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PAUL LEE

By Blair Taylor

My introduction to Paul Lee took place over three days during the late summer of 2000, when he and I and two friends convened in a sweltering Chelsea apartment. Extenuating circumstances prohibited the four of us from leaving the apartment, which in the end wasn't a pall so much as an advantage, since Paul doesn't need a lot of room to work. The weekend had the feel of the scene in *Animal House* where Donald Sutherland's Professor Jennings character blows Boone and Katy's minds with his universe-in-a-fingernail hypothesis. Except in our case Paul expanded our points of view quietly, with superior originality and, of course, none of the lecherous underpinnings. In his artwork, as in that weekend, Paul opens up the world in a way so unassuming as to be imperceptible until you are seeing it anew and all at once.

When I first met you, in 2000, you were making collages. They were fussy things with FedEx envelopes and Pop references.

Matt Damon.

Leo.

Yeah-from magazines.

They were always really small and meticulous.

Right, because I didn't have a studio for seven years.

Because you moved here without a plan, kind of. Or did you have a plan?

Well. I wanted to make work.

That's a good plan.

I moved here because I was having shows at the School-house Gallery in Provincetown. Having the shows there every year helped me keep ahold of making work, because it was a real struggle being here.

You mean financially?

Yes.

And you've said that you moved here, in a way, because of Jack Pierson.

Yeah, Jack sort of instigated it, because I wrote a paper about him when I was in college. Later, I met Jack and he had read my paper. I visited his studio in Provincetown, and then I came back and stayed-I had a little room in a house that he had in the summertime. It was amazing because I'd never

really spent any time in nature or by the sea. It was beautiful. In Provincetown, I realized that the sea, which I'd never really known growing up because my parents were from farms, is the most amazing place to be next to.

And that informed your work.

I think so, yes.

You work a lot with horizons. So what does It look like in Ilford, England, where you're from?

It's changed a lot. Ilford is on the edge of the suburbs in London. I remember my friend Rachel was from West London-Ilford's in East London-and we always used to talk about how although we loved being in the city, being on the edge of the city was an amazing place to be. Because you weren't right in the city, you could romanticize it. Ilford paper is there because of the Ilford camera factory, but when I was there the camera factory had become a super-market. It's a Sainsbury's supermarket. I was thinking there was a metaphorical association about that because where there used to be the Ilford camera film factory, I worked in the butcher's department chopping meat. So I really liked that metaphorical...

Meat to camera.

Yeah, exactly.

You were interested in cameras in your work, but not in actually using them.

I was interested in the camera as an object. It's like a station between two different realities: the imagined photographic reality and your actual reality. The camera is something you can actually hold that exists between those two different places.

Your work seems to be always between two different things.

And searching for depth. Trying to hold something that is perhaps unattainable. I was making the cameras out of clay, which to me was like making them out of dirt, which was then taking this object that is this station in between two realities, and making it into something that flowers grow out of. Like a rock. And then I started making rocks.

Your work seems to be anchored by these simple tenets. Not to say that the work is simple, but when you're asked about the work, you tend to talk about simple, universal things: the sun, the water, rocks, dirt-

Mixing colors. Chemical reactions. Things that are real. And I also like the idea that these materials are available to everyone as well. It's kind of like the FedEx things I made way back when. When I first moved to New York City, I would see people carrying FedEx boxes and there was something sort of glamorous about someone FedExing something somewhere. Like, "Wow. they're important," and the idea that planes are flying around everywhere with stuff in them. Again, like the camera in a way, the FedEx box is the station. Then I went away from that kind of literal metaphor to a more

poetic metaphor. Like rocks and the sea. More intimate metaphors.

You make everything with your hands. Nothing is outsourced. You have some basic store-bought materials, but you are handling them intimately and specifically by yourself.

Right, because I think what I'm trying to do is grapple with the sense that you exist in this world, and you're a person, and you see everything happening. I was writing last night about objects moving at different speeds, but when you process things, they all go into your head and all exist at the same speed. So I'm thinking of making objects that contain parts that move at different speeds. When that happens, a sort of depth is created.

It's interesting because you come from a kind of humble place as an artist-I'm not trying to romanticize your roots in Ilford, coming from a working-class background-but just the way that you think about things is really humble and intimate in a way. And for that to translate to the New York art world reception of the work...Reading reviews about your work, people like to tie you to incredibly huge forbears: Ellsworth Kelly, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg. How does that make you feel?

