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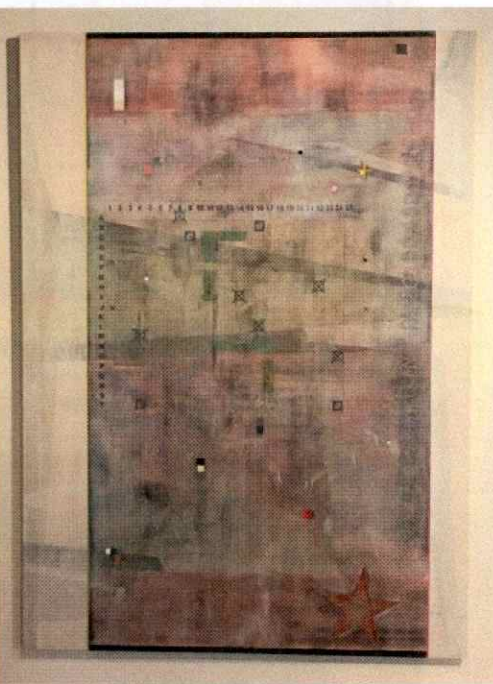
Painting is All Fun and Games, Joseph Winterhalter at DAAP's Philip Meyers Jr. Memorial Gallery

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Joseph Winterhalter: Painting consists of a suite of thirteen new works by this Cincinnati artist; five paintings and eight works on paper dated 2016 and 2017. For this show, Winterhalter focuses his conceptual gaze on the life and ideas of Guy Debord and Joe Strummer, men of successive generations who were both influential political dissidents. Winterhalter's exhibition, far from a display of static images, situates viewers at the heart of an experience that unfolds in layers of visual structure, cultural symbolism, political philosophy, history, and real and imagined terrain.



Joseph Winterhalter, "Film Excerpt: Le Jeu de la Guerre, '31—'94", 2017; "Film Excerpt: Considerations sur l'assassinat...", 2016; "Film Excerpt: May '82, Rue Quincampoix", 2017
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries



Joseph Winterhalter, "Film Excerpt: Le Jeu de la Guerre, '31—'94", 2017
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries

Debord (1931-1994), a French writer and filmmaker, was a founding member of the Situationist International (1957-72), a group of writers, artists, and anti-state revolutionaries influenced by Marxist theories and subversive political tactics of the early Surrealists. The Situationists were proponents of creating "situations" in which people became more acutely aware of their immediate experience in order to live more passionately, outside of the constructs of capitalist society. In 1965, Debord invented and produced "Le Jeu de la Guerre" (The Game of War), a board game that has become a legendary artifact of Debord's output. The harsh capitalist critique championed in Debord's writings was well known in England, where his ideas influenced the anarcho-punk music scene during the 1970s. Strummer (1952-2002) was the lead singer and songwriter for The Clash. Raised in late 1960's London in a climate of class and race-based political strife, he became an iconic voice of resistance for a generation of youth. He made music that was not as aurally caustic as that of his punk contemporaries, but lyrically was every bit as acerbic, calling out state-sponsored brutality and politico-social hypocrisy.

In Winterhalter's compositions, formal concerns are organized around the grid structure of Debord's famous game. A grid exists underneath all works in the show, from the paintings to the works on paper. In the paintings "Film Excerpt: Jeu de la Guerre: '31-'94" and "Are You RED...Y '52 - '02", the number and letter coordinates of the game board, along with x-marked squares comprise the central elements. In several of the paintings, conjoined solid colored squares rest like pieces on a chess board (according to the game, they are "arsenal squares"), and long diagonals connect what appear as strategic locations or targets, indicating intended action or movement.



