





ART BRINE

by Emily Farranto

David Surman, Ian Gouldstone, and the High Potential of Two-Person Shows

A marriage is more than two individuals who happen to live in the same house. And a two-person exhibition is more than two solo shows that occupy a gallery at the same time. Or it should be. *ROOMMATES* at Sibyl Gallery demonstrates the potential of a two-person show to represent three things: each artist's vision and something else introduced or amplified when viewing the work together. David Surman's representational paintings and Ian Gouldstone's abstract multi-media works, seen side by side, call attention to the notion of speed, how we approach different formats, and the continuing reverberations of art history.

The majority of Surman's paintings are large, gestural depictions of wolves painted in bright colors. Louisiana is *Blue Dog* territory, and from the doorway of the gallery, one could assume they are looking at something similar to the George Rodrigue series, but there's much more going on here. These cartoonish but not topical paintings are closer to Philip Guston or Carroll Dunham as the artist rummages through the canon of Western art. The wolf characters engage in activities, including painting, in *The Painter* (after Pablo Picasso), planting in *Hope without Optimism* (after Vincent Van Gogh), and dancing in *Red Dancers* (after Keith Haring and A. R. Penck).

The paint is applied in layers that confess how a painting is made: raw canvas, translucent washes, drawing and underpainting, and finishing detail—the literal clothes on the subject. The speed with which these were created is

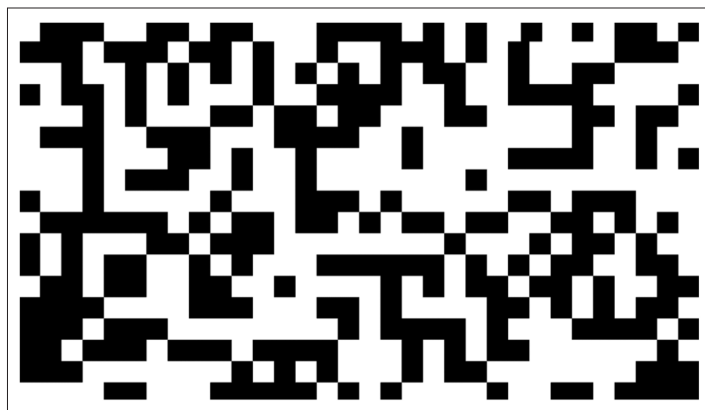
evident in the brushstrokes, some of them four inches wide. In some paintings where the underpainting is revealed, the dripping paint—appearing only in the underpainting—also alludes to the speed. Generally, I'm not a fan of performative drips which can resemble factory-made holes in blue jeans, preferring a person earn rather than stage the holes in their jeans and drips in their paintings. But in these paintings, the drips say, *this dripping layer is more fluid than the one over it*, what painters call “fat over lean,” meaning the oilier layers of oil paint should be applied over washes.

Positioned next to a vertical, mostly red and white and black *Red Dancers* canvas is a horizontal monitor showing black and white squares in what looks like a pixel glitch. Unsure if anything would “happen,” I stood there staring at the screen. Just as it seemed like there was nothing else to see, a black square slowly slipped out of place and joined a blocky black shape beneath it. Something about the stillness and waiting made this minimal action feel dramatic and surprisingly satisfying. It occurred to me that we are habituated to expect speed from screens. After watching the stillness and occasional cube or chunks of cubes shift and drop I felt I had embodied the slowness, calibrating my senses to it. Turning to look at *Red Dancers*, the whip and frenzy of paint, I felt this acceleration. The juxtaposition boosted the contrast.

The digital piece is titled *The Idea of Order at Lascaux*, Lascaux being the site of cave paintings made around 20,000

years ago in what is now France. It can also be found in the beginning of many Art History 101 coursebooks. The materials of Gouldstone's *The Idea of Order at Lascaux* are listed as “live simulation using custom software, single board computers, monitor.” In a text message, the artist described live simulation as “software performing live through hardware in the present moment... its output is not predetermined and cannot be repeated or perfectly predicted.” The leap between a screen of black and white geometric

a riff on Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Recognizable, how? I wondered, considering the adaptation looks nothing like the original. This was the mystery. In Surman's *Lunch on the Grass* (after Edouard Manet), a figure is nude, seated in profile, with his head turned to face the viewer. Though the gender and proportions are off, this is the main visual clue that the piece is a callback to Manet, “the father of Modernism.” Two wolves stand in for two more male figures in the original painting, though without the human I believe the reference would be



Ian Gouldstone, *The Idea of Order at Lascaux*



David Surman, *Lunch on the Grass* (after Edouard Manet)

shapes and drawings made by primitive humans is a large one, but if you do leap and make the connection, it's rewarding. For me, the connection lies somewhere in the idea of marks on a wall and the mysterious motivation to make them. I liked the piece before I read the title, but after, I felt it slip into place within the theme of art ancestry in the show.

Next to *Lascaux*, Surman's large painted diptych (a single image on two panels) is immediately recognizable as

lost. A hint of green and blue very vaguely correlates with the original, and just half a lemon represents the picnic on the grass instead of fruit and bread. It's almost funny.