Does it put pressure on you?

Well, I think they're all people who inform me. Most of the time that happens with artists that I really love. So I think their presence in the work happens by accident-or, not by accident but intuitively. I don't think of it as something that puts pressure on me. At school, when I went into art class it was this thing that I could do to rescue myself from what was going on in the playground. Art class was like in this safe place. Those artists were more in my reality than playing football in the playground. Looking at those people, and seeing it and believing in it, is more in the recollection of my past than anything else. I remember I had great friendships at school and my art teacher, Mr. Nutt, was really amazing.

Mr. Nutt?

He was a cool guy. I remember he used to paint bomb craters. But we never ever saw any of his work.

How do you know what he painted then?

Because he mentioned it, he would talk about it.

Wow. So you only had the idea of what Mr. Nutt made.

Art was like looking at these people who created how you perceived them, in a way, there was something about my school years where I was creating how people perceived me, because I was hiding things. So those influences, they through. I am aware of them when I am making work. I like that visual language is something that grows and evolves and develops and changes. How can anyone make anything that doesn't have influences?

Right, that's not the goal. But you also seem to separate yourself duly from the art world as it exists so monstrously in New York, right?

I'm aware of what goes on in the periphery of it all. At the end of the day, I'm making the work for myself because I'm trying to find something.

Your series of can sculptures that you've been working on for a while-is it always the same Xeroxed face stuck on them? Where is that image from?

There was occasionally a different one, but then I started to use the same one. It's from a '70s Nativist magazine, which I sort of feel is beside the point for me. I don't know if it is, but it's just this face that, for me, looks a bit like a statue. It's very classical, but very anonymous at the same time.

It's a very innocent face, one that immediately begs the question of homoeroticism for some viewers. Do people try to make more of that than you intend?

I think it exists and it's there and it happens. When I pull different elements from the work together, it becomes even more apparent. There are certain elements or gay history that are really interesting to me because it's changing and evolving and passing and losing something along the way, as well as gaining something. I think that I tend to romanticize the stuff that's more poetic and less about conforming. Because it seems like a lot of what's going on in the gay community now is all about conforming. I think, essentially, what I'm doing is dealing with the language of objects. My work is very much about desire, because desire is almost like an abstract thing in itself. Desire is about the things in you that exist at your core, but it's also about the things outside of you that control you against your will. So there are those two different realities.

Right.

I sort of love it that the bathhouse thing happened.

You mean an association from you using towels in your work?

I think it helps to contextualize the work in this moment in time. The bathhouse reading is kind of the most obvious reading, the narrative reading of it. But for me, I am more interested in different languages existing in the same object at the same time. For example, the light bulb: It's in front of the image of the face, which is a photographic image, which is made from a reaction with light, and now you have to look through the object of the light bulb to look at the photo. You're exposing something about how that image was made, but at the same time there's a space that you're looking through that is a physical thing that you could hold. I'm really interested in how the light bulb fits in a hand. Or take a yellow towel: You see the color yellow and it refers back to all these different things you associate with yellow. Like maybe when you're a little kid, yellow is sun, green is grass, blue is sky, but then you have this yellow object that you put on you that physically dries you. So you have this thing that touches your body, but also touches your mind way back there when you started to think about how you perceived the world. Maybe that's looking for a lost innocence. And maybe what's gone on the gay world was about discovery and now is about conforming.

Back to the towels for a second, because they are such a perfect material to chose to think about the body. You were hand-dying them and stitching them together to make flags, and then cutting away from them to create empty space, then drying them with cement into architectural forms. Did this process take them away from the body again?

They kind of become objects in the past. There's something about towels as I use them-they absorb something of the person who uses them. They're like a portrait of the person who used them, an abstract portrait. And so they're these things that retain something-I guess that implies a certain eroticism or whatever-they're holding something. But I want to talk about the towels that I hung on the colored panels. What happens is that you have this moment when it's hung on the peg. It's hung there and stays there.

It's suspended.

Exactly. But there's an immediate reaction with the colored panel that it's hung on. Whether it's a yellow towel hung on a blue panel-which refers to sun and sky, which refers to nature-or if it's a blue towel hung on a purple panel, where the blue might exist in the towel from the idea of water is suddenly mixed with the pink to make the purple of the panel.

The pink of your skin?

