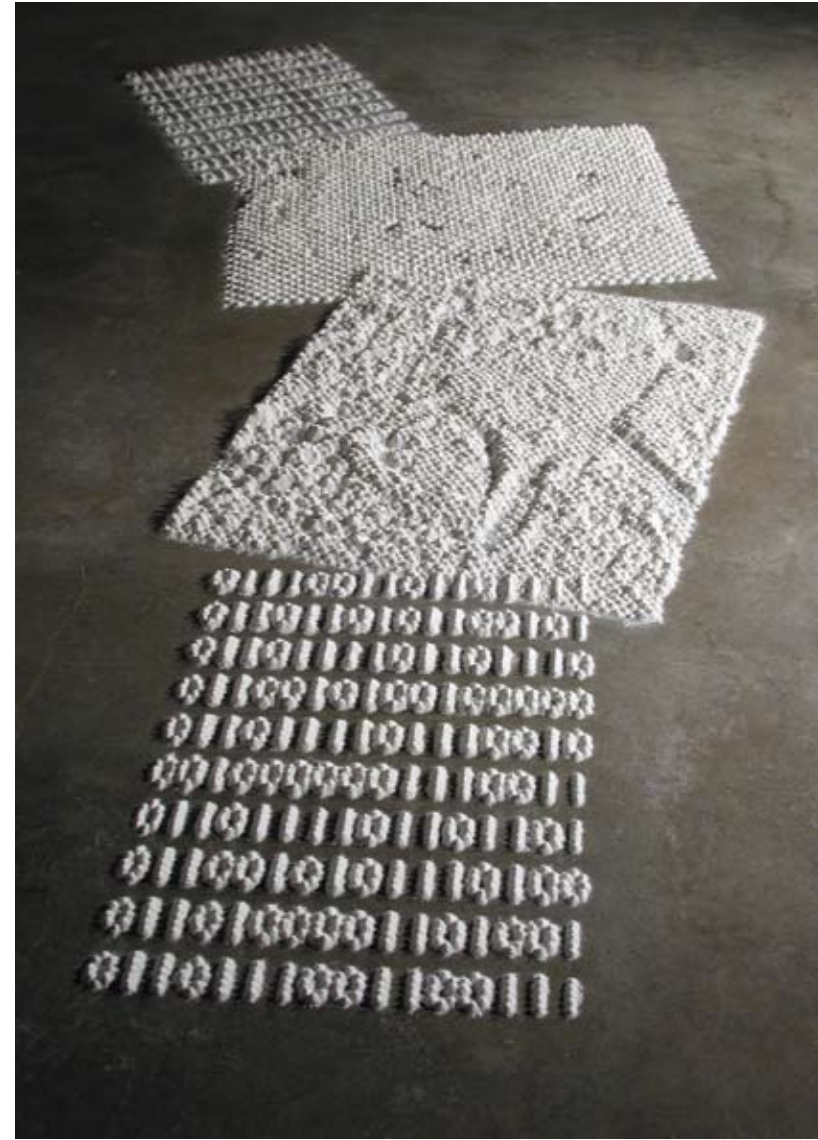
Trace Elements (2006) is four rectangles of sifted flour that look like overlapping carpets. The rectangles on each end are binary strings of alphabet code that when decoded read SOMEONE OR SOMETHING, and the two intermediate rectangles are fragments of halftone images. Though it's clear that a coherent image is the source of the tonal pattern in these intermediate shapes, the enlargement and the media – flour instead of ink – render the image content indiscernible.

In *Imposed Order* (2006), Meyer sifted flour through smaller sieves to form individual letters that repeat the words DESIGN OR CHANCE OR in concentric circles on a wood floor. We know so much about the two-dimensional version of our alphabet that we no longer register the forms' specific features let alone have any curiosity about them (why a vertical stroke here? a horizontal stroke there? an arc at the top? a half round at the bottom?), so these letters' third dimension is a startling revelation: their rising and falling z-axis profiles look like quarterly economic reports or annual weather forecasts. Yet the unexpected wonder of these forms reveals neither chance nor artistry; it's simple physics. The peaks and valleys are the cumulative consequence of each letter's two-dimensional shape, the sieve's screen size, and how the artist positioned and used his body to sift the flour.

Meyer's works begin as ostensibly simple experiments that promptly spiral out of whatever relational boundaries he might have anticipated. Like the great French entomologist J. Henri Fabre, who devoted his long and otherwise impoverished life to the study of insects he described in his notes as "my friends," "my companions," "my guests," and "my dear beasts," Meyer places faith in his own curiosity and follows where it leads. He honors the autonomy of the processes he puts into play by paying exquisite attention to the beauty of his experimental apparatus. He simply loves genuine knowledge, however it reveals itself, and like the trails of flour tracked across the gallery floor, his love leaves a mark.

