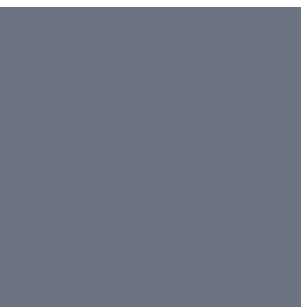
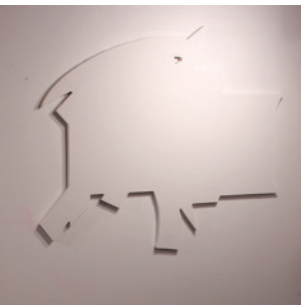
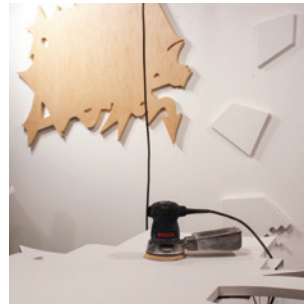
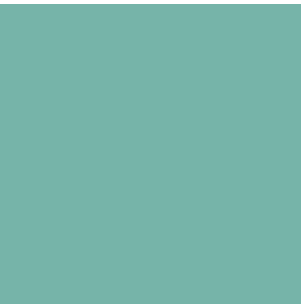


**JASON  
LAHR  
ELECTRIC  
FUNERAL**



# Tinted glass and the noise in a bubble: Three propositions on the paintings of Jason Lahr

BY: JOHN KISSICK

*Important things are inevitably cliché, but nobody wants to admit that.* — Chuck Klosterman

## 1 Undead and unconcerned

In a recent research paper on “Zombic Biology” posted on *The Federal Vampire and Zombie Agency* website (fvza.org), authors Pecos and Lomax answer a nagging question that keeps people up at night: can zombies actually hear? The answer is . . . sort of (at the beginning), then eventually not at all. They write: “Infection and eardrum perforation cause zombies to lose about 50 percent of their hearing within a few weeks of transformation. Complete deafness sets in within another month as necrosis spreads further into the ear.”<sup>1</sup> This explanation — long overdue to my mind — is quite helpful. First, it suggests that the transition to undeadedness is, among other things an aural process, related to the slow shutting out and shutting down of *alive* voices and thus *alive* cognition in favor of, well, nothing at all. Add to this condition a variety of other ailments such as myopia, colorblindness, cataracts, flesh eating skin ailments, little to no brain function and perhaps worst of all, horrific halitosis, and it is little wonder that zombies tend to lack a certain communicative finesse. They also tend to not engage in much of a reciprocal critical discourse when it comes to the world around them.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fvza.org/zscience2.html>. The authors note that zombies also suffer from severe myopia, colorblindness and cataracts. Their sense of smell, however, is superb!

It is safe to assume that most of us lack much in the way of empathy for zombies. And fair enough; outside of perhaps the odd pharmacological experience, it is hard to envision ever being in such a state or walking a mile in their shoes. Instead, our days are spent in the world of voices and technicolor; a confusing stew of resonance and dissonance, and most often a mix of the two. There are voices that ring loudly and truthfully; others that lie outright or barely register. There are voices rich with the inflection of history and privilege; others raspy and raw through suffering and censure. There are voices that are made weighty by perceived position and access, and others muted or just plain ignored through perceived insignificance. The undead sadly miss this. Instead, theirs is an essentially flattened experience of world, where all the stuff that we perceive as carrying a degree of meaning or emotional register is somehow unhinged and at an arm's length.

