

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday 14 March, 7 PM

BIO

Paul Sietsema was born in 1968 in Los Angeles. He received his BA from the University of California, Berkeley, and his MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles. He has had solo museum exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; the de Appel Foundation, Amsterdam; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Cubitt, London; and the Schinkel Pavillion, Berlin. Honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Wexner Center Residency Award. Paul Sietsema is represented by Matthew Marks Gallery.

UPCOMING

MERCER MUSIC SERIES 2013

Featuring: **I Am Robot and Proud / Alex Durlak / Cell Memory**

Friday 26 April at 8PM

Tickets \$10 / \$5 for members

IN STUDIO

Featuring: **Jeremy Bailey**

Monday 6 May at 8PM

Free and guaranteed to Sustaining Members on RSVP to york@mercerunion.org

STELLAR LIVING 2013 ART & DESIGN BENEFIT AUCTION

Save the date: **Thursday 16 May 2013 at 7PM**

Featuring works by: BGL, Cedric Bomford, Adam David Brown, Sarah Cale, Robyn Cumming, Heidi Earnshaw, Scott Eunson, Geoffrey Farmer, Fugitive Glue, Katharine Harvey, Jean-Paul Kelly, Micah Lexier, Derek Liddington, Anne Lowe, Annie MacDonell, Elizabeth MacIntosh, Benoit Maire, Niall McClelland, Tricia Middleton, Jonathan Monk, Gareth Moore, Moss & Lam, Jennifer Murphy, Christina Ott, Roula Partheniou, Ed Pien, Jaan Poldas, Kerri Reid, Zac Ridgely, Darren Rigo, Jon Sasaki, Jennifer Sciarrino, Hugh Scott Douglas, Berndnaut Smilde, Rob Southcott, Gary Taxali, Ron Terada, Winnie Truong, Kara Uzelman, Laurel Woodcock, Christina Zeidler & Deanne Lehtinen, Elizabeth Zvonar, and more...



Mercer Union, A Centre for Contemporary Art

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Cover image: Paul Sietsema, *Folded Corner*, 2012. Ink on paper, 165 x 124 cm.
All reproductions courtesy the artist and Matthew Marks Gallery.

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Paul Sietsema, *Light fall 4 (hand to hand)*, 2012. Ink on paper, 196 x 264 cm.



Paul Sietsema
Four Works

14 March–20 April 2013
Opening: Thursday 14 March, 7 PM

Front and Back Galleries

Paul Sietsema: *Four Works*

Paul Sietsema's 16mm film *Telegraph* (2012) offers an enigmatic missive formed by the gradual apparitions and vanishings of a series of driftwood bits. Like runic inscriptions, the shapes resemble familiar letterforms, yet are barred from easy legibility. Using one of film's earliest illusionary techniques, that of the dissolve, the resulting fade-outs are suggestive of the erosion of stone and the slow action of geological time. Though the shapes conjure an alphabet, the orientation and individual appearance of the wood slats hold these objects in a sort of limbo in which the photographic image is held back from making the full crossover into readily discernable typographic and linguistic form. As in a telegraphed message, in which information is transmitted across long distances, the film membrane also imprints and signals its own particular system of relay. While the battered sticks show signs of age, the film diegesis, an exceptional space outside of time, holds these objects in perfect suspension. Dating and identifying objects in Paul Sietsema's films is a thorny pursuit and this collision of historical frames is at the heart of the inquiry, the key to the work's very contemporaneity. A more sculptural cousin of the evanescent cell phone text message, *Telegraph* offers as a solemn meditation on codes of communication.

One of Sietsema's recurring preoccupations is with the condition of the artist as simultaneous consumer and producer of information and images.¹ Sietsema the consumer is an avid reader, collector and gatherer; a beachcomber salvaging texts and materials in the preserve of the studio, where these meaning-rich objects are intentionally harboured over time for eventual new production. Sietsema describes the wood featured in *Telegraph* as an amalgam of "pieces of a trellis from a previous studio, parts of houses I'd lived in, wood I would find between my car and the studio. A friend of mine went back to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and sent me the wood he found littering the landscape."² The wood here exemplifies a layering of specific transits and histories, an accrual of both personal biography and larger social-political events and temporalities. While the provenance of these objects is not strictly available to the outside eye, these details are subsidiary to the overall patina cast over the world contained in the film. The awareness of these filters in play guides the experience of the work, whether one identifies the sources or not. By partially suppressing the history



Paul Sietsema, *Untitled figure ground study (New York Times)*, 2009. Ink and enamel on paper, 79 x 87 cm.

of the source objects, Sietsema succeeds in what he describes elsewhere as "making the difference between appropriation and exposition less pronounced, and in the end, less relevant."³

