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SUMMER 2014
IMMEDIACY

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Photography by
Van Robinson

John Houck
on the artistic
benefits of
psychoanalysis,
the history of
graph paper and
photographing
childhood items.

In conversation with
Chris Wiley

Since meeting John Houck five years ago, I have been privy to exceptional, sure-footed advances in his work. These have not necessarily come in the form of Damascene flashes of insight that turn his work on a dime, though his recent transition from his intricate computer generated *Aggregates* series to his spatially flummoxing still lifes in *A History of Graph Paper*, might have you believe it. Rather, Houck is a tireless experimenter, a habit that is likely a holdover from his time as a programmer, where running code, tweaking it, and running it again, was the alpha and omega of his daily grind. Clearly this doggedness served him well. We spoke during the course of one week in Los Angeles, where Houck resides.

Chris Wiley: I met you right around the time that you made the shift from producing heavily referential photographs that came out of your time at the Whitney Independent Study Program to producing your *Aggregates* series, which are unabashedly concerned with aesthetic pleasure, despite their entanglement with your history as a computer programmer. Can you talk a little about this shift? I remember at the time we talked a lot about the importance of positioning visual richness over and against the chilliness of theory.

JH: After the ISP, like after any program, I was grappling with a heightened self-consciousness around what my work was doing, and more importantly, what I was doing in the larger world. I had been a student for almost thirty years and the ISP was the end of my formal education. I decided to stop doing residencies and programs in order to focus on my work. In transitional moments like this I often remember my dreams more vividly. I have told very few people this, but I woke up one morning a week after finishing the ISP and half asleep I wrote down on a piece of paper "What is the most beautiful thing you can make?" The details of the dream aren't so interesting, but the feeling from it consumed me, so much so that the feeling persisted in my studio.

Maybe the dream was a way of overcompensating for the headiness of the ISP. I'm a little on edge that we are traveling down the road toward a false dichotomy: work that is either formally loaded or theoretically invested. But maybe the chilliness of theory sent my unconscious reeling in search of visual richness. That could be a novel use of theory;

throw someone in the deep end of rationality, and they'll have a reaction formation that tends toward affect and feeling. Maybe that's why I enjoy programming and struggling with philosophical writing, it gives rise to its opposite. Of course the synthesis of the two is the interesting part.

CW: Yeah, to draw a hard line between the theoretical and the aesthetic is certainly to set up a false dichotomy. However, it is one that I am certainly prone to make, as I feel like one of the great shortcomings of theory-laden approaches to art making and art analysis is that it robs work of its ability to take its own unique shape, and chooses instead to cram it into a box better suited for philosophy. But this idea of synthesis is certainly useful when thinking about both your *Aggregates* and your new body of work that was recently shown under the title *A History of Graph Paper*. At risk of working backwards, I remember there being a particularly poignant reason for that latter title, which connects to what we're talking about. Can you explain it?

JH: The title for *A History of Graph Paper* comes from research I was doing about exactly that, graph paper. I was trying to find the origin of graph paper, not physically, as in (0,0), but historically. There are several origin stories about when graph paper became commercially available, but there was one figure in that history that was quite compelling to me. Luke Howard was a nineteenth-century scientist known as "the father of meteorology" and is credited with giving the scientific names to clouds around 1802. Goethe was so taken with





his naming system that he created four poems in honor of Luke Howard.

Prior to this, clouds didn't have names and it was only by painting these amorphous clouds on a grid that he was able to note patterns in cloud formations. Later, he was one of the first people to sell graph paper as a commercial product. I recently started reading a biography on Luke Howard and I want to write about this history more in-depth. The way the grid rationalized something like clouds, that were outside of language, into something classifiable is a fascinating process to me. I'm sure my fascination with the grid is related to my background in engineering and architecture, but I also think the rational is a tool that is often best put back in its toolbox. When it's time to do this, I think of a line from a Jack Gilbert poem: "We must unlearn the constellations to see the stars".