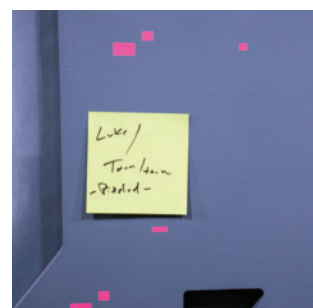
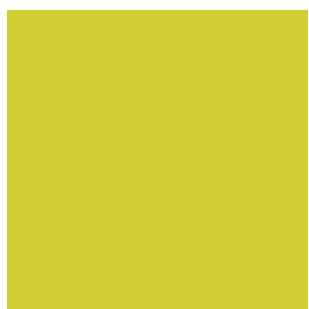
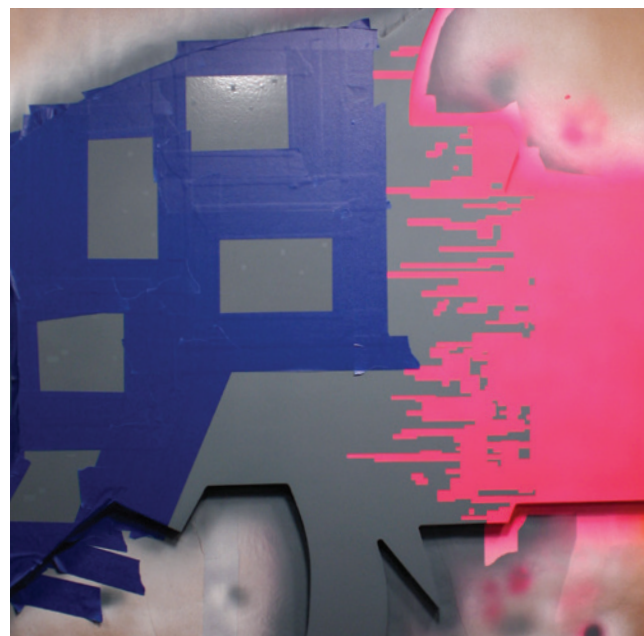
I would now like to pose a purely hypothetical situation. Suppose you are one such unusually empathetic soul, capable of stepping into the shoes of the recently undead. Recent, because you can still envision feeling something, being cognizant of something; it's just that it doesn't feel like much at all. You aren't fully zombie yet, but are well on your way. And as a result, you experience the world with a strange mixture of vague, filtered cognition and stand-offish indifference. Bright colors are there in front of your face, but no matter what the chromatic identity, they always feel

## **And they are bright, eccentric, and visually stunning. And funny. And maybe sad ... not quite sure.**

beige-grey; eccentric shapes don't read as eccentric at all; fragments of narrative feel like bits and pieces of random, disengaged sound bites, and none of it quite adds up. Or rather, it adds up, but to something vague and aloof that slips away the minute you catch it. I recognize that this isn't an easy proposition to grasp. I would, however, like to add one further complication: the zombie you embody only exists in a panelled basement in a forgotten subdivision, illuminated by the glow of a television screen that shows endless repeats of old sci-fi movies. And let's, for the sake of mood, add to this scene a single computer monitor, surrounded by a gaggle of ramped up and pimply-faced teenage boys. Finally, in the far corner there sits a couple of muttering older dudes (they are most definitely all dudes), waxing nostalgically about passionate relationships they vaguely remember ... about twenty years ago. The music is loud and pounding (you think, because it enters your cognition as simply static). Oh, and the basement in question is located in a small town in deepest Pennsylvania. Can you picture it? Can you? Welcome to the paintings of Jason Lahr.

Jason Lahr is an articulate and rigorous chronicler of the uneasy space between past and present; between thwarted expectation and flattening cynicism. His work is eccentric and critically pointed — a high-octane collision of images

that capture a kind of jittery deadpan-ness. And reminiscent of Macbeth's oft-quoted anthem to indifference, they are "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." They can come across as a visual rant and yet somehow have the emotional register of a 1980s video game. As a result, his art reads like a love song to unpoetic loss, unapologetically rendered. Lahr's paintings also have both a very specific and complicated relationship with cognition as it is sifted through the filters of masculinity, class and memory. Chromatically, they are brash like teenage bullies. They are also distant and removed — the painterly equivalent to a bored retiree sipping his mug of lukewarm coffee, staring through the living room window at the neighborhood drug dealers plying their trade across the street. The paintings seem both to embrace technology and to hate it at the same time. And they are resolutely and unapologetically flat, with just a hint of fleeting meaning stubbornly clinging on around the edges. The works track the uncertain murmurings of awaking adolescent sexuality; they are tired and don't give a shit anymore. And they are bright, eccentric, and visually stunning. And funny. And maybe sad ... not quite sure. And more than just a little lost. And for the undead that is us, the whole thing just sits there, grey like a lost world.



