

## NORA GRIFFIN

### Education:

2001-2005 Oberlin College, B.A with honors in studio art

2003-2004 Studio Art Centers International (SACI), Florence, Italy

### Solo Exhibitions:

2008 *girl and a gun: constructions, paintings, works on paper* Abaton Garage,  
Jersey City, NJ

2005 *Windows, Walls and Bridges*, Senior Thesis Exhibition, Oberlin College

### Group Exhibitions:

2008 *Party at Phong's House*, Galeria Janet Kurnatowski, NY  
(curated by Chris Martin)

*The Brooklyn Rail Silent Art Auction*, Pace Wildenstein Gallery, NY

2005 *Daily Schemes*, A.M. Richard Fine Art, NY

*Artist Postcard Show*, A.I.R Gallery, NY

### Residencies:

2006 Wolf Kahn Scholarship, Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT

### *Abaton Garage*

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## Nora Griffin

*Constructions, paintings, works on paper*

September 7 ~ October 2, 2008

## MARGINAL ACTIONS FRAME WORK

*A piece of chalk to follow the contours of what is not, or is no longer, or is not yet; the handwriting each one of us will use to compose his own list of things that quicken the heart; to offer, or to erase. In that moment, poetry will be made by everyone, and there will be emus in the zone.*

—Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (1983)

There are two photos in Nora Griffin’s studio that catch my eye as it darts from painting to severed painting. The first shows a smashed plaster wall meeting a concrete sidewalk at an angle. The gaping hole reveals a brick surface hidden beneath, wall-of-the-past, where bricks are laid in two distinct patterns: standard horizontal; and short end out, in a perfectly aligned, though ominously tilted grid. This image presents three meeting points between four specific zones of activity (in this case, materials or patterns): concrete and plaster, plaster and brick, and brick itself in two conflicting grid systems. Griffin has found a real-world example of exactly what interests her most: the lines where distinct objects meet, the often-abrupt border where one thing ends and another begins.

The other photo is harder to identify. It is divided into a highly distorted four-square grid with a red splatter of paint concentrated in one section and dripping into the other three. Once Griffin flips it upside down (the “correct” orientation), I recognize another meeting of wall and floor. This time, each is divided in two: the floor is half dark wood paneling, half stained-yellow tin. The wall is half white sliding door, and half unidentifiable darkness. She tells me the photo was taken at the Smith-9<sup>th</sup> Street station on the F line, but this doesn’t make it any clearer. Her subject is, again, the intersections of forms.

Both these photos show moments of city life cropped into semi-abstraction. They reveal two surfaces in New York (among the millions) that become paintings, whether purposely painted or not. They show the surface compartmentalized, drawing us into converging spaces, objects, colors and textures. All landscapes are divided into distinct components—tree, building, sky—which meet along different lines depending on our perspective. Griffin seeks out these double-sided, ever-changing passageways, and brings them into focus.

These photos present examples of space divided in two directions: in vertical stacks (the brick wall *beneath* the plaster); and flat, horizontal compartments (the partitioned wall and floor). Griffin uses both, starting with the latter. