

Surface Feelings: James Hyde and Thomas Simon in Conversation

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Installation of "Surface Feelings." From left: James Hyde, Dreamt, 2003; James Hyde, Lounge, 1998; Kristof Wickman, Parts and Holes, 2016; Siebren Versteeg, Clearcache33_11600x16000_00364, 2014.

The artists James Hyde and Thomas Simon met in 2007, when Hyde hired Simon as a studio assistant. Remaining friends with Hyde (certainly the elder and perhaps the wiser of the two), Simon recently included Hyde in "Surface Feelings," the final exhibition at Coustof Waxman, the temporary Lower East Side project space Simon has been running since last fall. The two recently met to discuss the exhibition, the state of abstraction, and digital authenticity. "Surface Feelings" closes Saturday, March 4 with an evening of stand-up comedy from 6 – 9 p.m.

James Hyde: Is there any life left in Coustof Waxman?

Thomas Simon: The great thing about having a logo is that you can put it on anything—

Hyde: So it could be more than just a line of shopping? [*Laughter*]

Simon: Right, the merch is evolving and I have a few opportunities for spaces—some temporary, some longer term, we'll see what shakes out. This all came about through a fortuitous turn of events. When you do something and people like it, things happen. We'll see.

Hyde: It's always important to have some faith in things like that.

Simon: I've been reading this book about the trickster mythology, by Lewis Hyde, no relation.

Hyde: My grandfather was Louis Hyde, so you never know—

Simon: He talks about this principle of the trickster god and that you have to sacrifice to it and of course there's always luck, but when you respect chance it breaks your way more often. It's the idea of submitting to it or having a healthy respect for it, rather than treating it like an enemy.

Hyde: If you're an artist, you have to believe in luck, but I think it is actually quite a bit more than that. As artists we're looking at the world and working within the world and, being within it and outside of it puts you in a funny place. It's a big part of what makes working as an artist so elating.

Simon: There is a tremendous amount of faith required both on a micro and macro level in the process of even one work—to start something not knowing where it's going.

Hyde: So much of it is based on foundational work, whether it's apparent or not. You work and you work and all of a sudden things start coming together and you don't know why because the work isn't dutiful. The subtle things start fitting together. All the tangible and intangible moments have been building invisible connections. The work takes off and you happily follow along. It's a mindset where your mind includes the studio or the world around you or your materials or your camera, if you're a photographer. Your mind is much more than what sits between your ears.

Simon: It makes me think of something Michael Krebber said to [Martin Kippenberger](/artists/4001-martin-kippenberger) about how art is like a garden. That idea of gardening seems so apt because you plant things but then there's this tremendous amount of patience and then what comes up isn't always what you thought. There's a control, but not a grasping control. It's like a gardening control.

Hyde: And with the art garden you can get extreme weather and it can be really bad or it can be really good. Extreme weather in a garden is almost always bad!

Simon: Yes, there are limits to the analogy. I also think about permission and about the way that one artist can do something and in doing it—first they have to find out how to do it for themselves and how to give themselves permission to do it and then other artists see it and it ends up opening a door. It's contagion almost by seeing. You see it and you get infected by the possibility. I remember those two years that I worked for you, I would leave your studio and walk around and I was almost surprised at the way I was seeing differently after being around the glass boxes or the concrete paintings. I recognize that looking now and it's not that I don't see it elsewhere, but at the time it was literally in my eye framing the way I was perceiving. I remember noticing myself noticing differently.

Hyde: That's great to hear—a high compliment. My greatest anxiety about being a painter, an abstract painter, is that my work has pulled away from the world. Pulling away is part of the definition of what abstraction is. With abstract painting, it's crucial to wonder, how does it relate to the world around us?

Simon: You also were the first person to show me the *Psychobuildings* book by Kippenberger, and I think there's something of the looking that I'm talking about within that book—finding friends in the world, but strange friends, like a fire hydrant or a piece of corner of architecture.

Hyde: Kippenberger uncovers useful things that develop pathos. That book may be my single favorite Kippenberger..

Simon: It's amazing how much that kind of looking, which has always been a part of photography, is so prevalent now with Instagram, that idea of just taking photos of a thing you find on the street, like a plastic bag, or some color combination or form. It's not all of Instagram—

Hyde: But it's a large percentage of the non-cat Instagram photographs?

Simon: That thing about pathos is important. It's about finding something that somehow reminds you of a character or somehow has a personality and is projecting personality in the world. Your work has to do with the idea of form, above or below consciousness, in the way that the conditions of the camera shape the kind of pictures that get taken. I think a lot of the artists in "Surface Feelings" are very much thinking about form as the subject or the medium as opposed to the decisions within a form.

Hyde: I care a lot about form, but it's never the subject for me. The remarkable thing about the show is that everybody is quite clear about the physicality and the configuration of what they are doing. For me it's a type of gesture or movement surrounding the object that creates a type of relationship or a type of empathetic relationship with the object. The form is integral to the language but it isn't the goal.

