

VALERIE CARBERRY GALLERY

Scott Wolniak: Fieldwork

A field is a container of sorts, a site or space that holds any number of different yet related things. In its broadest sense, a “field” refers to a circumscribed area of thought or action; it could be a stretch of open land, a baseball diamond, an academic discipline or branch of scientific inquiry, or a complex set of forces determining particular outcomes. When used as a verb, *field* and *fielding* denote acts of catching and throwing back: a baseball player fields a ground ball, a press officer fields questions from reporters. “Field” also functions adjectivally, as in *field notes* or *field hands*, and then there’s *field work*, which refers both to onsite research and to the set of observations that that research produces.

Here, in the field, is where Scott Wolniak’s area of investigation lies. His graphite drawings depict “fields” of things like grass, ashes, or carpet viewed from particular vantage points and framed through photographic processes. But the drawings are also fields themselves. Each is comprised of thousands of tiny pencil marks: slashes, squiggles, cross-hatches, small circles with lines radiating out from them like children’s drawings of the sun. Wolniak also makes lines through erasure, either by using an actual eraser or by leaving white lines of negative space between different islands of graphite marks. Seen close-up, Wolniak’s marks have an individualized, notational appearance—some of them recall shorthand symbols—but when viewed from a distance, the marks coalesce into more or less unified fields of varying densities. They could be maps, or pavement rubbings, or grey scale images blown up to the point of obliteration. The latter is in fact what Wolniak’s drawings *do* depict. Enlarged, grey scale images of actual sites provide the visual field that the artist observes and then represents, however abstractly. In this way Wolniak’s drawings blur distinctions between the act of observation and the thing observed. They are both the field *and* the field notes.

A painting is another type of field. Wolniak refers to his current painting series as “tablets,” a form they do indeed evoke through their shape and materials: thick, rectangular slabs of plaster supported by wire, burlap and wood. Sometimes the plaster is stained with colored ink; other times paint is applied to the surface. Wolniak makes marks by carving into the plaster with a knife, which is another way of creating line through removal. The process is also excavatory. The knife can carve small pits and pocks and occasionally larger holes into the plaster’s surface, revealing multiple strata beneath—the pre-history of the painting, if you will.

Simple, evocative titles like “Islands,” “Birds,” “Grass,” and “Current” suggest that Wolniak’s works offer calming, contemplative views of nature, and in many ways they do—but they’re also teeming with signs of the artist’s own labor-intensive, studio-bound activities. His marks are parts of a larger compositional whole, yet each one also operates individualistically as an idiosyncratic record of the particular moment in which it was made. Wolniak’s paintings and drawings open our eyes to multiple ways of seeing by collapsing site, process and sphere of inquiry into a single, infinitely complex visual field.

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