

In Front of Your Eyes

Hannah Cole, Jodi Hays & Celia Reisman

Presented by Tiger Strikes Asteroid Greenville

October 4 – November 27, 2019

Opening Reception: Friday, October 4th 6-9pm

“My experience of life is that it’s very fragmented. In one place, certain kinds of things occur and in another place a different kind of thing occurs.” — Jasper Johns

I.

Jasper Johns was born in Augusta, Georgia and spent his early years bouncing around South Carolina. Even studied art at USC for three semesters before transferring to Parsons School of Design in New York City. This move, the “big move,” was a long time coming for the artist. In a *New York Times* profile published earlier this year, Johns recounted his wish to be “anywhere but there,” throughout his Carolina childhood.

In Emile de Antonio’s 1972 documentary *Painters Painting*, Johns told the crew, “in this place where I was as a child, there were no artists and there was no art, so I didn’t really know what that meant.” He adds, “in part, the idea of being an artist was that kind of fantasy, of being out of *this*...because there’s none of *this* here. If you’re going to be it, you’ll have to be somewhere else.”

A binary pattern, an either/or trajectory, a pointing away from *this* and towards a *that*, a *somewhere else*, a place to be *it*. In one place, *this*, South Carolina, there was no art. In another place, *that*, possibly New York, there was—and *it* flourished.

“The only art [Johns] was exposed to growing up,” the *Times* profile claimed, the only work in front of his eyes, “were paintings by his dead grandmother in his grandfather’s house.”

## II.

The three artists featured in this exhibition—Hannah Cole, Jodi Hays, and Celia Reisman—work with the commonly brushed off, the assumed to be unremarkable, what Cole calls the “too everyday to notice.” With their works, mundane subjects are made noble. These artists point at *this*, without directing you towards a *that*.

Cole depicts the detritus and humdrum she passes on her daily commute to the studio—manhole covers, layered graffiti on a garage door, a gaggle of weeds growing between cracks in the concrete. Drawing from observation acts as a meditative practice, as well as an enchanted one, for the artist. Reminds her that, “magic isn’t over there, somewhere else...what you pay attention to reveals that there’s magic right under your nose.”

Reisman drives around her suburban Pennsylvania neighborhood, an area she’s lived in for over thirty-five years, for inspiration. Sketches suburban vistas from the driver’s seat and uses gouache to record the colors. Sometimes she’ll let go of the brakes and inch forward, the movement shifting her vantage point, helping her assemble a new and unsettling landscape. One where trees huddle together, mere inches from becoming intertwined. One where houses seem to encroach on one another, their windows facing out onto neighboring roofs and garages. Reisman is still intrigued and surprised by the *this*, the right here, remarking that, “I never would have thought of this subject matter as something that was going to sustain me for so long.”

Hays focuses on her neighborhood as well—the bustling borough of East Nashville, one that is evolving, and gentrifying, at a breakneck pace. The artist wrestles with these changes in a more abstract manner, referencing the amalgamation of layers that can transpose the everyday into a pictorial grid. “Windows, walls, stripes,” she says, adding in a later statement, “leveraging lenses [and] barriers.” Like looking out at your front lawn, the view obscured by curtains, lattice, shadows, and maybe a developer’s sign, or

a construction crew's crane. The *this* becoming a *that*, the process in which the familiar becomes a *somewhere else*, right in front of your eyes.

In some ways, Cole, Hays, and Reisman's practice of focusing on their immediate surroundings could be seen as a logical response to a world in political and environmental turmoil. When showboating, word-twisting and Congressional standstill become the status quo, small-scale actions can feel like the only ones with direct impact. When the nation feels like a train running off the tracks, what can we learn from standing with and connecting to our neighbors, our community and our surrounding ecosystem? What can happen when we return to the same sights again and again and look, *really look*, while reminding ourselves why we are here and why we've stayed? Everyday engagement becomes a form of activism, carrying more weight as time goes on.

III.

Tiger Strikes Asteroid's acronym, a cheeky nod to the Transport Security Administration —appropriate, considering we're talking about observing, seeing, taking a closer look at what's right in front of our eyes. In our current moment, post-9/11, post-Snowden effect, looking is intrinsically tied to surveillance. TSA, NSA, Security, Suspicion, 'See Something, Say Something.' I've touched on this before in relation to Hays' work, writing that her painting *Entry*, which is reminiscent of security camera footage, "could reference multiple real-world acts, events, and conclusions. We're given just enough information to be unsettled—to reflect on headlines we've read, tweets we've scrolled past, Facebook videos we've paused before their grim conclusion. All these instances speak to the precarious position of humans under surveillance, wherein people are rendered as anonymous blurs from equipment lacking enough pixels to tell the full story."

Viewing the exhibition through this lens imbues the works with a host of alternate meanings. Like Hays' *Study 4*, with its group of silhouettes standing single file against a

bold red and yellow background, the perspective slightly elevated. Cole's *Peek* acting a nod to a prosaic voyeurism—one spurred by innocent curiosity but still considered snooping nonetheless. Reisman's works become almost comical, pictorial details portraying the lengths one will go to protect some semblance of privacy in a time of its near-total erosion. Her depicted suburbia is so compressed, the structures so close to one another, that demarcations of property are made in vain. For instance, the subject of *Yellow Fence*, confusingly affixed to two disparate buildings, or "privacy hedges," clinging to the homes in *Orion's Belt*, are only effective at creating the illusion of separateness and concealment.

#### IV.

Towards the real purpose of TSA—Tiger Strikes Asteroid, that is. It is an exhibition space run by artists, one that prioritizes community building and criticality above commercial appeal or marketability. Greenville's location marks the fifth chapter of the gallery's ever-expanding network, one that helps build supportive and positive arts communities all over the country. TSA GVL is spearheaded by Mark Brosseau and Kara Blanken Soper, and its members include April Dauscha, Suzanne Dittenber, Susan Klein, Hirona Matsuda, and Kelsey Sheaffer. While Greenville is the home base, their arms will stretch to reach the entire Southeast.

TSA still has few hurdles to overcome, mainly in finding a permanent home, but that won't deter them in getting off to a rousing start. Their tenacity has already brought a trio of nationally-recognized talent to the area, and the gallery has prompted an important and overdue dialogue among artists here. When I first heard about the possibility of a TSA Greenville, I'll admit, my enthusiasm was hard to contain. I couldn't stop imagining the possibilities on the horizon, what TSA GVL could accomplish in the city that I grew up in. A place that I left as soon as I could, for some of the same reasons Jasper Johns so ruthlessly outlined over forty years ago.

The arrival of TSA signifies more than just a new gallery moving in, a new dish for the Upstate's cultural smorgasbord. TSA GVL offers lively, compelling, and unique opportunities for artists living, working and, more importantly, *staying* in the Southeast. Their success in the region will help change the outdated and damaging, but in some pockets still prevailing, notion that there's no "*this*" down here worth engaging with.

—Robert Grand, 2019