

## FOCUS

**Alex Hubbard**

Films, the expanded field and photographs; falling vases, melting wax and painted cars  
by Morgan Falconer

Below left:  
*Annotated  
Plans for an  
Excavation*  
2010  
DVD stills

Below right:  
*Letter Phase*  
8-9-2009  
2009  
Digital c-type  
print  
From the series  
'Letter Phase'  
2009

Opposite page:  
*Coastal Blues 25*  
2009  
Silkscreen print,  
oil and enamel  
on canvas  
1.0 x 1.3 m



There are probably only a few distinct moments in the practice of the post-studio artist. There is that first moment, when the new freedom sends them rushing into the landscape, to build lightning fields, to shape volcanoes, to wind spirals in far away lakes. And there is the moment of the artist-as-administrator, as service industry provider, creating on computer in the departure lounge. And then there is Alex Hubbard's moment, when the first seems grandiose and the latter complicit; when a return to the old studio of privileged epiphanies is impossible, and yet when some return to a studio of raw materials seems necessary. Not to process and output, but merely to handle and rearrange those materials – if only because such activities are beyond the pale in an era of super-productivity.

Such a practice could never be wedded to any one medium, hence the Brooklyn-based artist has made a number of videos that are poised to fall between two stools. The title of his three-part series, *The Collapse of the Expanded Field* (2007), suggests something of this intent, and, like many of the videos Hubbard made around this time, it records various performative actions carried out on objects introduced to a flat plane (tightly framed, and shot from directly above, it is often ambiguous as to whether this plane is upright or horizontal). In the first part of the series, a pink sheet is thrown over a white surface; a vase of flowers is arranged, then smashed; and the remnants are blackened with spray paint and the whole lot brusquely cleared away with a walking stick. It's an art that is happy to find beauty in the gutter; it's also restless – always

moving on, instantly unhappy with the last arrangement – and also frustrated, inclined to use violence as a means of composition.

Critics have often thought of Fischli/Weiss and Roman Signer when looking at these videos, but the most appropriate precedent would seem to be Hans Namuth's films of Jackson Pollock at work. For rather than insist on the optical beauty of his finished products, Hubbard values the materiality and tactility of every stage in their creation. Of late he has also changed the phrasing of these confrontations between painting and performance, tilting them more towards sculpture. In *Weekend Pass* (2008), he sets up his camera on a dolly that rotates around a plinth on which various objects – tablets of wax, a wellington boot, both of which were dumped on a scolding hot plate – are offered up as if for sacrifice. And in the video *Annotated Plans for an Excavation* (2010), which is included in the current Whitney Biennial, Hubbard films himself transforming an old, angular white Ford Tempo into a crude, flat picture of itself, by erecting screens on the roof, and using paint and putty to white out the wheels and windows; he then jumps in and starts driving. If in his early videos Hubbard subsumes reality into art – claiming it often with poured paint, as if by anointing – here reality is allowed to claim back its belongings.

For one so apparently uncomfortable with the conventions of the painted canvas, Hubbard also makes surprising lovely paintings. Some of his most recent showed earlier this year at Maccarone in New York. Employing fibreglass and resin, they feature clashing colour fields, in some parts sloppy with pooled paint, in others almost translucent. They are paintings with what Leo Steinberg once described – apropos of Robert Rauschenberg – as 'flat-bed surfaces': surfaces that aspire to the character of prints which might be the non-hierarchical pinboard for any object or image (even though for Hubbard they only carry colour). A different, similarly untitled series, from 2009, utilizes a silkscreen process, and is even closer to this model, the paint surfaces more evenly and mechanically applied, and the hues cooler – like photocopies from a colour-drained printer.

Hubbard has also made a series of photographs. The 'Letter Phase' series (2009) bottle the dynamism of his videos in single images which eschew any sense of ground; the dazzling metallic papers they depict, and the scattered and shiny letters – all are caught as if hurtling through the air. This might be the artist's slickest body of work to date, but that is not to say that it is accomplished – even though it is – rather, that it aspires to a quality of finish which his other work refuses. And what is exciting about an artist with Hubbard's itching spirit, is that one senses that that achievement might provoke at any moment a contrary impulse to further destruction. For this man is likely never happy.

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