## 2 Bending noise and pumping the volume

Jason Lahr's paintings have always reminded me of a quote by Chuck Klosterman about music and cars. He writes: "I love the way music inside a car makes you feel invisible; if you play the stereo at max volume, it's almost like the other people can't see into your vehicle. It tints your windows, somehow."<sup>2</sup> Lahr's work has a compelling "noise in a bubble" and "tinted windows" quality. Much of his painting over the past two decades has stood in as a kind of a visual approximation of a slightly psychotic mash-up: picture a 90s boy band that has been duct taped (it has to be duct tape) together with some death metal dudes and this conglomeration is dancing to some tripped out electronica; or maybe it is the Hardy Boys stumbling into an early Black Sabbath concert that is being performed on the USS Enterprise. And then sprinkle in a little bit of big "A" art speak and turn the whole thing up really loud. To me, experiencing Lahr's work is like looking directly into the "tinted window" of a private sanctuary made up of everyone else's white noise. His work has the very odd ability both to assert and cancel at the same time.

Lahr's paintings read like a kind of visual flypaper; buzzing cultural detritus seems literally to stick to the surfaces of his work. The stuff comes in all shapes and sizes: here, clean and techy sci-fi graphics or showy floating text; there, sickly sweet Boy Scout schematics and forsaken rock band insignias. Everything has the feel of decals, stuck on the surface of a guitar case or some hip kid's laptop. Everything, that is, except for the parts that are strangely painterly and soft, and even then those often feel like simulations. The images cascade from the paintings, each vying for pictorial authority over the others and each inevitably failing. Let's be clear, this is not an easy thing to do. Ambivalence is baked into the very fabric of these works, and they seem to flatten, both visually and emotionally before your very eyes.

# Ambivalence is baked into the very fabric of these works . . .

Jason Lahr's paintings also neatly confound certain fashionable aesthetic conventions around image appropriation because they draw so explicitly from such a specific cultural repository: the smoldering, pungent landfill that is working-class white male rural America. His images come from arguably the most unpopular, unhip, un-nuanced and unloved of sources, writ large and loud and proud. But to argue that Lahr's paintings are autobiographical in any conventional sense is to misunderstand how a collage aesthetic works. The bitter truth is that cut-and-paste — rather than introspective existential soul pummeling thumping — is the "new autobiography" and the artist's purposeful collision of bits and pieces of vivid but disengaged information might be as close to a "self" as anyone in painting gets these

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<sup>2</sup> Chuck Klosterman, *from Killing Yourself to Live: 85% of a True Story*. As quoted in: <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/222581>



days. That's not to say these paintings don't tell stories. They do. But the stories are about dislocation, disengagement and disappointment; about flattening stereotypes and unmet expectations; about lost jobs and escapist fantasies and a smoldering anger; voices from a disappearing world, or better, a world that disappeared years ago but no one told them. In this way, Lahr's work sits compellingly at the critical crossroads of two very different traditions: postmodern appropriation and Social Realism. And that is what makes them different.

### **3 Speaking in tongues (or at least having a tongue)**

It's not just Jason Lahr's images that actively seek to complicate and undermine historical conventions of narrative; it's also the way he paints them. His works are a smorgasbord of painterly conventions neatly dolloped onto his surfaces. There are slick, even slippery sign-painting applications and sharp-edged vinyl stenciling. There are clunky and self conscious representational gestures and vast areas of undifferentiated paint. There are things that have the surface quality of decals and there are even moments of tentative expressionist mark making. And they all exist in the same universe.

In Lahr's art, it can sometimes feel as if the "how" of painting has been thrown into the same blender as the "what," as material is forcefully employed to confound straightforward and banally ironic readings of the images. The result is not so much a canceling out of meaning (like in so much of today's appropriation oriented work), but a more subtle and satisfying under and over-scoring of images with a kind of accent or dialect. There is an aural texture to the work, as if parts are speaking at, to, or over each other through the artist's hand. The images simultaneously compete for attention and undermine their own authority, all through the way they are constructed with paint. In Lahr's painted world of conflicted styles, the bullies can have stuttering problems and the class clown might mask a debilitating shyness. After all, at the end of the day, these works remain very much about painting and the history of representation; and the obvious array of painting tropes is there to drive the point home. Seen from this particular angle, Lahr's works have always had a bit of a "nudge, nudge, wink, wink" character to them. Individual images within each composition are painted with an eye to specificity rather than uniformity; they implicate in varying degrees the presence of the artist as a productive *maker* rather than simply a *recycler*. And in this way, the paintings still *attempt* to tell stories, tentative and fractured though they might be. They posit the presence of the artist as creator, rather than throwing in the towel and giving up the idea of a real human subject, like so many other cut-and-paste artists these days. This is Lahr the Boy Scout, the listener, the humanist ... not Lahr the death-metal dude with clean edges. And yet he can hear them all. As a result, the paintings retain a certain tangible potential, despite their somewhat defiant psychological flatness. They are in a very real sense unapologetically complicated and skeptical. They just can't help themselves. And this is Jason Lahr at his critical and emotional best ... Zombies and tinted windows, static and all.



