

THE NEW YORK TIMES

NOVEMBER 18, 2010

PAUL LEE: 'LAVENDER'

By Karen Rosenberg

The humble terry-cloth towel may not seem likely to become a signature art material, but that's exactly what happens in Paul Lee's first show at Maccarone. Mr. Lee drapes, dyes, tears, scissors and punctures washcloths and bath sheets, determined to wrest as much visual pleasure as possible from these household staples.

Mr. Lee can make washcloths look like Modernist canvases, semaphore flags or Shaker quilts — albeit faded and tattered ones — as he does in a room of 96 of them. He even treats towels as film, punching holes in them and stitching them into a 35-millimeter reel. (He does something similar with a clear shower curtain.) Projected, it's a flickering, gold and blue waterfall.

As Mr. Lee uses it, the towel is a loaded piece of material — a link to the naked body and more specifically (though not exclusively) to bathhouses, saunas and other locales steeped in gay culture of a certain era. A bright yellow towel nestled inside a showerlike enclosure of lavender-painted wood conveys pleasures that aren't all formalist. And a blue towel thrown suggestively over a jetty of painted plaster rocks might have been left by an impromptu skinny-dipper.

In small wall sculptures that make use of beverage cans and tambourines, and in a crowded back room of washcloths stretched over modified podiums and studded with light bulbs, Mr. Lee invokes Jasper Johns, Paul Thek and other masters of nuanced assemblage. These works, unlike the others in this show, don't release as much as they absorb.