Simon: Maybe you disagree, but when I think of form I think of format, like the idea of a body of work—is that what you mean?

Hyde: I was thinking about the final shape of the artwork, but format is often a starting point for me to get to painting. In the case of my frescoes on Styrofoam, they began through observing workers layering Styrofoam over building exteriors and then putting stucco over it. I thought this would be a great support for fresco! The stucco on Styrofoam serves as a type of architecture on which to paint fresco. I begin there but I can't imagine what all the possibilities are or what types of experiences they allow unless I try a few different things. When that starts being repetitive, I stop with that particular format. Some formats hold greater possibilities than others.

Simon: I'm not necessarily saying that any of the artists in the show do it intentionally, just that they have an appetite for changing form. Nick van Woert, for instance, has many bodies of work with very distinct techniques and materials. Some are very pictorial, some are incredibly sculptural, some are really material, almost like an essence concept. I think in your own way you have that as well. I was just talking with someone about the glass box in the show and I was saying that the idea to make a painting and then enclose two inches of air in front of the painting is such an interesting decision in terms of material.

Hyde: Duchamp speaks about the delay of glass—it's quite funny—the idea that putting a sheet of glass in front slows the visual time it takes to see what's behind. Maybe that wedge of air delays it further, but the real secret is the back of it. If you just put the glass boxes flat up against the wall they lose their magic trick—the suspension of gravity. The shapes don't float; they just adhere to the wall through the

glass. With the tilt of the glass box there's air behind the panel and the back glass disappears and the paint marks seem to hover.

Simon: I love the thing about the air behind the glass box. That's such an important bit of air.

Hyde: The algorithms that Siebren Versteeg uses to make his "paintings" are quite like some habits I've internalized with painting the glass boxes. I recognize these habits as spiritually similar to Siebren's algorithms. But his paintings move toward dematerialization whereas the glass boxes move to a type of materiality. There's a difference in direction. But even so the glass in front also flattens and levels the material within.

Simon: Adding the dimension actually causes the flattening.

Hyde: I like to think the visuals of the interior painting adhere to the front of the glass.

Simon: It's like a screen.

Hyde: Yes, there is that notion of screen where things can move. There's a type of fluidity within the thin slice of the screen that provokes a critique of both spatialism and essential authorship—like there is a single right configuration. Well, there can be many right configurations. Or if a screen has some density of shapes, it can invite projections of images or the clichés of shallow space or deep space— all worthy of critique.

Simon: In curating shows I've come around to something I came to in my own work, which is that there are always things I'm doing that I don't notice until after the fact.

Hyde: It can take 10 years or 20 years to notice something that was always important. With really good art you can discover new things hundreds of years afterwards. An artwork is not frozen in a moment of time. What makes an artwork is what people within their time and culture bring to it.

Simon: I've had a strong feeling for a couple of years that I wanted to put your work and Siebren's work in the same room. I wasn't sure why, but now I see it much more clearly. It has to do with the screen and the glass box both as a kind of algorithm, and the notion of the pixels. I had my smart friend in the gallery today and we were looking at both the works and talking about the infinite resolution of any painting, good or bad, versus the very carefully defined resolution of a digital painting or print. When I used to do 3D rendering it made me aware of how much detail and how much information is available in the everyday. When you have to construct it from scratch for an architectural rendering you realize how bland the world looks without the dirt in the corners of things, and without the variations of textures and strange stains, or the microfiber brushed every which way. Uniformity is actually really off-putting. It is the uncanny of the uncanny valley. And so for both you and Siebren, I feel like both your work in a certain way really celebrates, and of course the glass box actually encases, that infinite quality of things—

Hyde: I think your show looks so good in a large part because it didn't come about through an overriding intellectual gathering of works. You didn't have a theme and find works to fit it. Instead the works start talking in interesting ways because they're different. The odd thing about Siebren's work is that it's so materially different than what I do, but there's also a common sense that painting is a form or format that you can ask questions about, you can inquire, it can be a flexible vital subject that doesn't have to be limited in medium. It can be an allegory. It can be a figure in and of itself. It can be a history. It can be a group of materials. It can be a substitute for something else or something else can be a substitute for it. There are all these fascinating and trickstery ways to take apart a form and format and make it offer up its humor and expression. Perhaps that's the deep structure of the show. With all the pieces there's a type of humor which is often unexpected. Nick's flat field of bark is so simple and elegant but then there's that absurd cast concrete beer can sitting on top of the frame.

Simon: There's a little bit of gravity—

Hyde: In your show the works look quite classical, but there's all sorts of weird bits going on that are probably inside jokes, but they're not inside jokes that you have to be an insider to know, they're inside jokes that give a kind of electricity to the works in the show's context.

Simon: I don't know the jokes, I don't know. But one of the juxtapositions I was really interested in is between the piece by Kristof [Wickman], which is pretty clearly a monochrome, and your concrete painting, which I had seen 10 years ago at Sikkema Jenkins.