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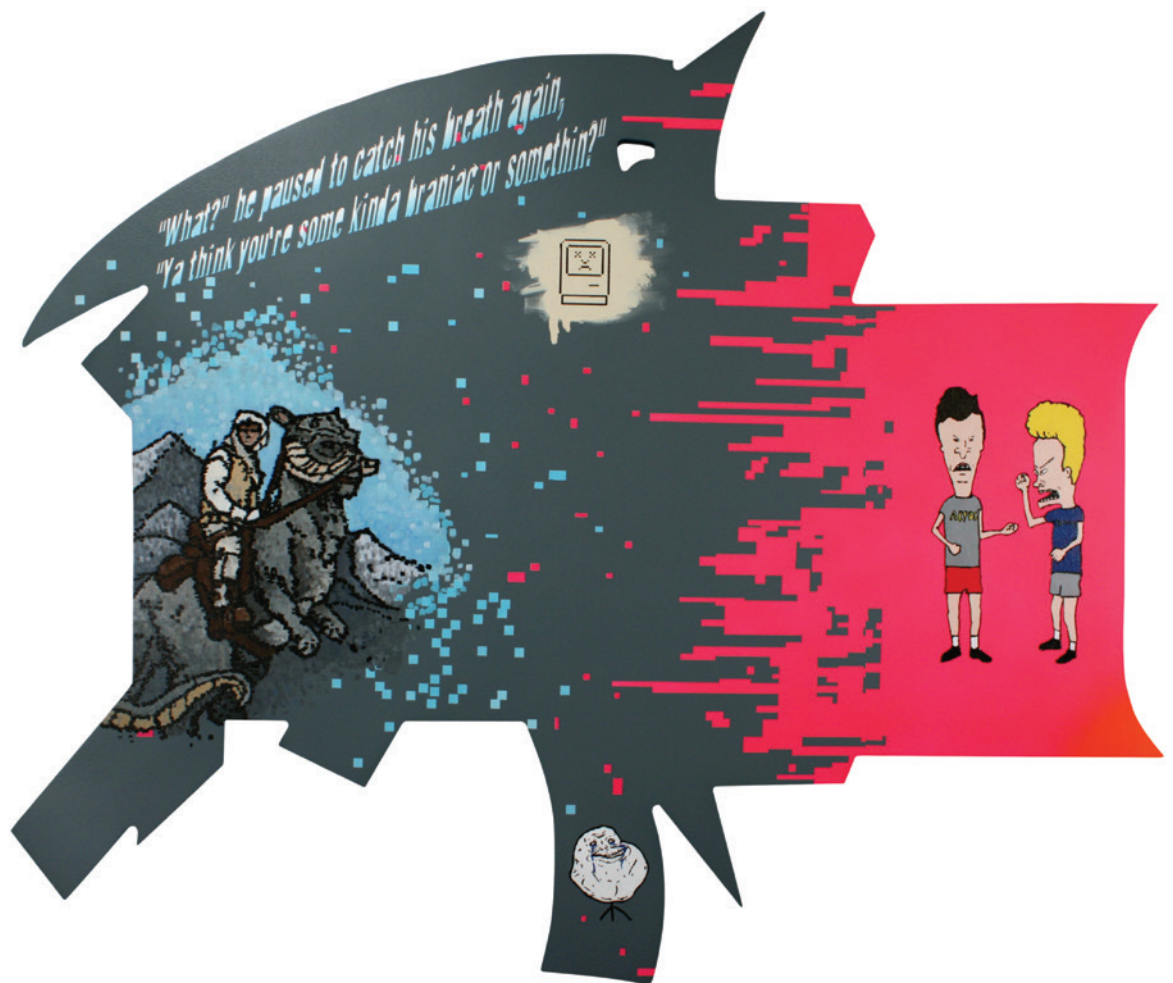
*Away With You*

