

EAST CITY ART REVIEWS

CMD + F at Hemphill Fine Arts

By Claudia Rousseau, Ph.D. on July 30, 2018



COURTESY OF HEMPHILL FINE ARTS.

Rachel Schmidt, *Tension*, 2017. Wood, LED lights, single channel video projection, sound by Drew Doucette; dimensions variable.

The title of a three-person show now at Hemphill Fine Arts, *CMD + F* makes reference to a computer command for a search within a document. Local artists Tommy Bobo, James Huckenpahler and Rachel Schmidt are all working with computer based new media, each of them seeking new ways to create art in this fast-changing digital world. The results, as beautifully presented here, are all fascinating, clearly demonstrating something of the potential of these experimental techniques.

Probably most striking is the large installation by Rachel Schmidt that occupies the darkened central space of the gallery. The work of an artist who has been preoccupied with environmental issues, Schmidt's *Tension* involves a group of island-like floor structures illuminated from below. These are cut wood, a natural material, and stand only a few inches from the floor. Painted white, they also suggest ice floes, and even connote the idea of separating land masses being caused by planetary climate

change. The white lights beneath them flicker according to a time-based program. The feeling is that the lights are also some natural phenomenon, something like the northern lights in the Arctic. On the wall is a looped video projection with sound. A shape like one of the floor sculptures occupies the center of the projected images that move behind it, thus making a visual connection between the video and the floor. The imagery in the video was combined from the artist's recent residency at

the Taipei Artist Village in Taiwan. Alternating between layered images of nature and the urban density of Taipei, the sounds of nature are juxtaposed to those of industry, while the video shows the encroachment of human construction into nature. The tension between the two is perhaps symbolized most poignantly by two segments. In one, a red feathered pigeon is seen sitting on a railing. A light rail train pulls into the station. The force of the air before it pushes against the poor bird, making it almost lose its grip. The train stops, people get off and on, and it pulls away, again fluttering the bird's feathers. It continues to sit. Soon after this, the viewer sees a group of birds wrapped in some sort of red netting. They are alive and some are trying desperately to escape. Others peck at food inside the netting. The dark shape is layered over them, appearing backlit. This scene appears to be a metaphor for freedom denied. Even when we see a natural setting, and hear birdsong, man-made stairs are seen within it, and a waterfall is accompanied by urban sounds. The whole is very compelling, and a viewer will likely watch the relatively short video multiple times.

Huckenpahler is represented in the first room of the gallery, and his six approximately 16- x 10-inch digitally manipulated photographic prints are the first thing one sees on entering. The minimal presentation of these small works printed directly on dibond and grouped together on the white wall makes them alluring in an odd sort of way. One is drawn to look closely, and that closer inspection reveals images that seem readable at first, but then defy simple decoding.

As one can learn from the artist's website, these are "software-generated montages influenced by the work of the *Affichistes*, particularly Mimmo Rotella," and the series they come from is called *Mimmo*. This interesting bit of information is nowhere in the gallery, but coming to the exhibit knowing this makes a great deal of difference in understanding them. Mimmo Rotella (1918-2006) was an Italian artist who made most of his best known work from 1953 to about 1969. He called his technique *décollage*, which involves the removing or tearing of pieces from an existing image. He was inspired by the way that layers of posters on the walls of Rome in this period, mostly from the cinema, were torn leaving places where the posters underneath would show through. So he began to tear posters deliberately, ripping them from the walls, and bringing



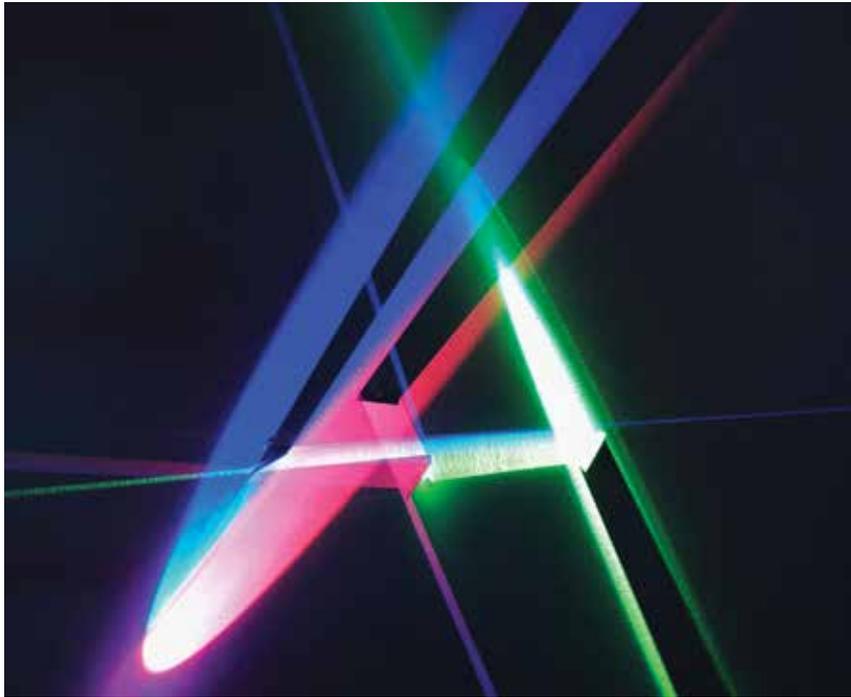
Rachel Schmidt, *Tension*, 2017. Wood, LED lights, single channel video projection, sound by Drew Doucette; dimensions variable.



James Huckenpahler, *minister of strange affairs*, 2017. Digital print on dibond, 16" x 10", ed. 1/1 unique, JH-071, printed in 2018.

