

**A Dialogue on Distortion:  
Graham McDougal & Bayne Peterson**

**November 30, 2017 - February 24, 2018**

**Providence College Galleries**

## A DIALOGUE ON DISTORTION

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A distortion is a change, twist or exaggeration which makes something appear different from its original reality. An image, a form, or even an idea can be distorted. In most fields, distortion is characterized as an unwanted, often accidental change to a signal. In the realms of audio-visual information, distortion occurs when signals and files lose or scramble information through the process of dissemination. But in the history of art, distortion does not occur; rather, it is consciously generated when an artist uses a process to physically alter the size, shape or character of a form. In effect, distortion is the means to a very particular end: abstraction. Indeed, what may characterize distortion, and in turn, abstraction, at this art historical moment nearly two decades into the new millennium, is artists' attempts to synthesize the available digital and analog methods for making abstract art. In fact, it is not uncommon for artists working today to fuse cutting-edge digital technology with only recently outmoded analog technologies, like dark room photography and plate printing. Readily available as well is a millennia's worth of so-called traditional approaches to art-making—from drawing, painting and hand sculpting to collage and trompe l'oeil assemblage—for artists to integrate with newer media and methods. In the artwork of Graham McDougal and Bayne Peterson, two artists whose making methodologies demonstrate the sometimes rigid yet often unfixed dichotomies between digital and analog tools, distortion manifests as a unifying logic of age-old techniques and radically novel fabrication processes. Each artwork is a conversation on the myriad ways to expressionistically manipulate, exaggerate or warp image and form. Together, in the format of an exhibition, these artists engage in *A Dialogue on Distortion*.

The exhibition features several new and recent works, many of which have been created specifically to emphasize the formal and conceptual commonalities of the two artists despite their use of drastically different materials and dimensions. Even with their shared sensibilities, however, this presentation also shows each artist's practices as separate and distinct. The artists have not collaborated, and their work is inspired by an array of issues related to the very notions of what constitutes abstraction. Their respective processes derive from parallel methodologies, moving from digital to analog and back again and eventually meeting through a shared language of patterned and optical effects. Like any language, this one evolves; it expands and contracts to communicate the artists' abilities to blur, shift and distort the lines between fine art and conceptual craft, the historical and new, the handmade and digitally output, the gestural and mechanical, the practical and experimental... the list of dichotomies goes on.

Trafficking in tessellation and precision, McDougal's prints, many of which initially read as paintings on canvas, fabric and panel, layer pattern over pattern to show intricate ornamentation not merely as decoration, but also as compositional material sturdy enough to build incredibly complex structures and configurations. For *A Dialogue on Distortion*, the artist created several artworks with the same title:  *Casting*. These works, which depict a series of dot-matrices layered slightly unevenly atop one another, create an interference effect. The fusion of patterns creates yet another pattern that's quite unlike and much more complex than any of the individual

archetypes. The resultant image is called a moiré pattern. In graphic arts and prepress production (as well as mathematics and physics), which McDougal frequently utilizes, moiré patterns are usually considered glitches or mistakes, occurring when the technology for printing full-color images incorrectly superimposes halftone screens, which, in favorable circumstances, should produce a perfect overlay of color. McDougal makes the moiré-inducing errors with purpose, creating an optically confusing yet impressive scene of doubled imagery, vibrating variegations, swelling forms and complex constellations of movement.

McDougal's silkscreens and woodcuts are as much paintings as they are prints, as much representational documentation of distortion as they are abstraction created out of processes of distortion. Beginning with a few selections of text-based imagery culled from vintage art and design journals, McDougal puts his source material through a series of mutations. Among other trials, he crops, scans, photocopies, digitally alters, combines, prints and tweaks by hand the imagery's most minute details to create dizzyingly complex compositions. The final artworks bear some resemblance to their visual origins but teeter on the edge of abstracted oblivion. And ultimately, a paradoxical tension is created within the artworks: while each piece is unique because of McDougal's irreproducible process, its formation depends so much on fine and commercial art tools intended for near-perfect reproduction. In this respect, McDougal's artworks fit Walter Benjamin's prognostication that "the work of art reproduced [will] become the work of art designed for reproducibility," except that they satisfy the point to its inversion: reproductions, and particularly the technological means to their materialization, progressively empower artists to compose works of art by way of the tools of reproduction, establishing a distinct site of originality between the original and its process of origin.<sup>1</sup> As such, we can establish McDougal's studio practice as a series of dichotomous choices between disorder and order, chance and control, and/or hand and machine. He shares this teleology with ardent samplers and acclaimed artists like Tauba Auerbach, R.H. Quaytman, Wade Guyton and Seth Price, all of whom locate the digital, and the machines that purvey it, in the sphere of everyday life, while noting the impossibilities of disconnecting that digital from the labor of the human body. For McDougal and these artists like him who are clearly invested in the handmade and artisanal intelligence of making unique objects even when using the tools of mechanical and digital reproduction, artistic culture is a storm of progress a la Benjamin, piling up traces and information wreckage out of which artworks get assembled and polished for presentation.

