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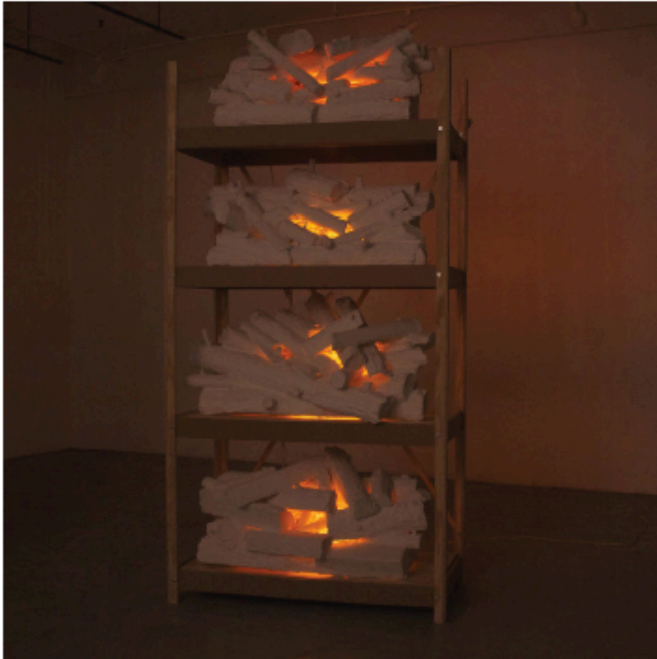
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ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | EXHIBITION REVIEW

## Yale, RISD MFAs Go on Display

Work by freshly minted graduates from two of the very best MFA programs in this week's Fine Art



Anthony Bragg's 'New Fire (shelves),' from the RISD exhibit. PHOTO: TONY BRAGG

By **PETER PLAGENS**

July 17, 2015 6:49 p.m. ET

### Yale MFA Painting and Printmaking Graduates 2015

Garis & Hahn

263 Bowery, (212) 228-8457

Through Aug. 8

### Rhode Island School of Design MFA Painting Program Thesis Exhibition

Kathryn Markel Fine Arts

529 W. 20th St., (212) 366-5368

Through Aug. 15

It's "unorthodox," say the press materials from Garis & Hahn, to present "an entire MFA class as a New York City gallery exhibition." The master of fine arts degree, generally requiring two or three years of work, is not only the "terminal degree" necessary for college teaching jobs, but also a typical first step into independent creativity for serious aspiring artists. (In most programs, there are no studio assignments, just a series of

critiques from faculty members, like doctors making house calls.) Work by freshly minted graduates from two of the very best MFA programs piques one's interest, both as a look at what younger artists are up to and as a possible harbinger of what's coming to the art scene over the next few years.

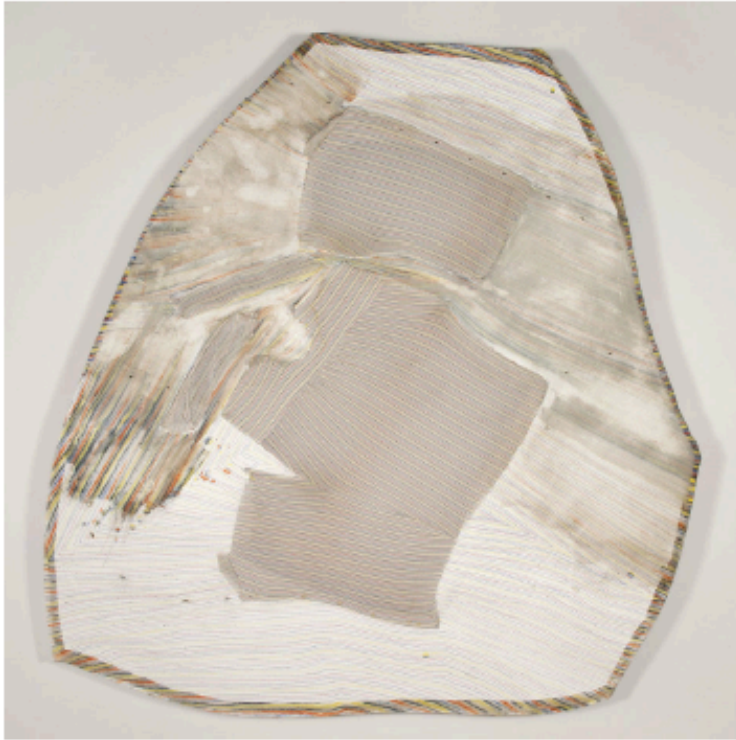
Yale University has long been considered a rocket to stardom in the New York art world, with an alumni roster that includes Chuck Close, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra and Lisa Yuskavage. The Rhode Island School of Design is one of the best art schools in the country, counting among the holders of its MFA Kara Walker, Julie Mehretu and Shahzia Sikander—all three, incidentally, eventual winners of MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowships.

