

ARTFORUM

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SUMMER PREVIEW

THE NEW LOOK:
ART AND FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY



\$10.00



HOUSTON

Stephen Lapthisophon

DAVID SHELTON GALLERY

“Coffee, seasonal fruit, spaghetti and rope”—this seemingly random list of items, which constituted the title of Dallas-based artist Stephen Lapthisophon’s first solo exhibition in Houston, flagged just some of the matter suggested by the heavily worked surfaces of the twelve recent abstract compositions on paper and canvas included in the show. There was evidence of disparate conventional media, including pencil, ink, charcoal, chalk, oil pastel, oil stick, and spray paint. But more enthralling (and at times grotesquely fascinating) were the traces—along with the scents and tastes, real and imagined—of the organic stuff of everyday life: olive oil, dried leaves, dirt and soot, herbs and spices (turmeric, cinnamon, paprika, dill), bacon fat (mixed with pigments), and beard clippings. Fragments of language appeared as inscrutable scrawls sometimes written backward, as if grabbed from conversation overheard in passing and recorded piecemeal.

Lapthisophon’s materials—ephemeral, nearly formless, often biotic—are arbitrary in that individually they appear not to carry symbolic



Stephen Laphisophon, *Who Will Survive in America (GSH)*, 2014, latex, india ink, pencil, spray paint, coffee, beard clippings, pigmented bacon fat on canvas, 60 × 42".

weight (as opposed to, say, Joseph Beuys's use of felt and fat). Collectively, though, they evoke a quotidian sense of place and a willfully anachronistic sense of time. In one beautifully overworked canvas, *October 1, 1969 (Rome)*, 2014, the surface was built up with shades of black, brown, and gray, and accented with mists of rose, green, and yellow. Cypress branches embedded in a muck of latex and spray paint supported drifts of rust-colored cayenne. In *Pensativo*, 2015, an enigmatic, compass-like icon rendered in poured black ink was surrounded by earthen splatters, sprays, stains, smears, rubbings, and illegible writing, marks that came across not as an offhand mode of provisional painting but as proof of the artist's attentive handling and care. The works resisted any appearance of newness, and moments of aesthetic discovery and pleasure were typically subverted by the anti-transcendent or even downright gross materials employed. Up close, pleasing compositions revealed themselves to be composed of the stuff of decay, populated by repellent blooms approximating mold, rust, and calcification. Occasional startling streaks of gold, supershiny black, or neon red and yellow, seen in works such as *Evidence, Logic, and Chance*, all 2016, seemed designed merely to highlight the artist's other materials as decidedly old or outworn.

The exhibition confirmed Laphisophon's thoroughgoing resistance, or nonsynchronism, to the "seasonal fruits" of the art world. His influences and concerns lie elsewhere, as indicated by *Europa (JB in Paris)*, 2014, the work one first encountered upon entering the gallery, in which an old black T-shirt is integrated into a scene smeared and dusted with white and reddish matter. The title nods to James Baldwin, a queer black writer who fled New York for France in 1948 for reasons of cultural survival. Europe—namely its art, film, and literature of the 1960s and '70s—is a major lodestar for Laphisophon (who came of age in the early '70s), and his work can be understood as holding open a portal to that era, in its aesthetics and poetics as well as its intellectual and political sympathies with the New Left. Importantly, Laphisophon doesn't fetishize his historical references. He *uses* them concretely, along with all the other matter that enters the work. In this exhibition there were whiffs of American expat Cy Twombly, who lived in Italy until his death in 2011, but without the references to classical mythology; and of Arte Povera, but without the feint of visionary mysticism. Laphisophon's work evokes the past, and in general a sense of pastness, to poetically address the present. Such evocative memorial operations were especially poignant in *Who Will Survive in America (GSH)*, 2014. Here, Laphisophon shifted his gaze to the United States, as indicated by the title's quotation of the coda to Gil Scott-Heron's "Comment #1," 1970, a seething statement on the contradictions within the American civil rights movement, and particularly those of the young white marchers who championed it. In this work, Laphisophon's repellent materials had become repellent even to one another. Copper-pigmented bacon fat produced reactive aureoles of pale sea green on a surface already suffering from craquelure and flaking. And dominating the work's center was a poured black figure, whose edges were agitated on all sides.

—Natilee Harren