Imposed Order (detail)
Flour
3 x 144 in. diameter (8 x 366 cm)
2006



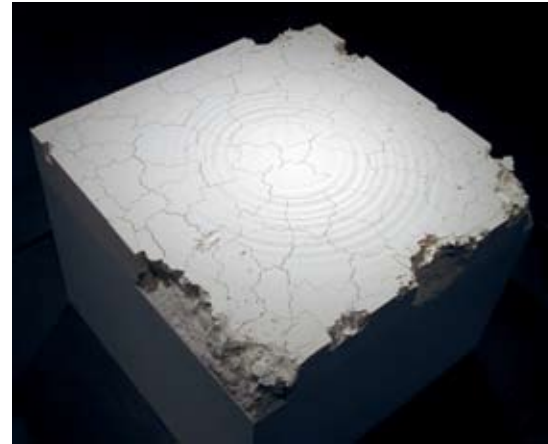


Trace Elements

Flour

2 x 144 x 68 in. (5 x 366 x 173 cm)

2006

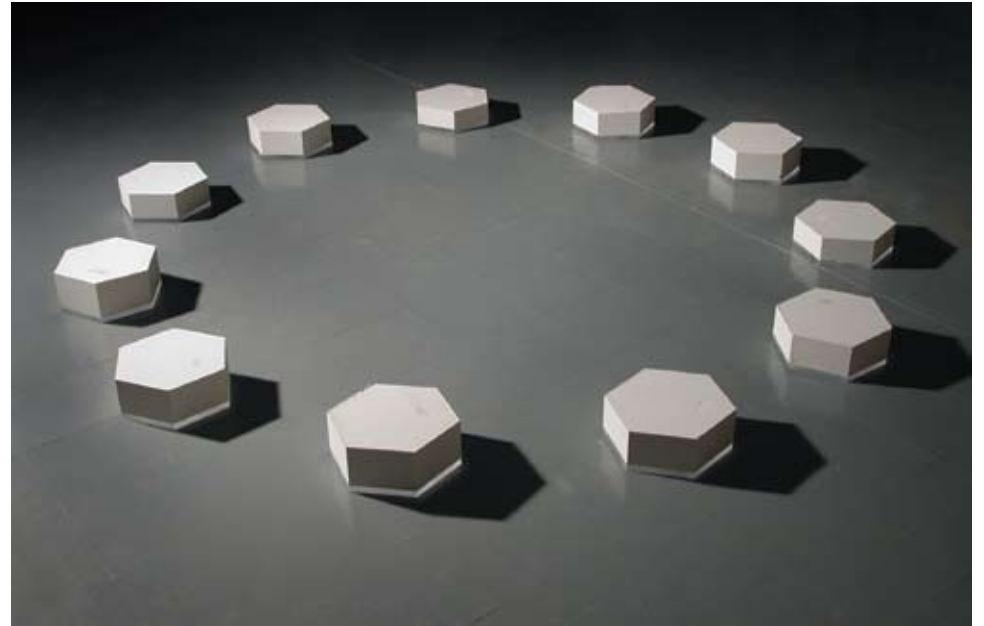


View of work at end of exhibition

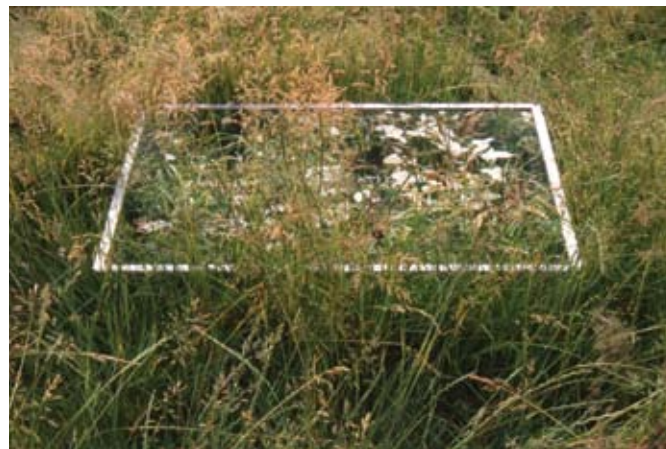
Affect or Effect (detail)
Flour, painted wood base
24 x 28 x 28 in. (61 x 71 x 71 cm)
2003



Affective Aspects of Consciousness, Glass, aluminum, four books, earth, time, 1 x 30 x 30 ft. (30 x 914 x 914 cm), 2000



Plausible Certainty
Flour, acrylic
7 x 108 in. diameter (18 x 274 cm)
2002



View of work at end of exhibition



Nature of Nature

Glass, aluminum, a book, soil, time
43 x 23 x 20 in. (109 x 58 x 51 cm)
2003



Detail view from 2007

Patterns of Probability
Steel, glass, gelatin, book pages, time
(approx.) 55 in. x 10 ft. x 20 ft. (140 x 305 x 610 cm)
1999