Hyde: Both of those pieces have the effect of wondering what this thing is used for. I think Kristof's piece is more explicit with all of the hooks and hangers. You don't know what it's about, but it looks like it wants to be useful. And that's a pretty great place for a monochrome to be: wondering how it's going to be useful.

Hyde: I'm not exactly sure what Zach [Bruder] is up to, but his paintings almost seem like a punch line in search of a joke—or maybe a reverse joke? There's oddball humor with both those artists' works even though they're so different.

Simon: He takes his titles quite seriously and has always had an interesting relationship to language. In his early paintings Richter would leave the bits of newspaper within the frame. Instead of just repainting the photograph that he had cut out of the newspaper he would paint part of the newspaper around it. So within the frame of the paintings, you can see some of the newspaper that surrounded the photograph he was painting. Once I saw those I realized that when you take an image that was intended to be captioned and then you remove the caption, there's a loss that demands a discussion. It's a simple trick that Zach's work taps into. The images are like propaganda or advertising.

Hyde: They feel like illustrations that become paintings by falling apart as illustrations.

Simon: You mentioned this idea that in contemporary painting there are a couple strong veins, illustrative painting or Matisse or a flat composition—

Hyde: It's a type of *fin de siècle* work that is being re-considered and it's interesting because in some ways we can understand [Egon Schiele](#) (/artists/egon-schiele-4280) and Matisse better with this distance. I think it's really important to re-look at something so that it doesn't get lost or become an official image of what it is. It's good to see work that takes up Matisse because it reminds you that his paintings are quite alive and are really dynamic in the way—not in style or appearance—but in the way they come together.

Simon: I find his painting really compelling and I always have, but sometimes the looseness is amazing. It's like he got bored painting that part. Like you've said, sometimes I think style is what happens when you're interested in something else.

Hyde: If Matisse has a style it comes through his hand and it comes through both insisting on drawing on the planar elements of painting. It's dazzling the many different ways he can bring them together. But I'm wondering why you chose the title "Surface Feelings"? It seemed to me that the beginning point is about works with interesting surfaces, but from there things moved in different directions.

Simon: I was thinking about how when you talk about an art object and then you say the word "surface" there is an immediate association with texture. I like the idea of the picture as window, or the idea of the screen having a texture you don't notice as you look through it until you're pointed toward it. Also the surface of something is basically where your eye stops and obviously behind every surface is more stuff but it's the surface that stops your eyeball and separates that thing from everything else. A surface feeling, like a surface emotion, implies a kind of shallowness but at the same time, and in a way with all the artists in the show there is this sense of remove from gesture or symbols of direct emotional art making.

Hyde: I thought the title was fun because it brings a bit of criticality to the notion of expressive transparency—and that somehow the surfaces might have feelings too!

Simon: With Siebren's paintings there's this kind of funny bait and switch. There are these overt indicators of an expressive abstract painting that is really a classic sort of Ab-Ex, in the way de Kooning was painting it on his own chest or something.

Hyde: At that moment American painting was bringing the physical presence of the painter into the work. Pollock and de Kooning had different methods but both of their paintings emphasize a painting/body relationship. To understand their pictures we empathize with the physical process of the painting. It's there in Newman and in Reinhardt too.

Simon: This is very close to what I'm interested in then, because when I think about Siebren's work there's this trick there where if you don't realize what it is right away you may start to empathize with the painter and with the marks and then it's like actually you've been empathizing with a robot to a certain extent. He's the programmer but he can step back from those marks in a way that an abstract painter cannot.

Hyde: In art there are two competing modes of authenticity: there's authenticity of the individual artist, which is transformed quite reductively into the body of the artist, as with the Ab-Ex artists, but there's also the authenticity of making work that reveals the context of your time and your society. The Siebren pieces are actually quite funny because they lead with the authenticity of the body but it's the clear eyed reflection of our digital world that they inhabit.

Simon: I'm still compelled by this mental image of Kristof's piece because through my day job I know a lot about powder coating and I know it's this thick layer of textured plastic that's covering this metal piece. All I can see is the plastic, there's no way to see inside to the metal. I know it's there, I can kind of sense it through the thing, but it's as if the metal disappeared and the plastic held its shape and there's something about that retreat of the work from it's own surface that I'm sensing with Siebren's work—

Hyde: Surface is taking over. It's true that surface can dissolve into materiality just as it can transform the sense of what material is. Similarly color can heighten or dissolve form.

Simon: And that's sort of the trick of your concrete paintings—the way that uniform color makes them into a physical mark.

Hyde: All more so because a thin coat of color is painted over the concrete. And the concrete is maybe 1/8th of an inch to 3/8 of an inch on the Styrofoam. And what is Styrofoam but infinite surface or as close as you can get wrapped around air?

Simon: It's an incredible magic trick to build out all this space into one thin, very complex plane, a green plane. You know the simple green is anything but.



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