

Artillery

Tom Thayer | Derek Eller Gallery

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By Elwyn Palmerton

The famed expressionist Edvard Munch was known to leave his paintings out in the rain on occasion, a habit he explained by saying, "It will either kill or cure them." I don't suspect that Tom Thayer has ever left one of his paintings outdoors but they do have a cracked, desiccated and weathered appearance that suggests it might not matter if he did. The cut-out corrugated cardboard figures hanging from dirty strings and gnarled curls of wire also help give off the impression that this work has been sitting undiscovered in an attic for about 30 years despite the fact that everything here is from 2012 and Thayer is only 42-years-old.

Even his videos-which are subjected, it would seem, to every form of analog video degradation known to man-have a "Video tape dumped in a mop bucket" feel. The best of these, *Empirical Video Study* is shown as a projection. Its multicolored, oscillating wave-forms and distorted abstractions remind one of what the unpaid-for premium cable TV channels (the scrambled porn) used to look like, except the colors are more muted-pale, static-y tangerines and faded, off-tint magentas predominate. That, and its rhythms are more furtive and hypnotic than herky-jerky. All of this would seem to be deliberately anti-aesthetic, faux-naïve, or a pointed affront to good taste except that Thayer's overall attitude isn't a rejection of (or an ironic gloss on) anything so much as it is marked by a casual but complete indifference to those standards in the first place. To pull a variegated collection of clumped-up lint from the dryer's lint filter and use it to fill in a goofy cut-out profile of a face-*With the Force of the Moon and the Ocean*-isn't an act that's determined in opposition to anything. It's a gesture, particular to itself-as if to say, this is the world, or part of it. It is abject, quotidian, fraught with pathos, entropy, degradation and sadness, but also charming, weirdly funny, and beautiful.

It's a refined vision, also. The overall formal intelligence and sense of economy (along with the silhouetted figures and dangling strings) calls to mind late Jasper Johns, but the general tone is reminiscent of a different artist altogether: the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still. Paintings by Still tend to feel as if one is staring into outer space and finding that there's no one out there: we're all totally alone. Imagine, then, if Still had the sense of humor to hang a Johns-like cut-out silhouetted figure in front of that existential void. It's funny, yes, but not exactly "ha ha" funny. By suggesting that we're all alone, it resists that condition by attempting to communicate-even as it implicates its own efforts as comically futile. This is paradoxical-funny because it isn't funny, and sad because it's utterly mundane: the type of thing best expressed through corrugated cardboard, lint and VCR tracking errors-just some of Thayer's derelict materials.