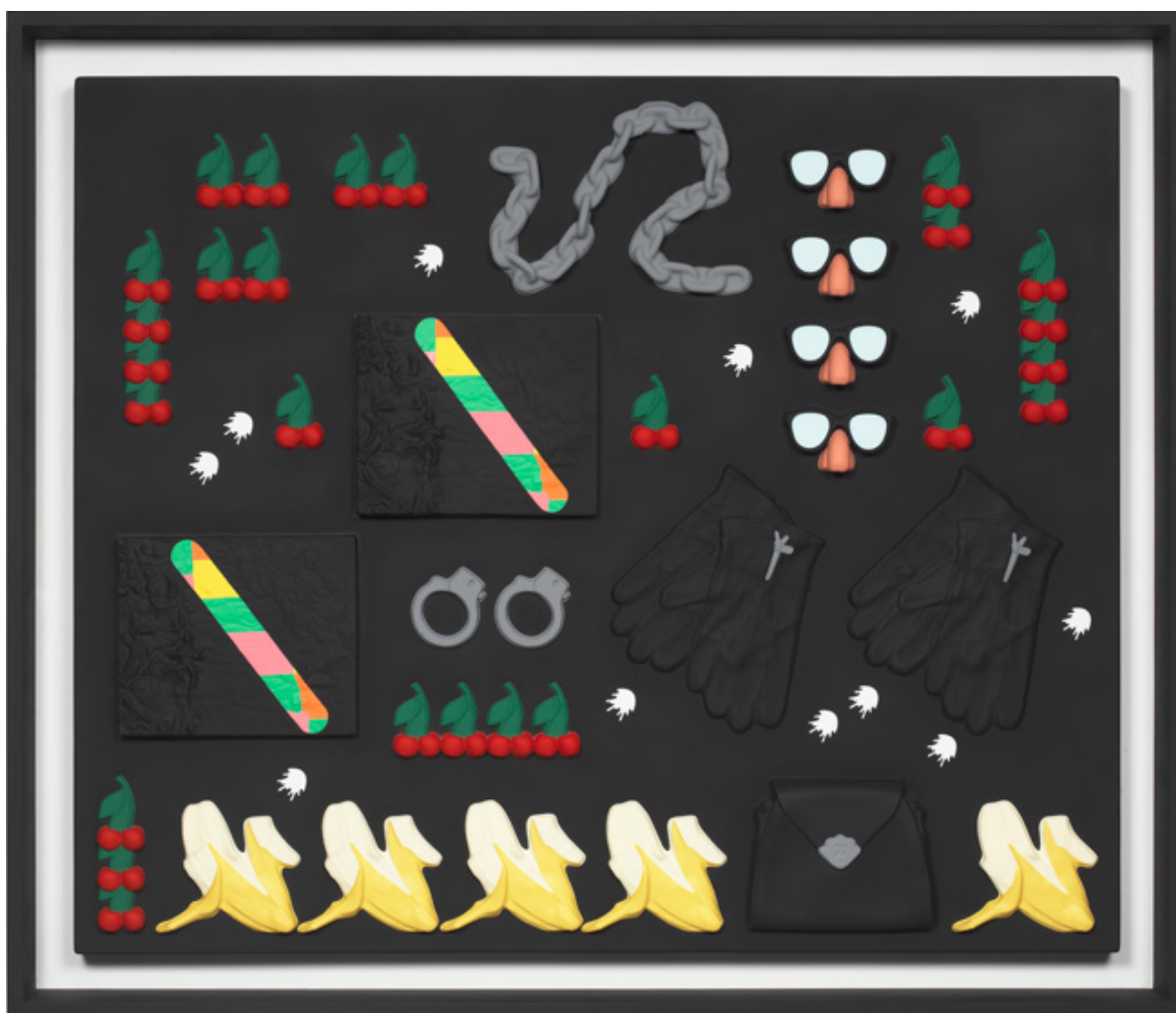


HYPERALLERGIC

The Function of Forms: Matthew Palladino's Object Lessons

by Nicole Rudick July 12, 2014



Matthew Palladino, "Night Ride" (2014), acrylic and plaster on panel, 45 1/2 x 53 1/2 inches

Matthew Palladino's gallerist calls his new works paintings, but one wonders whether that label is given partly for simplicity's sake: They are paintings but also sculptural reliefs. They are illusionistic but also real. They are representational but are also shaped from actual objects. What's more, Palladino thinks of them in photographic terms and says that they are "like paintings that render themselves."

In truth, they look most like paintings, but it's impossible to ignore the objects emerging from the backgrounds. The eight works on view at Garth Greenan Gallery are hung in simple, monochrome wood frames that encompass the elements on the panels — multicolored elements that comprise two-dimensional painted forms and three-dimensional reliefs of plaster casts. The casts are formed from molds and, more recently, by way of a vacuum-forming machine with which Palladino can capture the shapes of softer, often perishable objects, such as banana peels, wads of gum, leather gloves, and plastic masks.

He introduced casts into his work after coming across "naughty" ice-cube trays in a costume shop and realized that they were molds he didn't have to make himself (his attempts to do so were expensive and often unsuccessful). He then discovered inexpensive candy molds (the tiny lobsters, clusters of grapes, and sports equipment that appear in these works, for instance) that, though varied, are available in a finite number of shapes. This constriction — that he must select from a limited number of forms to create his compositions — appeals to Palladino: he's able to employ found imagery without having to locate new objects to use each time he begins a work; he simply pulls from a set catalogue of preexisting forms.

The vacuum-forming machine adds a temporal dimension to Palladino's process. The gum casts that dot "The Accident" (2014), for example, are a result of a labor-intensive process in which Palladino chewed some five packs of gum and made eight casts before settling on the one he would reproduce for the work. The banana peel in "Night Ride" (2014), on the other hand, had to be cast quickly; it began to brown almost immediately after its separation from the banana. Another difference between the molded and vacuum-formed objects is that the latter process produces life-size casts that more directly mimic reality. That they resemble objects we recognize, without actually being those objects, puts the casts at a certain remove: they can simply be shapes to be manipulated as easily as they can stand in for real objects.

Palladino, however, doesn't think of composition in terms of physical manipulation, as a sculptor would; he makes choices about arrangement and positioning, but he imagines himself capturing images — as with photography — that already exist. His work engages with both the Duchampian readymade and the notion, à la the still life, of arranging and presenting objects. One of the most intriguing works in this regard is "Still Life with Fruit" (2014). It contains casts of many of the items that appear in other works in the show (a camera, car air fresheners, a chain, fruit, plastic cups, beer cans, glasses), but Palladino has here left them white. Color appears only at the bottom of the panel, where three palettes and twelve paintbrushes are arrayed, ready to distribute a dozen hues onto the scene at hand. A preliminary orange squiggle, writ across a mass of plasticky folds, is the only mark to have been made on the "painting" itself.

Of his earlier, two-dimensional paintings, Palladino has said that he began to weary of the "illusion of painting": "I wanted to see the objects I painted in person, not just their representations." "Still Life with Fruit" literalizes that impulse: to see the objects on the canvas before painting them. It is as though Palladino has taken the objects on which a still life is modeled and placed them onto the canvas in order to manipulate the composition before sitting down to paint the scene. Though Palladino doesn't think of his other works as still lifes, they all hew to this idea at their most basic level.

Pop Art, to which Palladino's work is closely allied, likewise recasts still-life traditions by experimenting with media and formal techniques. Jim Dine asserted, in 1963, that "the object is used to make art, just like paint is used to make art." In "Color Chart" (1961), Dine juxtaposed a strict grid of watercolor swatches and a loose palette of variously colored brushstrokes. The painting is concerned with Dine's experience as a painter and with the process of painting: color is both medium and form. Palladino's 2010 painting "Test Print (John Henry)," which reproduces the precise pattern created during a printer's ink-flow test, treats color similarly, as both subject and object and reflects the same experience but from a more technologically advanced perspective (Dine's watercolors versus Palladino's color printer). In both paintings, art's materiality is the subject.