Yeah. It's sort of undiplomatic of me. But anyway, with the cement towel, it becomes an architectural form. It also becomes something permanent. It holds. The person is still there, but the person becomes the viewer. There's an interactivity that happens, which is like the work in the L. A. show with the tambourines that you don't actually hit but you think about hitting.

And the tennis and racquetballs suspended on the can sculptures. Is it like the potential that you as a viewer could have or would have with an object that now you can't have?

Yeah, exactly. It's an implied interactivity. What that's doing is opening up some sort of imagined space in the objects, but it's also a physical space at the same time. I'm really interested in this kind of place where imagined realities and physical realities meet. So there's this opening up space in objects. It's almost like trying to make holes that you could climb in to where you can exist in your current reality. It's just about trying to feel. And I think that comes from-and I'm reluctant to say it-oppression. But the bigger picture exists outside of oppression, something more universal-

Well, oppression is pretty universal.

It is. That's very true. We all oppress ourselves, really. But I think there was a heightened awareness of oppression.

You mean in your own personal life?

Right. And I think the crux of an art object is to open up a space you can exist in with the viewer. It's about trying to share your experience. Does this sound like therapy?

It sounds like the kind of therapy I want. Actual therapy scares the shit out of me!

Anyway, I work really intuitively. Hopefully it stops me from making work that's contrived.

I remember you told me about having read about Ellsworth Kelly taking the bus and looking at the shadows from the bus. You were relating to this really quotidian experience, that someone like Ellsworth Kelly was riding a bus and looking at shadows and making artwork. That seems really parallel to your process. Maybe even more than the art objects that result, the way you think about how to make art objects is similar? It's about a daily experience?

Yes, there is a realness to everyday experience. Anyway, it's funny you bring up Ellsworth Kelly and the shadows because in Provincetown, I was staying in a cabin and the sunlight was coming through a mosquito mesh screen on the door and there was the bigger wooden grid over that, which I guess is to protect the mosquito mesh. The was coming in and refracting this grid on the floor and there was this crazy wind and all these trees were blowing around outside. So there was this grid on the floor that was the shadow of a grid, and then there were the shadows of leaves and the trees and the branches laid on top of this grid, and it was on this maroon floor. It just happened to be so beautiful, the summer wind and the crazy shadows moving. I took a clear light bulb and I put the clear light on top of the grid. I made a video for seven minutes of an object, which you can hold, on the floor. And the contrast of the light was intense that the light bulb looked almost like it was switching on and off, just because of the shadows in the trees. It was somehow allowing you to hold on to a piece of nature, hold on to a natural reaction that was occurring. The bulb became like a camera-this point in between.

You bring up your video work, which I want to talk about. For example, the piece we showed in Berlin, *Freight*. Your studio in Marfa, Texas, when you did your residency with the Chinati Foundation, had a view out onto a train track. And every day a few times a day, a train would pass by your window. And you took the Xeroxed image of a face and pasted it on the window and filmed the Xerox with a rectangle cut away where the eyes would be...

Yeah, like the sort of rectangle you would see over someone's eyes when their identity is being blocked. I lined it up with the bottom of the train track and the freight train passed through the eyes of the image. There were all different colors and all these different sectioned boxes, some were stacked one on top of the other. I think that [Donald] Judd really loved the trains passing through the landscape there. They are amazing trains.

The effect of the finished video is so complicated. Everyone who saw that video said, "How did he do this? Is it two projections? What's happening here?" The expectation is that there are special effects and everyone is trying to figure out what the special effects are, when in fact you've made it in the most basic, handmade way that you possibly

could have. It was all done with objects and tape and of what was happening outside, and it creates this more magical, mysterious end result because video is something that everyone expects will be manipulated.

In the video there's always this physical element-something that you could grasp and hold. I like the idea that even though video is this imaginary thing, you can hold on to it and have it and grasp it, even though it's impossible to do that, really. Sometimes the idea of trying to achieve something is equally as important as achieving something. I think that what happens in that video is you end up looking into the eyes of this person, but when you look into the eyes of this person you end up witnessing a physical volume. You're looking into the eyes of this person and experiencing a mass-a heavy massive thing. Uniting the imagined reality and the physical reality.

So what's next?

I'm interested in these videos that I started to make in Provincetown. And when I first started making work there, I was always interested in these reflectors that you see on wooden posts.

The ones so you can know where not to drive?