2017

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

36" × 45"





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*Forever Alone*

2017

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

38" × 45"



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*Pixelfucker*

2015

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

43" × 50"



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Donkey Brains

2015

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

45" × 45"



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*Remote Viewer*

2015

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

34" × 34"





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*Screen Grab*

2015

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

22" × 19"




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*Negative Creep*

2017

Oil and acrylic on shaped panel

17 ½" × 14 ½"




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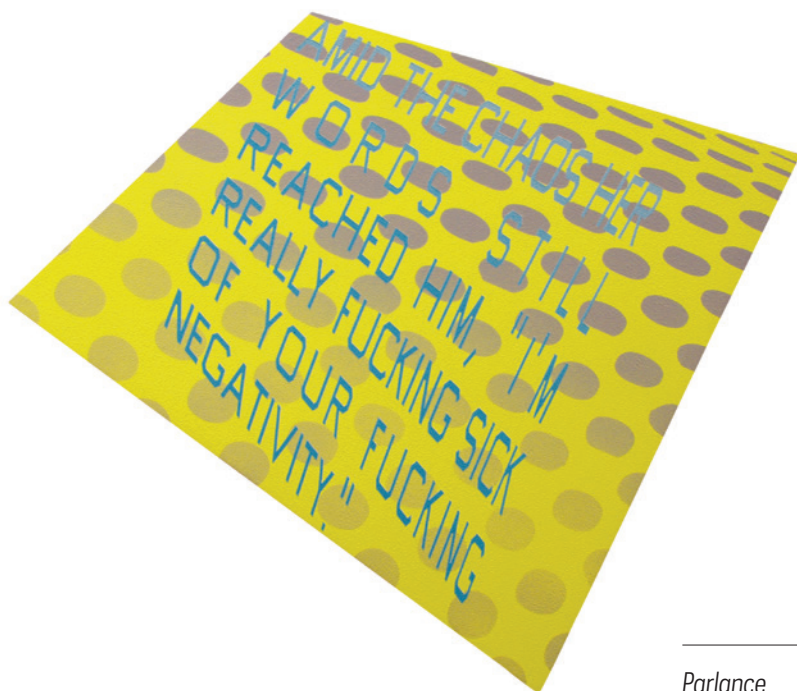
*Minutiae*

2017

Acrylic on shaped panel

10" × 7 ½"






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*Parlance*

2017

Acrylic on shaped panel

11" × 12 ½"