Collectively, this current crop of thesis work seems all too eager to join the dance party of current styles. Much of it falls within the gravitational pull of “zombie formalist” (i.e., somewhat abject) abstraction and, for all its schooled cleverness, looks vanilla with a few strawberry sprinkles. Both shows suffer from a withering consistency of modest scale, which may come from having to fit everybody into the exhibitions. (The Yale show boasts 21 artists, and the 10 RISD grads are squeezed into their gallery's rather tight quarters).

It's also regrettable to see how some artists are weighed down by conceptual overreach stated in grandiose academic verbiage. For example (from one gallery's unbylined press materials, but with more than a hint of the faculty curator's authorship), “Western culture's voyeuristic tendencies toward the gendered and racialized body, and the duality of fetishization and censure directed at it.” And (from an artist's own website), “In her work, she focuses on the study of power relationship and the ideology impact of inhumane conditions and social psychology.” This sort of lingo is part of what the art world expects from its future luminaries, and graduate programs—putting the final touches of professional training on those who are about to emerge as emerging artists—are at pains to help them furnish it.

All that said, the two shows offer several examples of promising work. Among the graduate art from New Haven, Conn., Marisa Manso's visually and physically hefty shaped painting “Untitled” (2015), Luke Rogers's Chelsea-ready “Gestures I” from 2015 (inkjet ink on canvas is a favorite trope in current painting), and Sarah Faux's fleshy pink “Untitled” (2015) stand out for me.

From farther up I-95, in Providence, R.I., Whitney Oldenburg's “Unpeeled” (2015)—a chunky, painting-like object containing car polishers and rock as well as oil and acrylic



Marisa Manso's 'Untitled,' from the Yale show. PHOTO: GARIS & HAHN

paint—has a faintly rough feminism to it, in a good way. Anthony Bragg's "New Fire (shelves)," 2014-15, demonstrates that an elegantly goofy idea (vertically stacked hearths with Hydrocal logs and light-bulb fires) can suffice as art. And Jon Merritt's "Arboreal Model: Astrom" (2015), a veritable Aztec Christmas tree of bright acrylic rectangles on a shaped panel (which the faculty curator cheerily calls an example of "Montessori minimalism") is satisfyingly snappy.

In both shows, however, there's an overwhelming sense that strategy ("What do I have to make to get into a decent gallery?") trumps personal passion ("This is what I'm driven to create, and, art market be damned, this is what I'll make").

Granted, all artists are historically situated, and no graduate student at Yale or RISD or anyplace else is painting the equivalent of Cimabue's enthroned Madonnas with gold-leaf backgrounds. But this crop of 30 or so recently graduated artists appears to be semi-stymied by the current art predicament, where not only "everything" appears to have been done already, but overt, ironic riffs on "everything has been done already" have already been done, too.

In the absence of some singular, searing personal vision—a rare quality in artists at any stage—graduating MFA painters face daunting circumstances. Intelligence and talent, however, lurk in both shows. All they need is some more time to bloom.

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*