



WHERE THE LINE LEADS: JOHN HOUCK AT ON STELLAR RAYS

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John Houck, *Box of Transitional Objects*, 2016, archival pigment print, 24 x 30 inches.

COURTESY ON STELLAR RAYS

Don't ask what it means so much as where does it go. Drawn lines are sometimes representations, but they also lead somewhere." These are John Houck's final words in the folded pamphlet accompanying his show "Playing and Reality," at On Stellar Rays.

This advice provides a useful lens through which to view the content of Houck's exhibition — in particular the relationship between what is play and what is real.

For instance, it helps us account for the thick blue diagonal line running across the canvas of *Incidental and Intentional* (2015). By depicting a bright streak diffracted behind the photograph of a mason jar, and then along the top of another jar, Houck performs an act

of perceptive trickery as well as a representation of the material that comprises a painting. Where then, does the blue line lead us?

In the pamphlet, American author Siri Hustvedt observes, “Every painting is always two paintings: The one you see, and the one you remember.” To this Houck adds, “There is also the one you photograph.”

The artist renders this idea through another humorously literal gesture in *Poppies* (2016). Here Houck layers a photograph of a vase of flowers manipulated to appear three-dimensional beside a more conventional two-dimensional Polaroid of another vase, all set within a frame. Beyond this surface lies a second, largely obscured canvas containing a third, more impressionistic take on the Polaroid flowers, which are painted in broad strokes.

Together these modes of replication create an image at once tangible in its representation of a physical space and surreal in its breaking of the fourth wall. Yet again, Houck leads us through his hall of mirrors, but to what end?

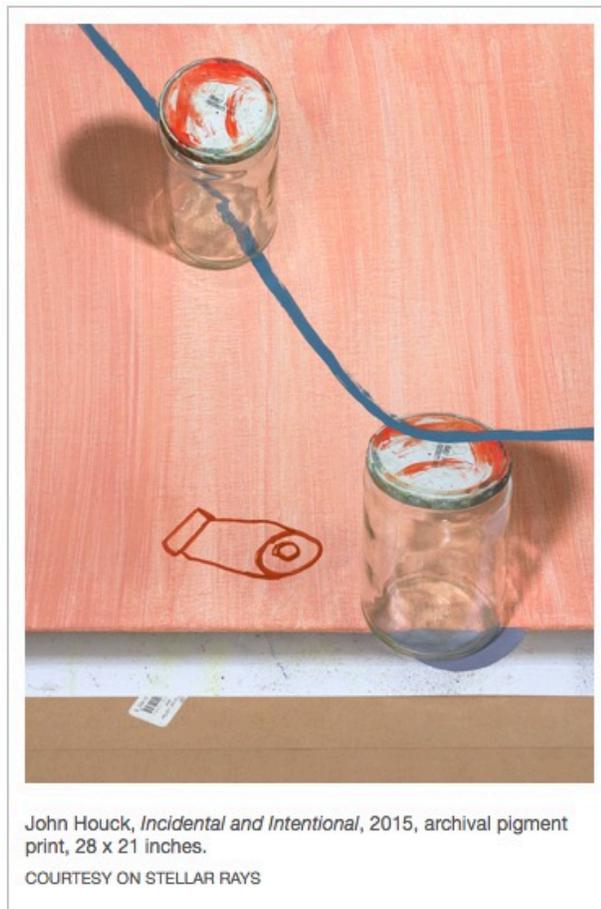
He speculates, “When driving past a freeway overpass or new building under construction, the falsework keeping it in place while it’s being built is always stunning. It is abstract, and like all abstraction, beneath it there is something tender, something that must stand on its own one day. Artwork that is only abstract is false work in the psychological sense.”

In *Passe or Retiré* (2016) a photograph of a pair of disembodied legs balanced on one foot evokes a balletic position. In addition to the cut-off figure’s hands tying the shoe on the raised foot, an extra pair of hands appears to be entering from outside the photograph’s frame, grasping onto an extra set of laces.

Houck’s use of this frame-within-a-frame motif reveals the “falsework” used to create depth in photography and painting. The artist explores how we understand visual representation through image making by drawing our attention to the flat nature of a canvas. In doing so, his work attempts to move us beyond abstraction.

Returning then to where the line leads us, our answer might be found in another of Houck’s quotes. One in particular is taken from the exhibition’s namesake—a book written by British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott:

“It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.”



John Houck, *Incidental and Intentional*, 2015, archival pigment print, 28 x 21 inches.
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