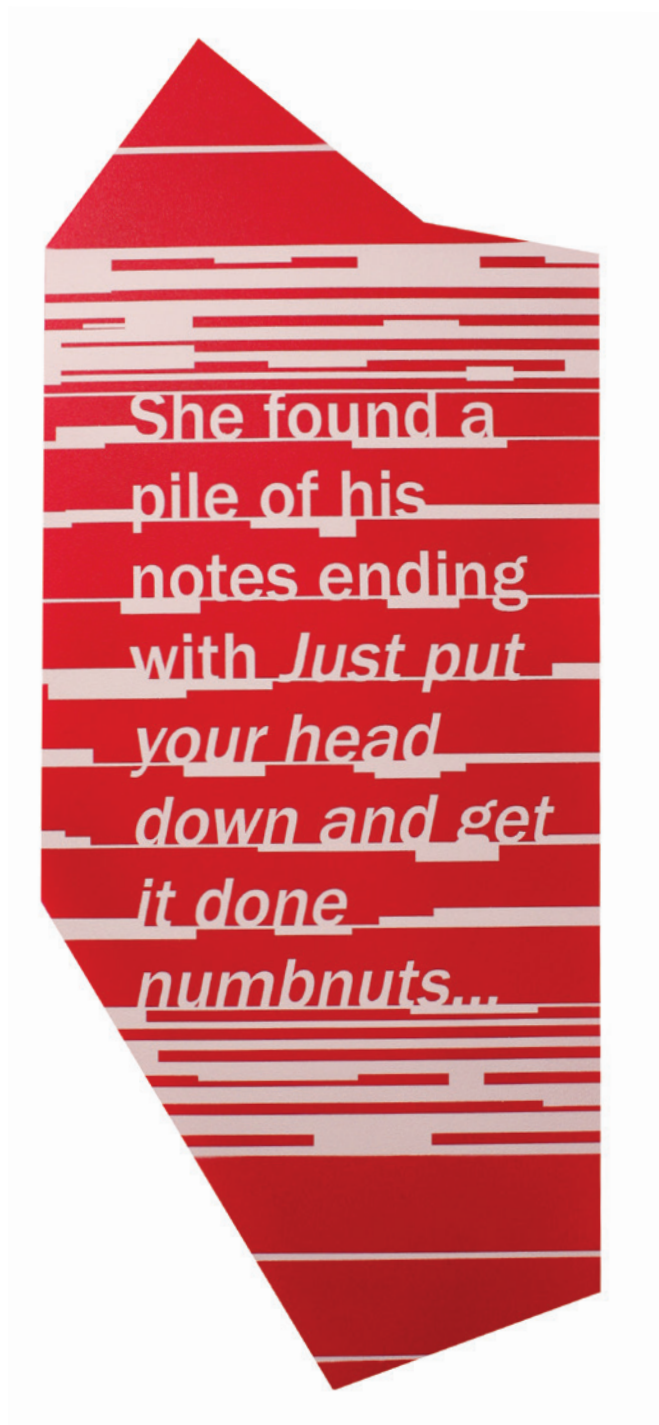

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*Humorless*

2015

Acrylic on shaped panel

20" × 16"



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*Parallax*

2015

Acrylic on shaped panel

27" × 11"



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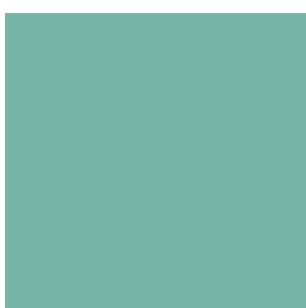
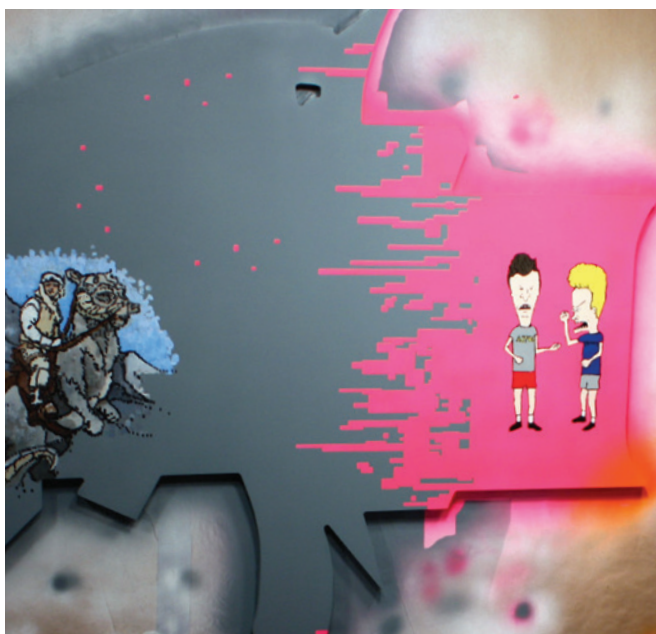
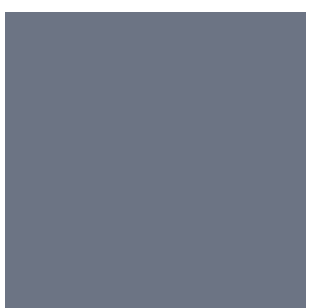
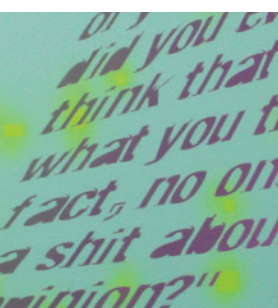
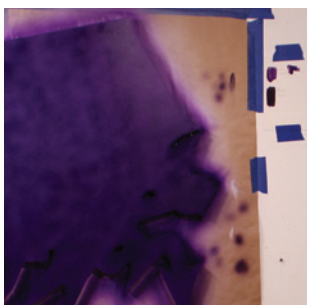
*Observer Effect*