One might expect that Ian Gouldstone's abstract multi-media works and quiet geometric serigraphs would feel at odds with—or at least disconnected from—Surman's paintings. But the outcome of pairing these

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artists ("ROOMMATES") is more layered than the messy vs. neat dichotomy of TV co-habitators like *The Odd Couple* or *Will & Grace*. I would think painting would be the more fun and carefree roommate at Sibyl, but there is something heavy about the paintings and something more playful about the digital work.

One piece seems like an outlier, not part of either artists' body of work on view. But Gouldman's *Black Box* is a point of contact, an intersection of both bodies of work. When I arrived at Sibyl and entered the exhibition, I saw what looked like a problem. In the middle of the large and always professional space was a large blue tarp on the floor and the sound of dripping water. I saw the blue plastic move as a drop of water must have landed, though I could not see the water. I looked up at the ceiling to find the source of the leak and realized it hadn't been raining outside. Then I noticed the cords running from the gallery wall under the tarp.

Black Box is both conceptual and representational, like the paintings. It is time-based and subtle like the digital works. It suggests itself in the audible background of both bodies of work as the sound of falling drops of water speeds up and slows down, an imaginary rainstorm passing outside. The phrase "black box" can refer to a small theater, a flight recorder recoverable after a plane crash, or a method of testing a computer program, all relevant references according to the themes of the show. I'm

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David Surman, *Red Dancers* (after Keith Haring and A. R. Penck)

guessing it alludes to the last. Black box testing evaluates the functionality of a program by its output and can be done without knowledge of code or the inner workings of a system. It's an apt metaphor for art viewing or how without being in a relationship you can see external signs of its healthy functioning.

The show's title winks at the fact that the two London-based artists are a couple—roommates, in the parlance of more pearl-clutching times. The exhibition text points out, "Art history is replete with examples of artists whose life together is framed as the struggle of one career against another, but for Gouldstone and Surman, the project is one of pure exploration." The viewer's experience of *ROOMMATES* is also an argument for the often underrealized potential of two-person shows. ♡



For more info on *ROOMMATES*, currently on view, check out sibylgallery.com.

The Crow

He is the summation of all other people like him before him. These bodies expire but spurt out more of themselves just before. Two ways to get it,
Be born
Consume, ladylike, the entrails
And then, perched there, great being of flight, ground waddler, watches
Yes, and gleans
And continues the grudge all its own
"A murder!"
These English
-words-
are so dramatic

—Mavis Figgis

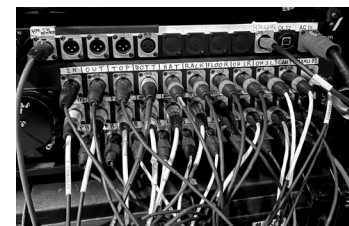
SOUND CHECK

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bag. It's also really useful for playback systems, to put that over the computers. Really, you want to protect anything that can overheat.

Let's talk about the show I saw you mix at the Civic. Thank you so much for letting me stand at the sound booth with you for that one, by the way. The view was amazing from there but it was also, obviously, the best sonic balance in the whole venue. That tour was interesting. It was in 2023. I was hired super last minute because they had someone bail and needed a replacement immediately. I actually had to jump off of the Joy Oladokun tour briefly so I could do front of house for

Kesha's opener, Jake Wesley Rogers. I didn't have a lot of my own gear, at that point, so Kesha's front of house guy let me use his whole set up. Initially, we were told that Kesha was going to do a stripped-down tour and make it really simple, so we designed a chill show around a piano, and then we showed up to the first show and it was a *full* pop production, with backup dancers, so we had to scramble and create a whole 'nother show and hire a drummer to meet us in Atlanta... Somehow we made it all work. ♡



MARCO GILL

RAISING LOUISIANA

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Are there any seemingly negative parenting experiences that you later felt grateful for?

When my daughter was 5 to 6, I was very consumed with the care of my ailing mother. Most mornings, my daughter and I took food and coffee to the hospital for Mom, and we brought her dinner in the evenings. I felt immensely guilty that my daughter, who could have been carefree during these years—sleeping in a bit in the mornings and playing with other kids after school—was instead bearing witness to this excruciating process of pain and loss. I felt horrible that she couldn't get the best version of me because I was stressed out and tired from trying to

raise her while caring for my mom, fighting for her humane treatment in the hospital, and holding down a full-time job... alone. Now, when I look back on the hospital photos, I see a progressively-shrinking older woman, laughing and sharing life with the little girl who crawled into her hospital bed every morning. I see a young girl spending precious time with her Nanamae, soaking it up like the finite treasure that it turned out to be. Looking back on what then felt like a tremendous sacrifice for my daughter to make, I don't think that she missed out at all and I am so grateful that the three of us had those last years together. —Megan CW

There is so much about caregiving that is absolute drudgery, but it's also where our bonds of commitment are forged. Not long after my then-fiance and soon-to-be stepson and I moved in together, my partner had to leave town for a couple days. Of course that's when my 10-year-old almost-stepson got norovirus and puked his guts out for 24 hours straight. As I collapsed in bed after cleaning the vomit from around his toilet, I thought, "OK, this is it. Now there can be no doubt that I truly care. That we are a family." —Sara Pic



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