

Utilitarian Abstraction Statement (Dean Kessmann)

My interest in the swatches of colors and patterns in *Utilitarian Abstraction* developed through the banal process of breaking down cardboard boxes to be placed into the recycling bin. In this project my focus turns to commercial packaging materials, primarily cardboard boxes from grocery store shelves. Therefore, this work, on some level, is autobiographical in that it paints a selective and subjective picture of my family's consuming habits at a particular moment in the early part of the 21st Century. *Utilitarian Abstraction* continues what has become an ongoing exploration of the materiality of mass-produced paper products and an interest in consumer culture as it reveals itself through product packaging and other methods of advertising goods and services. The original purpose of these utilitarian patches of colors and patterns that I have selected for aesthetic reasons is to enable printers to match the colors specified by their clients and keep the text and images in registration throughout the printing process. Graphic designers and printers are intimately familiar with this hidden imagery due to the function it serves, but consumers rarely notice, and almost certainly do not normally consider these tiny abstractions on aesthetic or other critical levels. However, the final pieces in this project carefully re-present this functional imagery in order to expose the ways in which the graphic design and printing industries have usurped the visual language of fine art, and vice versa.

While the exteriors of the boxes are covered with photographs, graphics, and text meant to get our attention while shopping, graphic designers carefully place the tiny grids of colors and patterns that are the subject of this work in areas that are out of sight once they are assembled, generally on the box flaps. Through the familiar domestic chore of disassembling these boxes, I became intrigued by the somewhat standardized, yet surprisingly unique imagery that I continued to discover. Shortly thereafter, I found myself imagining these utilitarian marks as miniature abstract paintings that had been hidden from view, smuggled into my home via the packaging of ordinary consumer products. When the cardboard boxes are intact, these "paintings" are sealed within the otherwise dark and empty interior spaces of product packaging. Additionally, since this imagery generally exists in those areas where adhesives are applied to assemble the flat pieces of cardboard into boxes, tearing them apart further alters their appearance. The glue stains, blemishes, and tears call attention to their imperfect material nature and the fact that they are common recyclables that all of us accumulate throughout our day-to-day lives.

These fragments from commercial packaging material are scanned on a high-resolution scanner, and then filtered through a digital environment before being returned to the material world as large-format prints on paper. On one hand, this digital process resists the auratic status associated with works of art by concealing the hand of the artist, yet the individual characteristics and flaws of the source material have been decidedly retained, instead of being retouched out of the scanned files. Thus, the final images are nowhere near the perfect digital files from which they are derived; instead, they are messy, a condition that is emphasized even more through the extreme magnification of this imagery. Through these transformations an odd reversal takes place in regard to the opposition between mechanical reproduction and originality. The mass-produced commercial imagery that proliferates at an ever-increasing speed is generally far removed from the cache that is afforded unique works of art. However, the fact that this imagery was rediscovered and has found its way into a gallery setting as unique, one of a kind prints enables the work to subversively reclaim the aura granted original works of art.

Utilitarian Abstraction should be considered in relation to a variety of historical precedents in the history of art, as well as more contemporary work that celebrates or critiques consumerism, even as the final artworks in this project become yet another commodity within the art market. This work engages with these historical precedents—especially Pop art, Op art, abstract monochromatic painting, and more recent trends in appropriation—and responds to the circulation of matter and data that infiltrates so many facets of our daily lives. As in much of my past work, the final images in *Utilitarian Abstraction* are as referential as they are abstract, thus erasing the fine line between these two modes of representation. Finally, this work opens up the possibility for viewers to make newly discovered associations between high art and consumerism through the visual language of popular culture and contemporary notions of abstraction, and asks them to reflect upon the material messiness and tactile nature of ink-stained paper products in a digital age.