2015

Acrylic on shaped panel

17" × 14"





*I'm incredibly lucky to have such wonderful friends and colleagues ... deepest thanks to Tom Berding, John Kissick, Anne Berry, Shazzi Thomas and The Painting Center crew, Joe Thomas, Mike Elwell and his CNC skills, Maria and Steve Tomasula, Nicole Woods, Heather Bhandari, Raphael Fenton-Spaid, Jayson Bimber, Adam Fung, Vernon Fisher, Aron Packer, and my colleagues and students in the Department of Art, Art History & Design at the University of Notre Dame. Partial support for this exhibition provided by the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at the University of Notre Dame.*

*Biggest thanks of all to Krista; you're the best.*

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## Jason Lahr // [jasonlahr.net](http://jasonlahr.net)

Jason Lahr was born and raised in rural Pennsylvania. He received his M.F.A. in drawing and painting from Penn State University and his B.F.A. in painting from Clarion University. Since 2004, he has been represented by Aron Packer Projects in Chicago, IL.

Lahr's paintings combine darkly comic texts with appropriated images, creating shifting narratives of working class male identity. The work draws from feminism, narrative theory, contemporary and postmodern fiction, semiotics, and film theory to explore the formation and shaping of masculinity through mass culture. The images are pulled from a wide range of popular and sub-cultural ephemera while the texts are fragments that suggest their excision from a larger story and give the reader/viewer flashbulb glimpses at moments of narrative action. Centering on female characters that occupy positions of authority and male characters who are injured, inept, defeated, or perplexed by their dealings with women, the texts and images form narratives which question the wash of expectations and assumptions we experience and create through popular culture.

His book *Words for Paintings* (Stepsister Press, 2010) collects twelve years of texts alongside reproductions of his work and in-progress views from his studio.

Lahr currently lives and works in South Bend, IN where he holds an Assistant Professor of Painting position at the University of Notre Dame.

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## John Kissick // [johnkissick.ca](http://johnkissick.ca)

Known primarily as a painter and writer, John Kissick's exhibition record includes over 30 solo exhibitions in Canada, the USA, and Germany. His work has been included in a number of important survey exhibitions and held in numerous public collections. A mid-career survey entitled *John Kissick: A Nervous Decade*, toured Canada from 2010 to 2012 and was accompanied by a major publication. The current survey exhibition *John Kissick: The Boom Bits* tours Canada through 2018.

He is the author of the book *Art: Context and Criticism* (1992-96) and has written numerous catalog essays and articles for periodicals. As a curator, he was the recipient of the 2014 Ontario Association of Art Galleries Award for Curatorial Writing. Two recent essays: "Elephants in the Room" for *Canadian Art Magazine* and "Disco and the Death Switch: Tales from Contemporary Abstraction" for *Border Crossings* were recently nominated for National Magazine Awards.

Kissick has held numerous academic posts, including Professor of Art at the School of Visual Arts at Penn State University, Dean of the Faculty of Art at the Ontario College of Art and Design University, and most recently as Director of the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph where he is currently Professor of Art.

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## Anne H. Berry // [annehberry.com](http://annehberry.com)

Anne H. Berry is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design at Cleveland State University, part of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities. She received her MFA degree in 2008 from the School of Visual Communication Design at Kent State University and her graduate coursework, which focused on Environmental Graphic Design, provided opportunities to collaborate on wayfinding and interpretive design projects with other graphic designers, architects, and urban designers. She also received a Student Merit Award from the Society for Experiential Graphic Design in 2006 for her contributions to a proposal for a mixed housing development in the North Lawndale area of Chicago, IL.

In addition to teaching, Anne works as a freelance designer. Her most recent projects include a permanent exhibit for the Civil Rights Heritage Center in South Bend, IN, and logo identities for the University of Notre Dame's Center for Social Research and Center for Social Concerns. She is a co-founder of LightBox, a studio in downtown Goshen, IN, and serves as the Chief Creative Officer for the online peer feedback educational platform Round3. She is currently researching topics focused on ethnic/racial diversity in design education, design for social impact, and diversity issues within the design profession.



