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Carl Fudge: Dazzle at Ronald Feldman Gallery

by David Brody

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31 Mercer Street, south of Grand Street, Soho

New York City, 212-226-3232



Carl Fudge, *Yaw*, 2010. Unique screenprint collage on mulberry paper, 29-1/2 x 99-1/2 inches. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery

Carl Fudge has always taken a printmaker's approach to painting, deploying silkscreen (usually on canvas) with such combinatory verve that the image sources – themselves generally prints of some kind – get shuffled into synthetic insectoid life forms and ornamental festoons, or pulverized into pixels through a liquid diamond lens. Though **Fudge's** superflat constructions implicate the digital, and though he does process his sources on the computer, the work remains handmade in its layerings (both digital and analog) with the door to improvisation left ajar.

But only slightly. **Fudge's** sources, recognizable chunks of which he is at pains to keep in the room, tend toward factory-slick conceptual vectors. Image grabs from old Manga porn – Japanese erotic prints that exemplify the double meaning of “graphic” – later led to a neutered, digital-age version – cutie-pie Anime girls and their robot cousins – as if **Fudge** wanted to challenge Takashi Murakami on his own turf. In his last show at Feldman, **Fudge** reckoned with Warholism directly (and the silkscreen monkey on his back) by taking aim at the late Rorschach and Camouflage paintings – paradoxically revealing works by Warhol that were closer to his liquid nitrogen heart than anything in his oeuvre since Elvis and flowers.

If **Fudge's** invocations of recombinative, product-oriented serialism could seem like posturings in the realm of the obvious, albeit often-enough sparkling ones, his new subject matter is refreshingly far off the radar – and closer to home. In **Fudge's** current show of unique silkscreen collages on paper grids, this native Londoner (living in New York) sets his sights on a species of naval camouflage known as “Dazzle Painting,” which amounts to a neglected episode of British Modernism writ very, very large.

During World War One, jaggy, high-contrast shapes were found to frustrate the split-lens focus devices of enemy periscopes, by which range was calculated. This side effect of avant-garde stylistics worked as *reverse* camouflage, as first the British, then other world navies slathered their ships with gargantuan black and white abstractions that couldn't be easily parsed. It is worth remembering that utility was part of abstraction's birthright in the revolutionary alignments that then prevailed; the exuberance of the designs merits an account of the influence, or not, of national schools of abstraction on naval ministries.

Be that as it may, Dazzle is most associated with the whirling sawblade planes of Vorticism, perhaps Britain's last avant-garde art movement until Pop. (A brief cul-de-sac, Vorticism was decimated by the Great War that launched the ships.) Edward Wadsworth, a full-fledged associate of Wyndam Lewis and the BLAST crowd, is often falsely credited as Dazzle's inventor, and it is primarily a single black and white woodcut of his that **Fudge** samples, dissects, and disrupts. This 1918 print known as *Liverpool Shipping* happens to be a Vorticist afterimage, since by then Wadsworth had returned to a patriotic realism analogous to the work of Louis Lozowick or Charles Sheeler – but with a Stuart Davis twist, consisting in choice of subject: Dazzle-painted ships in drydock looming over crews of artist-workers with broom-sized brushes. By subsuming the high-contrast disorientations of gigantic Dazzle hulls within his own chopping graphic rhythms, Wadsworth took a workmanlike, rear-guard position on Modernism that a contemporary British artist might well regard with a mixture of proprietary nostalgia and fond contempt.

This, at any rate, is one way to read **Fudge's** Frankenstein reconstruction of Wadsworth's already tricky textures. In grids of screen-printed Japanese paper, he plays with the scalpel edges between sheets, especially in two red versus black arrays called *Plate Layers 1* and *Plate Layers 2*. The process is hard to decipher: Were the sheets printed separately, then configured after the fact? Or were the hard cuts and slices that happen to land exactly on seams pre-loaded into the tiled master plan, itself a vivisectioning grid? We see bits of mirror image and rotated pattern being passed between the pair of works, as if the same alphabet of silkscreens might have been used exactly twice, but the dense, single layer of complications flattens into a recognition test we cannot pass.

From work to work, **Fudge** zooms in and out on Wadsworth – and thus Modernism, war, and misdirection. Sometimes **Fudge** seems to be searching for hidden sweet spots in

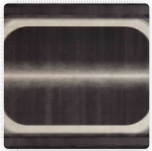


Carl Fudge, Plate Layers 1, 2010. Unique screenprint collage on mulberry paper, 58-1/4 x 59 inches.

Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery

the harmonics of recognition. At others, he is like a U-boat gunner getting a fix on his quarry: *Transition* is structured literally as a target. Works like the *Plate Layers*, *Aground*, *Jerseymore* and *Disruption*, on the other hand, connect **Fudge** to a contemporary investigation of printmaking as integral to a deep, complex, handmade serialism, as in superb current shows by James Siena and Thomas Nozkowski (at Pace Prints and Senior and Shopmaker, respectively). In any case, one hopes that **Fudge** is not through with Wadsworth and Dazzle. **Fudge** has found himself a house of mirrors subject worthy of his impressive, transgenic talent.

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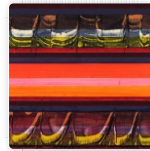
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