

Grabner, Michelle. "Josh Reames, Andrew Rafacz," *Artforum*, July, 2019.

# ARTFORUM

Josh Reames  
ANDREW RAFACZ

by Michelle Grabner



Josh Reames, *wheres my gun*, 2018, acrylic, oil, sawdust, ash, dyed rag, and soil on canvas, 60 × 50".

Josh Reames  
ANDREW RAFACZ

In each of the four paintings in Josh Reames's exhibition "BO-DE-GAS," uniformly distributed idiomatic images floated graphically on raw canvas surfaces. Punctuating each of the intimate gallery's four walls, the paintings were supplemented with three black, wall-mounted handrails that sported a selection of attitude-declaring bumper stickers. The works are stylistically indebted to the appropriation work of the 1980s, such as the commodity-driven, logo-festooned work of Ashley Bickerton, Matt Mullican, and Peter Nagy, and to the later work of Laura Owens. Yet Reames's lexicon of found imagery is devoid of critical engagement with the updated questions of authorship, originality, and the authority of painting. Instead, his paintings imitate and aggregate languages of critique, not as a counterposition but as a nullification of those conditions of representation.

*Wheres my gun*, 2018, comprised a taxonomy of images—a black-and-white illustration of a skeletal hand, a directional arrow, a distorted police badge, a flute, a lizard's foot, and a contour of a cartoon horse. These commonplace signs are interspersed with abstract paint marks, scribbles with drop shadows, and smears of soil mixed with acrylic medium. Rarely do any of Reames's images overlap; instead they occupy even portions of the picture plane. Separation is the primary logic; together, the

images struggle to constitute any meaningful discussion of signification. *Wheres my gun* was unique in the group of paintings in that the artist deployed a twisted rope as a structuring element to compartmentalize two image fields. The two handrails that bracketed *wheres my gun* nearly touched the canvas's edge. Installed at hand height, *opinion rail (01)* and *opinion rail (02)*, both 2018, were emblazoned with the slogans *remember america?*, *friction is a drag*, and *there is no god*. Vaguely cynical, the stickers begin to suggest a critical attitude, one that was also invoked in *probable cause*, 2018, in which a painted sign reading *stop*, a battery, a thunderbolt, a row of staggered rifle butts, a pair of Caucasian hands gripping prison bars, and an American flag seen through the shape of Florida hint at a lukewarm discourse on justice and power. Still, the intrusions of watery gradients of paint and colorful smears detract from a critical reading.

In *XXX*, 2018, Reames reveled in shallow illusionary play with drop shadows. The upper-right and lower-left corners of the painting, which is compositionally built around a diagrammatic viper head, are dominated by two-dimensional hard-edge geometries that contrast with the organic edges of the shapes around the snake motif. The proximity of a longer rail installed just below the painting underscored visual equivalents between the vocabulary of the painting and the platitudes on the manufactured metal bar: *i brake for wild mushrooms*, *live fast troll hard*, and *wish you were beer*. And although both the rail and the canvas are types of supports, indifference is what gets propped up in these uniform compositions. Compounding this effect, the matter-of-fact paint handling conveys a print-like verisimilitude, another form of detachment into the field of signs, mantras, and codes peppering Reames's cultural aggregates.

In the adjacent gallery, Reames curated a group exhibition titled "Reunion Tour" that brought together the work of fifteen artists. The contributions varied wildly, from Sam Lipp's multicolor fabric flag, whose stripes each sported a single patch of camouflage, to Vincent Dermody's three concrete-encrusted beer growlers. Perhaps the work that was most sympathetic to Reames's unimpassioned method of appropriation was Ron Ewert's *Vial Devil Ego*, 2018, an allover gestural line drawing that appears digitally reversed, enlarged, and transferred onto a large canvas. Also making an appearance in Reames's teeming curatorial exercise was Siebren Versteeg's *Painting Robots*, 2018, a three-part tableau of assemblages that includes a welding mask with protruding hair braids, an electronic cigarette, a Styrofoam head supported by three paintbrushes, and a vertical foil bag with a single paintbrush emerging from its center. Versteeg's absurd objects tease out risky questions regarding the cultural hierarchies of painting and the authority of the painter. Here the tropes of gender and genius and the fetishization of skill are melded into a stylistic formula that problematizes rather than essentializes painting's energies. Reames's compositions, on the other hand, reinforce the familiar homogeneity of signs taken out of context. As with the title of the exhibition, "BO-DE-GAS," a reference to a scene from the 1998 Dave Chappelle movie *Half Baked*, Reames appropriates for style, not to critique.

—Michelle Grabner