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Tommy Bobo, *Falling Without Seeing*, 2018. LED lights, colored gels, mirrors; dimensions variable.

them back to the studio where he glued them to canvases. Thus his compositions were created by a process of tearing away, the opposite of building-up of elements to create a *collage*. Their basis in mass media imagery connects them to the development of pop art, and Rotella was a key figure in the *Nouveau Réalistes* whom he joined in 1960. Huckenpahler's technique, digitally combining Civil War photographic portraits in the Brady-Handy Collection with other imagery stored on his computer, and ripping away recognizable parts of both, results in layered abstract images that are only partially comprehensible as portraits, although some are clearer than others. Numbers on the old negatives persist in the new prints to which the artist adds ink colors in the printing of each unique work. Huckenpahler gives all his prints

intriguing titles which, of course, affect what the viewer will see in the print. Among my favorites was *minister of strange affairs* with its ghostly gray and green figure.

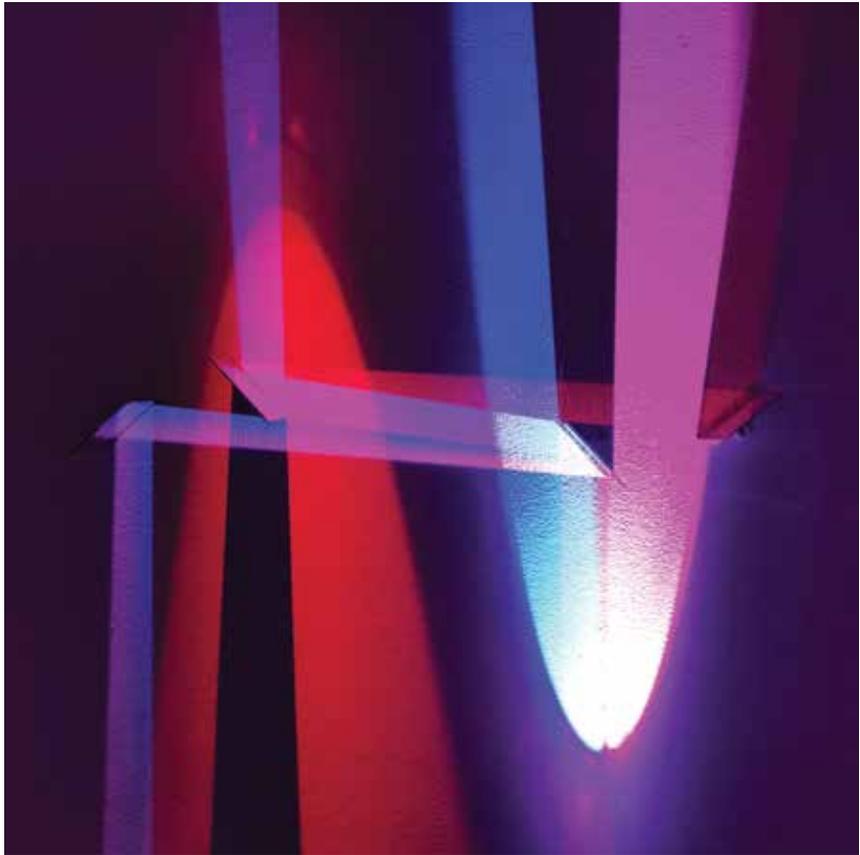
Tommy Bobo's light paintings and his new moving light work are installed in an enclosed room at the far end of the gallery. Stepping into this darkened space is sort of magical. The ambient darkness is pierced by the brilliant colors in the light of his five projections. One's attention is immediately captured by the central work, *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated (to Forsythe and Willems)* which has been programmed to create approximately fourteen million possible combinations of colored light forms. The title may be familiar to modern dance enthusiasts. It is the title of a ballet originally created by William Forsythe for the Paris

Opera Ballet with electronic music by Thom Willems. This challenging work premiered in 1987 featuring the then very young Sylvie Guillem and Laurent Hilaire, and some would say that it changed contemporary ballet forever. In a communication with the artist, Bobo explains why he used the title for his new foray into moving light, suggesting that the work is similarly a watershed in his investigations into using a light medium to evoke physical movement:

"I want to evoke a dancerly [*sic*] sense of movement with the light. This piece in particular is a stepping stone to my grander robotic light dancing ambitions. By referencing dance in the title, I hope that some will see a bit more of my thought process."

The work is mesmerizing. The combinations change about every 5 seconds, although the sequence is not absolutely regular. Small mirrors are attached to the wall in strategic places to reflect the light in certain directions. The motion-controlled lights create curved and pointed forms that—perhaps because of the title—do seem to evoke the quick movements of Forsythe's choreography.

Also in the space are the works I referred to above as light paintings since they do not move, but sustain a combination of light forms, employing mirrors and LED light with the same brilliantly colored gels in a static image. These also have interesting titles that encourage the viewer to "see" something beyond the simple light forms.



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Falling Without Seeing has an arrow-like shape that might connote a “falling” in the dark, and *My Face Against Yours* has two forms that seem to glide next to one another on the shadowed wall. Indeed, collectors will need more than a simple wall to bring one of these “paintings” home. They demand a special space like the enclosure in the gallery to be seen.

This elegant exhibition will be on view at Hemphill through August 10th. It’s worth braving the construction on 14th Street for the experience.

CMD + F at Hemphill Fine Arts, 1515 14th Street NW, Washington DC, June 28–August 10, 2018.

Tommy Bobo, *My Face Against Yours*, 2018. LED lights, gels, mirrors; dimensions variable.