## JASON LAHR

b. 1975, Clarion, PA

### EDUCATION

- 1999      **Master of Fine Arts**  
Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
- 1997      **Bachelor of Fine Arts**  
Clarion University, Clarion, PA

### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

#### Solo

- 2017      ***Electric Funeral***, The Painting Center, Project Room, New York City, NY (\*catalog)
- 2015      ***It Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time***, Moudy Gallery, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX  
***8-Bit Fictions***, Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA (\*catalog)
- 2014      ***Master of Reality***, Safety Kleen Gallery One, Elgin Community College, Elgin, IL (\*catalog)
- 2013      ***Signal Jammer***, Elon University, Elon, NC  
***Too Dumb for New York City, Too Ugly for LA***, Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 2011      ***Digital Error***, School of Fine Arts Gallery, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
- 2010      ***DEATHMETALHIPPIEKILLER***, Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL

#### Group

- 2016      ***Digital Culture***, Czong Institute of Contemporary Art Museum, Gimpo, South Korea  
***Fiction: (With Only Daylight Between Us) v.2***, traveled to Boecker Contemporary, Heidelberg, Germany; Class Room, Coventry, United Kingdom; Apothecary, Chattanooga, TN; Angelika Studios, High Wycombe, United Kingdom; and Corridor Project, Dayton, OH  
***Resurrection***, Aron Packer Projects, Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, IL
- 2015      ***Lil' Lebowsky Urban Achievers*** (two-person), Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI  
***South Bend Selfie***, South Bend Museum of Art, South Bend, IN
- 2014      ***Fiction (With Only Daylight Between Us)***, University of Dayton, Dayton OH; travelled to Neon Heater, Findlay, OH

- 2013 **CONTEXT/Art Miami**, Art Miami Pavilion, Miami, FL (via Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL)  
**Jason Lahr vs. Krista Hoefle//Krista Hoefle vs. Jason Lahr** (2 person), Hershberger Gallery, Goshen College, Goshen, IN  
**Disassembly and Reconfiguration** (two-person), Kresge Art Gallery, Olivet College, Olivet, MI  
**Gesturing into Consciousness**, Zoller Gallery, Penn State University, University Park, PA  
**Gallery Artist Group Show**, Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL  
**Almost Metal Collective**, A+D Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago, IL
- 2012 **CONTEXT/Art Miami**, Art Miami Pavilion, Miami, FL (via Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL)  
**Bookstore**, Drift Station, Lincoln, NE  
**Gallery Artist Painting Show**, Packer Schopf Gallery, Chicago, IL  
**Epicus Doomicus Articus**, Compound Gallery, Portland, OR  
**Friends of the Beast**, OhNoDOOM!, Chicago, IL
- 2010 **Flesh and Bone**, Hyde Park Art Center and Co-Prosperity Sphere, Chicago, IL  
**Level 13: Classic Video Game Art**, Altered Esthetics, Minneapolis, MN  
**Flatline**, Sellout, Minneapolis, MN

## AUTHOR

*Words for Paintings*, Stepsister Press, Chicago, IL: 2010. 150 pages.

"John Kissick: Abstraction as Appropriation," (catalog essay) *John Kissick: A Nervous Decade*, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, Kitchener, ON: 2010. pp. 51-56.

"Underpainting," (catalog essay) *Surface Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Painting*, South Bend Museum of Art, South Bend, IN: 2010. pp. 6-7.

*Something Geographical: Vernon Fisher, Buzz Spector, and Xiaoxe Xie.* (catalog essay) Zolla/Lieberman Gallery, Chicago, IL and South Bend Museum of Art, South Bend, IN: 2009. p. 2.

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## **SELECTED COLLECTIONS**

Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw, GA

Frans Masereel Centrum, Kasterlee, Belgium

Private Collection, Copenhagen, Denmark

Dr. Joe Thomas, Atlanta, GA

Private Collection, Miami, FL

Private Collection, Chicago, IL

Private Collection, Chicago, IL

Private Collection, Brooklyn, NY

Private Collection, Minneapolis, MN

Private Collection, South Bend, IN

Private Collection, West Palm Beach, FL

jasonlahr.net

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