Detail view from 2004

INSTALLATIONS AND SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2008 Forest for the Trees: David Meyer, Leedy-Voulkos Art Center, Kansas City, Missouri
2008 Separated by Sight, installation, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, Delaware
2007 Separated by Sight: an Installation by David Meyer, Montgomery College, Takoma Park Maryland
2006 Three by Three, three person, installation, The Delaplaine, Visual Arts Center, Frederick, Maryland
2004 Patterns of Probability, image series, Cubicle Ten Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
2004 Claire Sherwood and David Meyer, two person, Mt. Saint Mary's University, Emmitsburg, Maryland
2001 Subject of Experience, installation, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, DE
2001 Of Relevance: Sculpture Exhibition by David Meyer, Penn. School of Art & Design, Lancaster, PA
1999 Patterns of Probability, installation, Delaware Division of the Arts, Wilmington, Delaware
1998 Changing Perspective: Recent Works by David Meyer, Univ. Gallery, Univ. of Delaware, Newark, DE

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 EQUINOX, juried by Lorie Mertes, Arlington Arts Center, Arlington Virginia
2006 Micro Monumental, juried by Kristen Hileman - Xavier University, Art Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
First exhibited at Flashpoint Gallery, Washington D.C.
2006 Sculpture Unbound, curated by Glenn Harper, Edison Place Gallery, Washington D.C.
2006 Parts of the Whole, curated by Elizabeth Grady, Vox Populi, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
2005 It Was Here a Minute Ago, curated by Veronica Mijelshon, NURTUREart Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
2005 Al₂O₃ -2SiO₂ -2H₂O: Contemporary Sculpture, curated by Tom Pergola, Area 405, Baltimore, MD
2004 Sculpture in Four Dimensions, juried by Ana Maria Escallon & Twylene Moyer
Art Museum of the Americas, OAS, Washington D.C.
2004 Drawing to Sculpture, juried by Renee Van der Stelt & J. Susan Isaacs, Ph.D.
The Delaplaine, Visual Arts Center, Frederick, Maryland
2004 Flora: Sculptures of the Natural World, juried by Lillian Fitzgerald & Virginia Mecklenburg
United States Botanic Garden, Washington D.C.
2002 Sculpture at Mill River's End, Mill River Gallery, Ellicott, Maryland
2002 Connective, juried by John Murphy, Nexus Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
2001 Diverse Creations, Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Washington D.C.
2000 Naked Nature: 21st Century Summer Salon, Shakespeare's Fulcrum, New York City, New York
2000 Biennial 2000, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware
1997 Present 1997, curated by Jacqueline Terrassa & Adelheid Mers Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL
1993 ABSTRACT: CHICAGO, Klein Art Works, Chicago, Illinois
1991 MIND OVER MATTER = SCULPTURE, Fermilab National Accelerator, Batavia, Illinois

AWARDS & COMMISSIONS

- 2005 Director's Award, Neil Watson, Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts, Wilmington, Delaware
2002 Commission, *Recognizable Something* - City of Newark, Delaware
2001 Commission, Delaware Community Foundation, Wilmington, Delaware
2000 Individual Artist Fellowship, Established, Delaware Division of the Arts, Wilmington, Delaware
1997 Commission, *Oklahoma City Memorial*, Archdiocese of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
1996 Best of Show Award, Philadelphia International Contemporary Art Competition of Old City
Rodger LaPelle Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
1989 Commission, *Oklahoma Tribal Monument*, Oklahoma State Capitol, North Mall, Oklahoma City, OK

EDUCATION

- Master of Fine Art, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware
Bachelor of Fine Art, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri

FOREST FOR THE TREES

DAVID MEYER

June 6 - August 1, 2008
Leedy-Voulkos Art Center
Kansas City, Missouri

All photographs of the exhibition by E G Schempf. All other images by the artist unless otherwise noted.

Cover and back, view of exhibition at Leedy-Voulkos Art Center
Inside cover, detail of *Scrutinizing the Clouds*. Inside back, detail of *Glimmers of Something Familiar*.

Elizabeth Grady, *Meeting of the Minds: a missed appointment*, 2008
Roberta Lord, *Touch Skin Love Beauty Fade Away . . .*, 2008

This exhibition and catalogue were partly funded by a generous grant from the University of Delaware's General University Research fund and the Faculty Enrichment Research Fund for Arts and Humanities.

Special thanks to Larry and Randee Buechel, Dick Jobe at Machine Head, Ben McCullough for his tireless assistance installing the exhibition and all those who helped with this exhibition and catalogue.

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Glimmers of Something Familiar

Synthetic fabric, cord, steel
(approx.) 12 x 50 x 90 ft. (366 x 1524 x 2743 cm)
2008, Paros, Greece



Photograph by Elsa Thorp