Exactly, because the road is something I've been thinking about. The idea of a black towel nailed on the wall, with the negative space, is this kind of road. I like the idea that, like the tambourines, the reflectors are these things that bounce you back, that you bounce back at you, bounce color back at you. So I'm really interested in thinking about the reflectors in relation to towels and stuff. And I made a painting in Provincetown. I've always used color and I feel my sculptures are very painterly.

It's a very loose margin with you.

Right, but I also like that-I like the evasive quality of what the medium actually is, because I think that the objects are almost in denial about themselves in some ways, in terms of what they are. Like the collages are also photographs and paintings and sculptures. The sculptures use the language of painting. The towel pieces, I guess, are like paintings, but using the language of sculpture. The videos are using the language of collage.

Do you think of yourself mostly as a sculptor?

When people ask, I say, "Um, ah, I'm an artist."

Who are your contemporary influences?

Well, Jack. I like how Jack, again, uses everyday life experiences. There's a poetry and a romance to his work that I really like, and a sense of loss when looking at the past. When I first became interested in his work, he was blurring photographs. I found that really interesting. I liked his use of clichés, because-like the open road, celebrity and all that sort of stuff-these are just everyday things that exist in everyone's life that you can hold on to and maybe fantasize about.

I like that idea of cliché.

There's the Elvis imagery and the coif, the James Dean and all that stuff.

You seem to choose such unloaded materials for starters.

A towel, a light bulb, a soda can and a rock are not even clichés because they are so banal. Elvis is loaded. But a rock is totally forgettable. It's something that's ubiquitous but not cliché. You could say that the light bulb is an artistic cliché.

Jasper Johns.

Dan Flavin, Rauschenberg. But it means something different at this point in time. Or maybe I just use it in a different way. Other influences: Robert Gober, Donald Judd. I used to really love Robert Smithson when I was at college.

Not any more?

No, I still think he's amazing. I was just thinking about Spiral Jetty. How it's this thing that you walk around, and then at the center of it you look around and you're at this final point, and all you have around is the path that took you to that point. It's like a concrete memory.

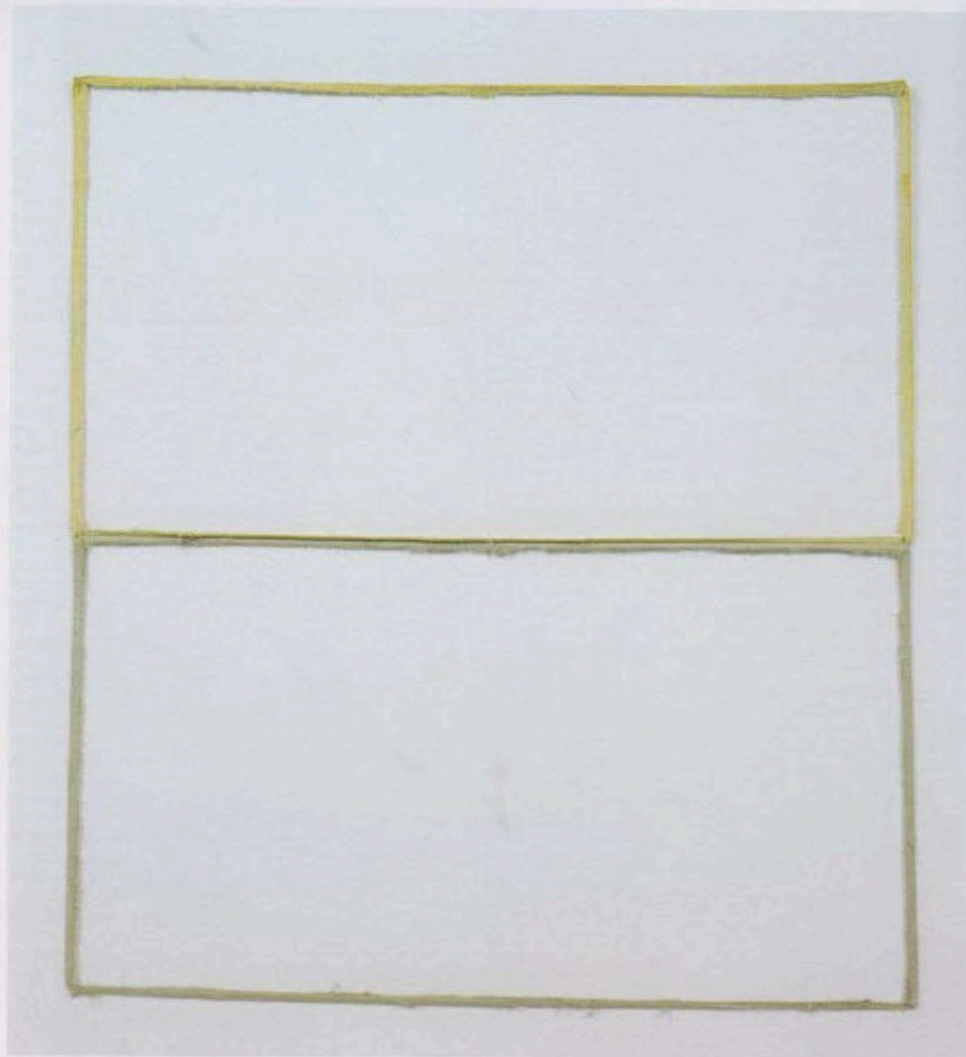
An artifact of what just happened.