Peterson's sculptural work shares a sensibility with McDougal's two-dimensional work because its production too requires of the artist a pendulous process, one that swings between computer generation and the handcrafted. He usually starts the compositional phase with just an idea in mind, a pencil sketch, or a foam core model. Other times, he begins the formation of an artwork with a 3D rendering, which allows him to map out the necessary fabrication steps for the given object. Ultimately,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* (New York: Shoken Books, 1968), 221.

though, the 3D version of the object rarely matches the final result because Peterson often intervenes at some point, whether tweaking a cut here, which warps an angle there, or hand sanding a component there, which tapers an element here. Hand work or not, the 3D software, or at the very least its visual language that the artist finds so appealing, has an impact on both conception and output. As Peterson explains to Lauren Ross in an interview for this catalogue, his interest lies in the hardwired subjectivities of the software, which often produce abstruse formal outcomes that reside “somewhere between image/object and digital/analog.”<sup>2</sup> For example, he sometimes drafts and slices an object virtually so that it can be laser-cut as a series of vector files into multiple sheets of plywood. The cut plywood, which looks like so many puzzle pieces, is stacked and compressed into three-dimensional forms before the final and lengthy process of power and hand-sanding to smooth perfection. As Peterson explains to Ross in terms not totally dissimilar to a description of McDougal’s production process, his conception and manifestation of abstraction are results of various kinds of distortion:

**I like the idea of abstraction being a natural process. For example, a representational sculpture could become abstract if left to wear down over time. Similarly, an idea, image, or object could become unrecognizable as it goes through stages of process, changes hands multiple times, or iterates over and over. This idea of abstraction as a form of evolution or distortion is part of what has caused a shift in my work toward abstraction. I also enjoy the freedom of abstraction; working with abstract forms feels like play. And I appreciate the physicality and universality of the experience of formal and optical qualities.**

To understand this trajectory of distortion, it’s helpful to look at Peterson’s earlier work, two of which are included in *A Dialogue on Distortion* and called *Untitled* (2015). These small dyed-plywood sculptures, one with its appendage-like components attached by string, are reminiscent of Alexander Calder’s mechanized mobiles. Their wormy elements seem computer generated and digitally rendered, but the artist actually intuitively sculpted and hand-carved them from multiple chunks of the compressed plywood. The artworks’ fluid outlines and soft circular forms, which appear as transmutation of liquid to solid material, computer-screen animation to static object, reveal abstraction’s ability to signify phases of distortion and therefore stages of evolution. Likewise, *Knot 1* and *Knot 2* (2015), another pair of artworks included in the exhibition, exemplify a process that goes a few steps further. For their construction, Peterson made a mold of a finished stacked plywood object and then hand cast two replications of it, albeit in different materials. *Knot 1* is gravel and resin, while *Knot 2* is powdered granite and resin. Abstraction becomes a built-in part of numerous developmental phases as forms distort and adapt to new replication methods, materials and hand finishing.

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<sup>2</sup> Lauren Ross, “Discussing Distortion” in *A Dialogue on Distortion: Graham McDougal & Bayne Peterson*, November 30, 2017 – February 24, 2018 (Providence: Providence College Galleries, 2018) 25.

Characterized both as still-life and biomorphic abstraction, Peterson's more recent work draws out the totemic and surreal qualities of functional objects. Reliquaries come to mind. So, too, do cogs and spindles and the Mouse Trap game, but they are all misshapen takes on originals. Organic forms in uncanny arrangements conjure traditions of American folk art and non-Western decorative objects. Tight striated patterns vibrate with bold, riotous color combinations to evoke spiritual and mythological narratives. Akin to McDougal's process of continually appropriating the same form to build densely repetitive patterns, Peterson often replicates his own work, or at minimum repeats elements of it, to suggest curious blends of modernism, ethnography and natural history. Prime examples are two commissioned works—a four-by-five-foot plywood and sand sculpture and a tiny sculpture that has been 3D printed in a kind of sandstone material. Both of these pieces are based on a dyed-plywood and epoxy table-top sculpture called *Untitled* (2017), which was originally shown in *Still Life*, Peterson's solo exhibition at Kristen Lorello Gallery in September 2017. The plywood and sand sculpture is a mostly faithful rendition of the original table-top sculpture. It is just 3D scanned, scaled up, given a new color palette, and constructed of ever-so-slightly different materials. The sandstone piece, however, is a dramatically distorted version of the earlier work, so much so that it has the quality of having been created in a different era altogether. With this practice of re-working the same forms and compositional structures, Peterson yields a kind of family resemblance among his artworks that encourages one to look for and even invent associations between them. And if one looks long enough, the topographical striations or bands of color mapping the structural components of underlying shapes begin to tell stories. In one tale, histories of local visual culture collide when the New England Queen Anne architectural style meets the eye-twitching art of Providence fixtures like Jim Drain and Ara Peterson. In another, Bridget Riley's Op-Art paintings begin to grow into sculptural renditions of the various natural organisms that Ernst Haeckel illustrated for his seminal 19th century book, *Art Forms in Nature*.

In the company of one another, McDougal and Peterson's bodies of work are ultimately meditations on the elasticity of form and pattern, of representation and abstraction, of what is referential and what is not. No particular forms or specific references seem more important than their accrual and manipulation. That they can be combined, recombined and altered at will makes each physical artwork a kind of blurred index in which a series of classifications result in nebulously diverse associations and cultural implications. The logic, or lack thereof, of accumulation conceals the recursive nature of the artworks. To make sense of their logic, however, is perhaps beside the point. The dialogue on distortion, as it relates to artistic intention and the integration of the analog and the digital into the abstract, is the real point, and it is continually worth making.

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This catalog accompanies the exhibition:

*A Dialogue on Distortion:*

*Graham McDougal & Bayne Peterson*

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Organized by PC–G Director & Curator Jamilee Lacy

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