Joseph Winterhalter, "Film Excerpt: I Hired a Contract Killer", 2016
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries

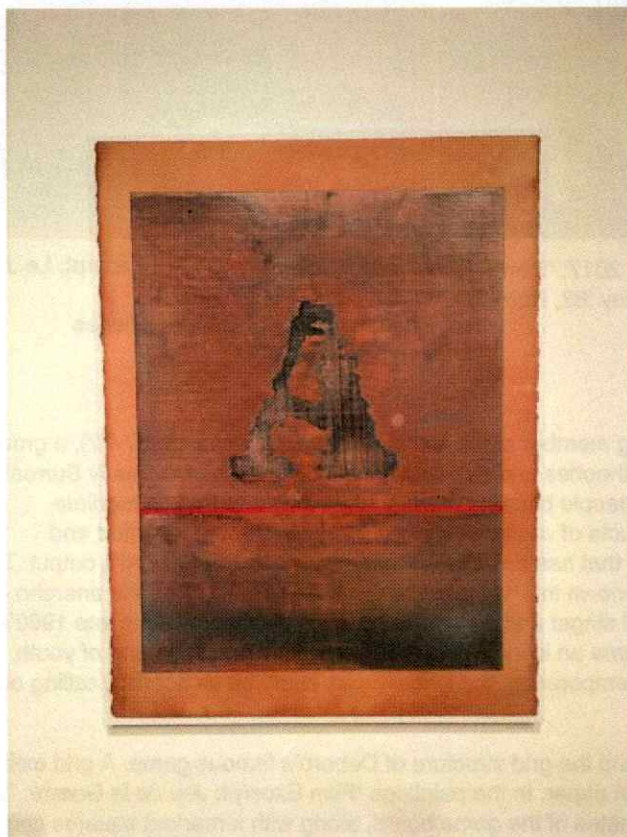
In addition to their underpinning grid, the paintings contain architectural forms that recall the simplicity of ubiquitous modern skyscrapers, such as in "Film Excerpt: I Hired a Contract Killer", and the complexity of urban planning renderings, as in "Film Excerpt: Considerations sur l'assassinat...". In this piece, the upper segment of variegated gray grid squares resemble pixels, a low-resolution digitization of geographic terrain, a technological landscape that enables advanced strategic surveillance and pursuit of targets. The tall rectangles, mostly painted narrower than the total width of their canvas, inspire a kind of vertigo, a feeling of looking up and looking deep simultaneously.

Other motifs repeated throughout the works are more explicit in their symbolism and relate to the political leanings of the show's protagonists. The letter A, the color red, and a five-pointed star, sometimes red, sometimes black, signal communist and anarchist movements. In "Elegy: Champot, Bellevue -la-Montagne", a gray brick wall pattern sports a faded, graffiti-like star at the bottom. "In the Street: Boulevard St. Michel", also employs a graffiti-like mark; a circle around an A, the international symbol for anarchy. A portion of this marking also appears in "Notting Hill, 30 Aug '76". In the series "3 Card Trick 1", "3 Card Trick 2", and "3 Card Trick 3", the central focus of the image is a star or a red A, the title recalling the designation of "card-carrying Communist" as well as the well-known con-game Three Card Monte.

Winterhalter's paintings are works of meticulous labor and remarkable craft. He has developed highly specialized techniques incorporating an unusual mix of materials like Russian Caravan tea, oil, wax, color pencil, vinyl, latex, carpenter's chalk, powdered graphite, acrylic resin, and spray paint. The works on paper also contain embossed markings. The way he builds his surfaces results in detailed textures that become more visual than tactile, incredibly varied yet seamlessly integrated.

There is a pervasive sense that each of the marks, texts, and patterns embedded in the surfaces indicate enigmatic subcultural codes and signals. Beyond these familiar and cryptic visual references and symbols, clues to meaning can be traced by close examination of the artwork titles and exhibit layout. It appears every detail of the exhibition, including its overall design, is as carefully crafted as the paintings themselves to reveal the nature of the "situation" Winterhalter has created. To pursue these leads is to attempt to unravel a carefully constructed mystery, sometimes leading down an internet rabbit hole of information, other times leading to illumination. The repetition of images inherent in the artworks establishes a first layer of relationship among them, the titles perhaps the next layer, but there is more to discover here that rewards slow observation and curiosity. Winterhalter references specific characters and artifacts that lead to suggestions and possibilities rather than answers. The necessity of using the Internet to construct meaning guarantees that one path will lead to another (in writing this review, one such search led me to Ted Kaczynski's anarchist rant on "the System").