Nevertheless, close looking at Sietsema's images does seem to reward the viewer willing to wager interpretations of them. For example in the drawing *Folded Corner* (2012), one re-encounters the previously adopted motif of the sailboat that has populated previous works. In their serial appearance, the ships begins to read diaristically, perhaps even as self-portraiture. On the ships' sails appear numbers that can be taken as historical markers. Possible correspondences are available, if left uncharted by the artist—1968, both the year of the artist's birth but also the revolutionary days of the Paris student riots; 1964, the year in which the Civil Rights Act was legislated but also the year around which Sietsema's film *Empire* (2002) was spun⁴; 1929, the upheaval of the stock market crash; and, more recent in memory, 2011, the year of the Arab Spring. The toggling between individual lived subjectivity and historical time is a frequent artistic motif, most keenly apparent in the artist's adoption of newsprint in a series of works to which *Untitled figure ground study (New York Times)* (2009) belongs. Attesting to the irrepressible draw of the newspaper page to artists from Rauschenberg to On Kawara, Sietsema diligently hand-renders the otherwise transient physical support of a



Paul Sietsema, *Telegraph*, 2012. 16mm film loop, approximately 12 minutes.

news clipping, thus transposing with the patience of a scribe the source artifact onto the white page in a conserved form, a ground on which to overlay yet another form, a conspicuously abstract expressionist drip. The clipping in this case, which also appears in a differing configuration in *Event Drawing* (2009), points to Sietsema's own inclusion in the art historical register—the fine print revealing a review by critic Roberta Smith of his exhibition *Empire* held at the Museum of Modern Art in 2003. Sietsema comments on this trope in use in a number of the drawings, "That some of the newspapers I saved had various amounts of specific biographical information about me in them, made their ambiguity, their internal/eternal to me, (biographical/autobiographical) position nicely activated, I thought."⁵

Sietsema the maker is capable of the most detailed material processes, employing arcane hand photo-finishing techniques to render trompe l'oeuil illusionism of the most astounding order. His detailed technical proficiency aids in sealing the continuous loop of image ingestion and image proliferation, since the boundary of where found representation begins and new line starts is so seamlessly hybridized. The only clue regarding technique in the three drawings on view in this exhibition is the descriptor "ink drawing," which only narrowly separates them from what we might assume to be strictly photomechanical reproduction methods. In this ambiguity we find ourselves confounded by what we are looking at—a rare and precious troubling of the image that runs counter to the ubiquity of the flat pixilation of digital culture.

If Sietsema is so sharply conditioned to the ins and outs of image production, we can also attribute this heightened sensitivity to his immediate environment and chosen production site of Los Angeles, the headquarters of the illusion industries. One of the

guiding contradictions of the theatrical tradition is something very well identified in the case of the film prop—a category of object that in order to best represent a real world equivalent is crafted to behave differently, to outperform the real object under bright studio lights, and make up for the deficiency of the real object to be able to look like itself in this proxy environment. In this created universe, new physical forms are invented as surrogates for an already existing world. For previous film works including *Figure 3* (2008), Sietsema carefully crafted props to conjure archeological artifacts, again collapsing histories in the process. *Telegraph* is quite a departure from these former works since the found object is only produced in the sense of its being harnessed and constituted into text.

The missive once assembled reads: L/E/T/T/E/R/ T/O/ A/ Y/O/U/N/G/ P/A/ I/N/T/E/R, referencing the collected correspondence between Rainer Maria Rilke and the aspiring poet Franz Kappus,⁶ but also pointing to a possible transmission across time from Rilke to Sietsema. It can be read as both a backwards and forwards reach in time since Sietsema's own intended addressee is described as "a formalist painter who died very young in the 1970s."⁷ The description itself contains the paradox of a once youthful subject now a dead forebear, or a subject from a previous generation whose age is capped while Sietsema advances in age. In Rilke's first letter to Kappus, he advises the young poet not to depend on outside criticism but rather to delve further into self in order to ascertain artistic purpose. This directive to plunge inward serves as sharp rejoinder to Roberta Smith's quip in the New York Times review of Sietsema's *Empire* exhibition that "Mr. Sietsema's work needs to be more accessible." Running contra to Rilke's prescription, she concludes that Sietsema will find an appropriate peerage among a set of artists she names, if only he gives up his more insular course. Add to the mix the fact that the film *Empire* concentrates on the influence of critic Clement Greenberg in codifying one major doctrine of American art, and we understand Sietsema's skillful observation of the forms of authority that transmits knowledge and establishes value in art. In the midst of this hall of mirrors, Rilke's directive to test artistic pursuit against self rather than external forces seems a tidy exit from the baroque chains of influence that seem to guide so much contemporary artistic output. Sietsema is not excluded from this interplay, yet the singularity of his approach and his intense compounding of referring sources does seem to up the ante for what representation can serve and what function looking can still hold.

—Sarah Robayo Sheridan
Director of Exhibitions and Publications

Notes

- ¹ Paul Sietsema: *interviews on films and works* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel / Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 32.
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 95-96.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ⁴ The 16mm film *Empire* (2002) is in part concentrated on a reconstructed 3D model of art critic Clement Greenberg's apartment as it figured in the pages of a 1964 issue of *Vogue* magazine.
- ⁵ Paul Sietsema: *interviews on films and works* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel / Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 32.
- ⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a young poet*, trans. M.D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1954).
- ⁷ Paul Sietsema: *interviews on films and works* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel / Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 96.