

Finding Our Way Amid the Modern Fatalism of Circuit Boards

Seph Rodney
October 14, 2015

Elias Sime's installations at James Cohan Gallery are visually impressive, but more than that, they are brilliant in their capacity to accomplish several things at once. First, it suggests a different relation to discarded technology, but Sime's work also offers an innovative approach to modernist "painting," with constructed assemblages that, depending on the viewer's vantage, appear as abstract imagery or clever mapmaking. The work positions Sime in the ongoing modernist arbitration between sculpture and painting — that is, as a mass or collection versus an image or picture field — and the assemblages exist in the middle of these two poles. These are significant ambitions, but then there is the experience of looking at the work.

Cracked, discarded circuit boards purchased or salvaged from the open-air Merkato in Addis Ababa make up the majority of the work being shown. (There is other work consisting of electrical wires "sewn" into intricately complex patterns on panels that yield a set of colorful mosaics, but these works are less compelling to me.) Sime uses a backing of pressed wood against which he nails the circuits, motherboards, and other machine parts he has collected. Up close the plastic housings, that had previously held loops of copper wire, look chewed up. Considered in terms of the sheer tonnage of material brought together for this exhibition alone, they become an apt metaphor for the spent technological energy that leaves behind physical detritus usually destined for landfill sites. The artist seems to be making a twinned set of melancholic observations: we humans are absolutely terrible at cleaning up after ourselves, and we are part and parcel of an entropic universe.

"Tightrope 3" (2009–14), in which a skein of broken shards appear in sharp relief against a black lacquered field of fiberglass, has a rough splendor — it seems almost cobbled together. If you step back from the work, the PCI slots and sockets, the resistors, capacitors and transistors, input ports, buttons, and key pads become warehouses, factories, loading docks, and airplane hangars in patterns that form carefully composed, discrete spatial realms. This is the view of the world underneath you as you peer out an airplane. From this vantage point the terrain becomes a kind of topographical map outlining a place that, though not immediately recognizable, could easily be familiar.

Where the art feels more clearly in dialogue with painting is with works like "Tightrope 8" (2009–14) and "Tightrope 9" (2009–14), where the circuit boards are separated into distinct fields of color and the material is cut and shaped in such a way as to represent representational forms. "Tightrope 9" in particular achieves a lyrical symmetry so lovely that it almost slips into the decorative.

Sime's assemblages maintain the useful tension between surface and meaning by making the artist's exhaustive manipulation of the raw, reclaimed materials a central theme. The rigorous labor called upon to assemble the huge "Tightrope 7" (2009–14) is indicated by the studied arrangement of diverse elements such as cowrie shells, plastic buttons, wire insulators, and LCD screens in a work more than eight feet high by almost 40 feet long. This work contrasts with "Ants and Ceramicists" (2009–14) which sits nearby, and features yarn sewn into delicate patterns on canvas. This piece has a similar reliance on the skillful, crafted hand, but without the larger ambitions of the assemblages.

In the end, Sime puts forward a quietly hopeful argument: using skillful labor to reclaim the value that continues to be leached away in our civilization's inexorable march through technological obsolescence. His work is about using that which we think is waste — no longer of use or representative of our desires — and using that material to form another view of our modern fatalism.

Elias Sime continues at James Cohan Gallery (533 W 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until October 17.

<https://hyperallergic.com/239261/finding-our-way-amid-the-modern-fatalism-of-circuit-boards/>