It's an affirmation of the point where you are, at that point.

We all need one of those. How the fuck did I get here? Where's my jetty?

Where my jetty when I need one?





PAGE 109
Untitled (three towels), 2007
Bath towels, cotton thread and ink
70 x 50 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles

PAGE 110
Untitled (double negative, gold and beige), 2007
Bath towels, cotton thread and ink
49.2 x 43.7 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles





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Untitled (can sculpture), 2007

Soda can, magnifying glass, string, paint, Xerox, sea sponge and ink
7.9 x 5.1 x 4.7 inches

Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles

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Untitled (three towels), 2008

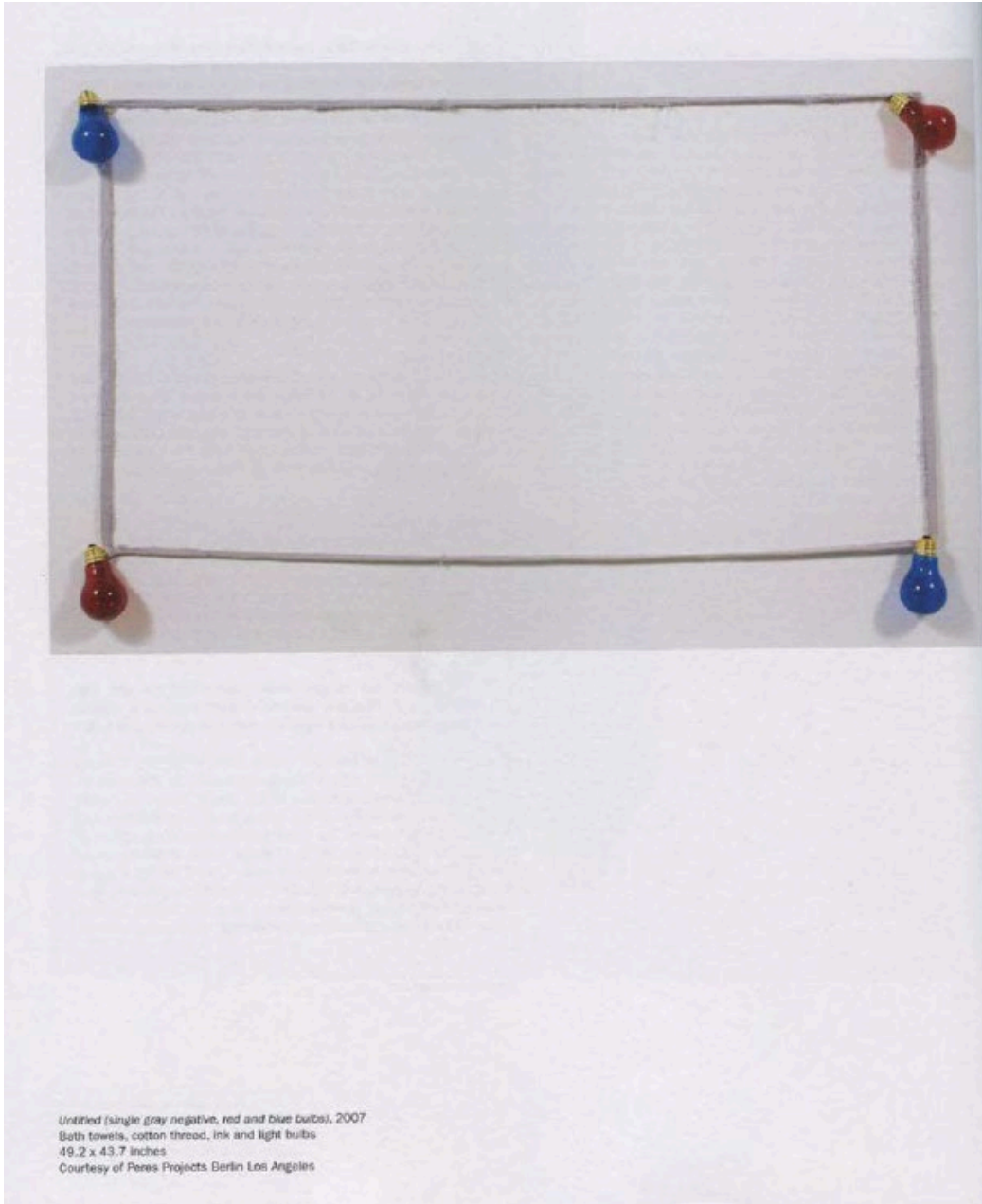
Bath towels, cotton thread and ink
70 x 42 inches

Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles

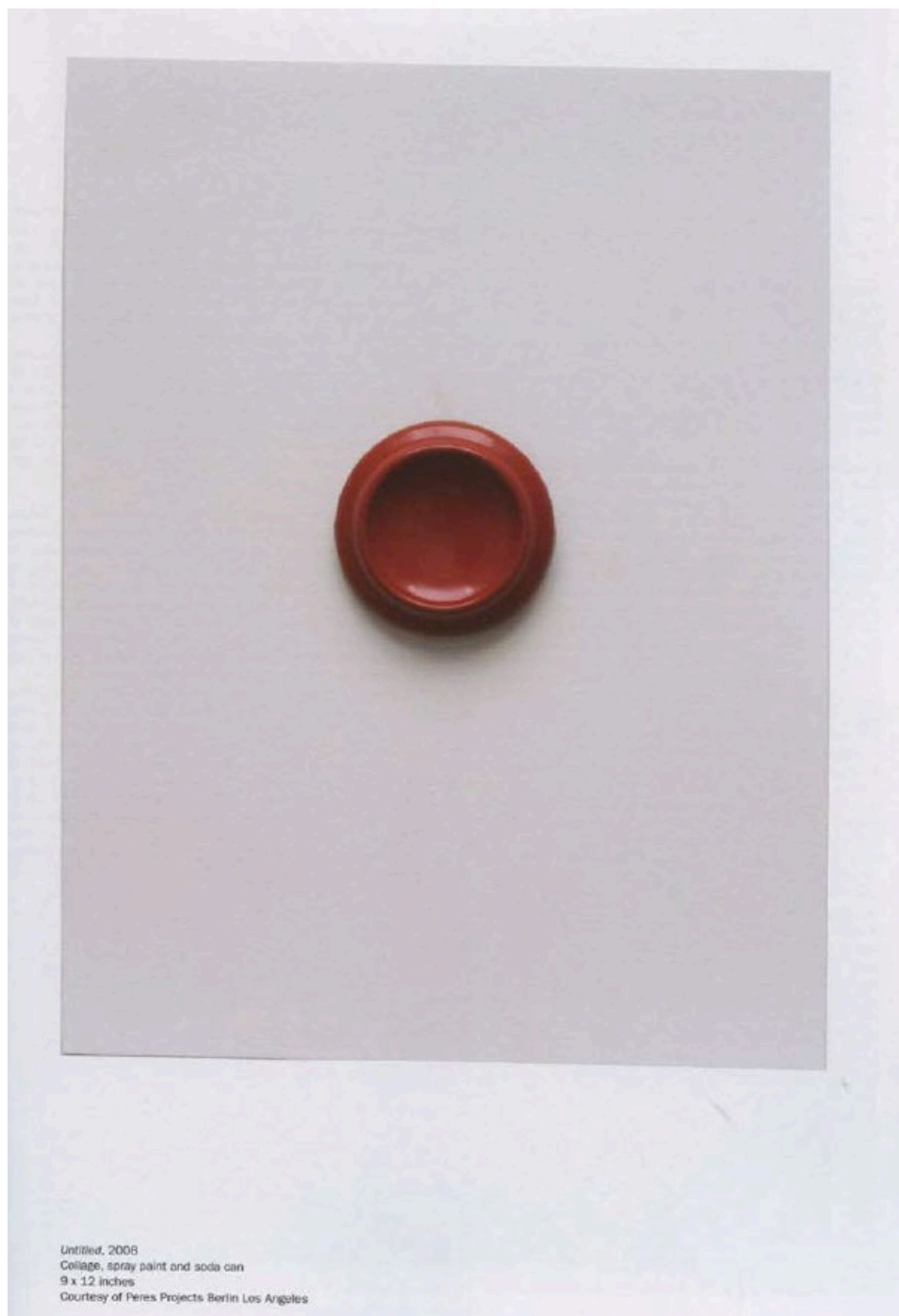




Untitled (towel hook painting), 2008
Bath towel, wood panel, house paint and ink
30 x 40 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles

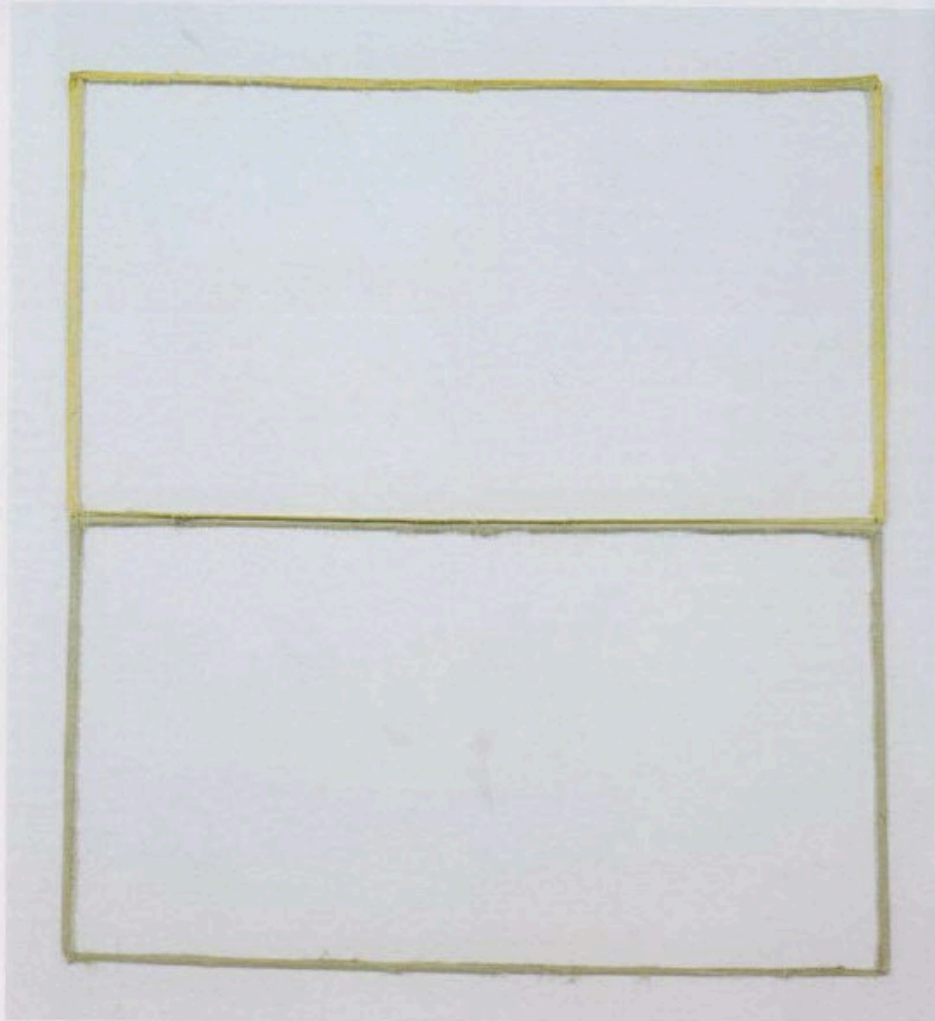


Untitled (single gray negative, red and blue bulbs), 2007
Bath towels, cotton thread, ink and light bulbs
49.2 x 43.7 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin Los Angeles



Untitled, 2006
Collage, spray paint and soda can
9 x 12 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles





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Untitled (three towels), 2007
Bath towels, cotton thread and ink
70 x 50 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles

PAGE 110

Untitled (double negative, gold and beige), 2007
Bath towels, cotton thread and ink
49.2 x 43.7 inches
Courtesy of Peres Projects Berlin Los Angeles