Palladino employs typically no more than ten unmodulated colors in each work. His preferred paint is 1-Shot, an enamel that is also used for pin-striping cars and for sign painting. But because Palladino wants his paintings to resemble "a giant McDonald's toy," he mixes in talcum powder, to offset enamel's otherwise shiny appearance. The limited color scheme and choice of paint have the effect of creating a minimalist and highly ordered surface: there are no brushstrokes and no shadows, and so no illusion of depth.

The idea of flattening the surface becomes a kind of joke in "The Accident," in which some of the three-dimensional objects — beer cans, plastic masks, wads of gum — are literally flattened. In the case of the gum, the sneaker tread pressed into the surface of the many wads attached to the surface mirrors the tire tread that snakes its way through the middle of the painting, as if the tire that had run over, leaving them squashed in the road. The compression of the picture plane and the interplay of real objects with painted ones call to mind the introduction of collage into cubism by Braque, Picasso, and others and its juxtaposition, too, of various objects, colors, and textures.

In the 1960s, Tom Wesselmann revisited this idea in the context of Pop Art with his multimedia "still lifes." "Still Life #30" (1963), for instance, depicts a kitchen scene that is composed both of a painted surface showing a sink, stove, table, and window and of objects set in relief: printed advertisements, plastic flowers, a refrigerator door, 7-Up bottles, and stamped metal. The three-dimensional objects (ironically, the flowers and the bottles are replicas of actual flowers and 7-Up bottles — representations of representations) extend out from the artificial space of the picture and into the reality of the viewer. At the same time, the sculptural quality underscores the painting's objectness.

The same play occurs in Palladino's work. In "The Window" (2014), the nine panes of a wooden window frame each house a face-size blob of red plaster. The window is ajar, and its open portion, at bottom, contains overlapping multiples of a man's smiling face (taken from the head of a blow-up doll). The frame is decorated with painted confectionary sprinkles whose disordered, multicolored multiplicity is at odds with the even, controlled repetition of the red blobs and faces. What's more, the flatness of the painted sprinkles highlights the dimensional interplay of the faces: Are they looking out, or are we? Are they inside the painting, or are we? It's a metaphysical question conjured in "Still Life with Fruit," too, which similarly puts the painting — the physical object and the act itself — at strange angles to reality.

This is also the point at which narrative enters the work: through open-ended connections. In selecting objects, Palladino puts together shapes that interact with one another. In "Night Ride," certain elements taken together — black gloves, handcuffs, a chain — suggest a suspicious plot, while others — banana peels, Groucho glasses, bird droppings — give it slapstick flavor (I thought immediately of Peter Sellers in Blake Edwards' *The Pink Panther* series). Palladino has created, as Philip Guston's late work has been described, a "spare parts world," in which the elements are familiar, and there is a resonance between them, but the meaning generated has a life of its own.

The one work in the show that doesn't contain any objects embedded into its surface is "The Flight" (2014), which is itself an object. Palladino made seven plaster panels and then broke each of them by dropping them onto his studio floor. He salvaged some of the pieces, adhered them into seven discrete sections, and mounted those onto two panels. He covered the shards in imagery and symbols borrowed from an airline safety card to produce a kind of oversize Rosetta stone, an arcane and partial record that will only hint at its own meaning. It is incomplete, untranslatable, and all the richer for its absences. The work is a nod to ancient art: fragments of reliefs, sculptures, and murals. As remnants, these shards are transformed into objects unto themselves. Though they bear the shadows of their former selves, they make up new stories on their own. As do the forms in Palladino's painting-reliefs, familiar objects that are decidedly different from what they once were.

Matthew Palladino continues at Garth Greenan Gallery (529 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through July 15.