Beginning in the first gallery room, geographic locations are used for the first three titles, referring viewers to London and Paris as critical locations. Small works on paper lead to the large-scale, quasi-architectural paintings that further allude to the urban environment. The first painting shown is "Film Excerpt: Le Jeu de la Guerre, '31-'94", a literal representation of Debord's game, which establishes a conceptual and visual foundation for the exhibition.



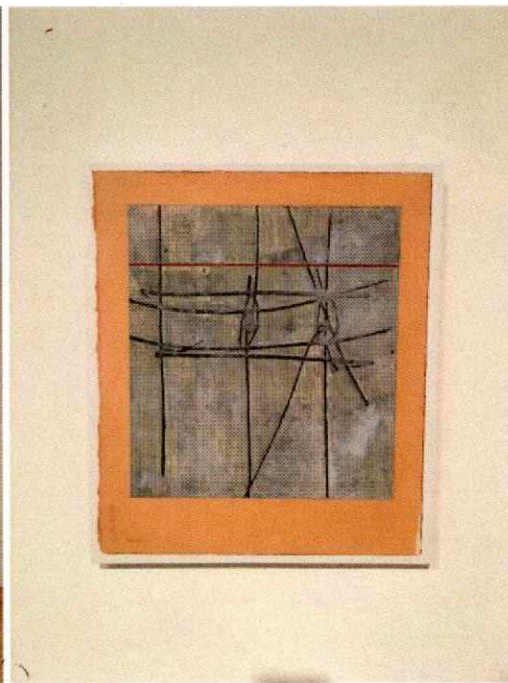
Joseph Winterhalter, "3 Card Trick 2", 2017
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries

The titles of the next several works as “film excerpt” suggest a narrative continuity to the paintings, and recall the French New Wave film aesthetic that influenced Debord. The only one of these titles that refers to an actual film is “Film Excerpt: I Hired A Contract Killer”, the first painting visitors encounter in the second gallery room. The painting depicts a dark, imposing architectural grid as a silhouette set against a bright gray ground. Researching the film itself reveals the introduction of Joe Strummer into the exhibition context: it features a brief cameo with Joe Strummer as a guitar player in a café.

All the works in the second gallery room reference Strummer. The title of the room's only other large painting “Film Excerpt: Are You RED..Y, '52 – '02”, Winterhalter cites the title of a song by the Clash, along with the brief lifespan of Strummer, who died unexpectedly at age 50 from a heart defect. The full title of the song “Are You RED...Y for War”, gives a nod to Communist symbolism and the revolutionary struggle. This painting is the exact reverse image of “Film Excerpt: Le Jeu de la Guerre '31-'94”, serving to visually and conceptually link Strummer and Debord in a reflective symmetry. In addition to the “film excerpts”, Winterhalter has created other parallel works on paper, “Elegy: Champot, Bellevue-la-Montagne” and “Elegy: Broomfield, Somerset”, the death locations of each man, and “In the Street: Boulevard St. Michel” and “In the Building: Hammersmith Palais”, as formative places and fields of influence for each man. These works also mirror their counterpart's location in the other room. The final series in this room, “Three Card Trick” (1-3), another Clash song title, compares Debord's game (writing) with Strummer's game (music).



Joseph Winterhalter, “3 Card Trick 1”, “3 Card Trick 2”, “3 Card Trick 3”, all 2017
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries



Joseph Winterhalter, “In the Street: Boulevard St. Michel”, 2016
Photo courtesy of DAAP Galleries

In the design as well as content of this exhibition, Winterhalter has ingeniously turned the gallery into a game board. Within this he has located Debord and Strummer as players in *Le Jeu de la Guerre*, participants in the struggle, both enacting strategies in support of their ideologies, not necessarily as opponents. He has inverted the physical space of the gallery, with its symmetrical square rooms, into the conjoined “arsenal squares” of Debord's game. In reframing the gallery as the tiny arsenal square, Winterhalter has in turn shrunk the viewer like Alice, placing the audience as spectator inside the field of play, immersed in the real, rendered, and virtual geographies of the game of war. Winterhalter's players are dead. Long live the players.

—Susan Byrnes is a visual artist whose work encompasses traditional and contemporary forms and practices, including sculpture, multimedia installation, radio broadcasts, writing, and curatorial projects. She currently resides in Cincinnati, OH.