CW: Also in keeping with this notion of your work straddling the line between the affective and the analytic is the connection that you draw between the methods by which you created the works for *A History of Graph Paper* and your deep ongoing engagement with psychoanalysis. Of course, this also directly relates to the subject matter of the work as well. Can you talk about this a little, and also address this seeming ascendance of psychoanalysis in your work, which had previously been dominated, in my understanding, by your background as a programmer?

JH: I became interested in psychoanalysis at the ISP. Halfway through the program I decided to see an analyst myself, and since I was living in New York it wasn't a bad place to find one. I showed up the first day with a notepad and had every intention of treating it like another academic class, but that quickly changed. I wasn't allowed to take notes. This prohibition and many other parts of the analytic process created a situation where I found myself in the realm of memory and feeling. It was an absolutely crucial step for me. Working with an analyst over the past four years has done more for me artistically than any academic program. To put it simply, it has taught me how to sit with frustration and difficult feelings. Technical repetition or blank abstraction or writing software can be a way to avoid such feelings. I hope my work can

come out of both technical and affective realms in some third way.

The *Aggregates* are personal in terms of my experience as a programmer. I worked as a software engineer for five years before getting my MFA, and I programmed obsessively during that time. The *Aggregates*, while re-photographed, are coded from the start. My recent work speaks to my former job as a software engineer in a more oblique way, and takes on more directly my experience in the analytic process. The thing that ties all my work together is the dialectic between desire and repetition.

CW: The objects that you photograph in the *History of Graph Paper* are significant objects from your past, correct? When you first explained that to me, I thought it was a brilliant way to move the new studio work that has been in vogue for the last five years or so into new, and possibly deeper territory. Does this have to do with the element of desire that drives your work? Is it a desire for healing? A desire to reclaim or understand the past?

JH: That's right, they are all objects given to me by my parents over the past three years. I don't think it's coincidental that when I told my parents I was seeing an analyst they started bringing me gifts every time they would visit me. These gifts were all objects from my childhood; my stamp collection, family heirlooms from the reservation I was born on, drawing equipment. To me, these gifts said, "Get this shit out of our house, but don't forget you were once our child." To me, these objects are a way to acknowledge my transition to a place where I can be more psychically free of my parents.

I was originally re-photographing cast-off pieces of foam and it was purely formal, a very empty kind of abstraction, and too similar to the current profusion of still life art photography that features banal objects. I wanted the objects to be layered and personal, so I took these objects my parents had been giving me as a starting point. The re-photographing is not unlike analysis where you have some memory of an object or event and then you look at it from several perspectives in the present. I want the photos to speak about how imaginative remembering is, and for the viewer to read them as a puzzle to analyze in a way that is hopefully not unlike the analytic process.

At the moment, my parents are getting ready to move to Portland and they are cleaning out their house. I'm overwhelmed with them calling daily to ask if I want to keep certain objects they are digging up from the basement. They have stored way more than I could ever remember and now that push has come to shove, these objects have to be dealt with because they are moving. It's no longer a sweet gesture, a gift. It's too much. There are precious few objects that either me or my parents want anymore and perhaps this is the perfect end to my *History of Graph Paper* series.

CW: Finally, I have to ask, does your experience as a surfer play into the creation of your work? And please, spare us the bad Internet puns.

JH: Unlike surfing the Internet, surfing has taught me to be more patient and mindful. With surfing, you often have to wait for the perfect wave and some days it never shows up. In the studio, those moments when you achieve a creative flow, like the perfect wave, are also rare and fleeting. You are swept up in those moments and they carry you as long as they will. It's akin to unconscious processes in that you can't will them to be. No amount of willful effort will materialize the perfect day of surfing or a great art work. They arise like a wave and carry you along. All we can do is be present when they happen and hope we stand-up at the right moment. I've always thought this T.S. Eliot quote gets to the heart of creative work and surfing, "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business."



Untitled, #78, 50,624 combinations of a 2x2 grid, 15 colors, 2012 (from Aggregates series).
Creased archival pigment print (unique), 24x30 inches.





*Baby Shoes, Never Worn, (From the series A History of Graph Paper), 2013.
20x27 inches.*

*Pointing Device, (From the series A History of Graph Paper), 2013.
32 1/2x45 1/2 inches.*

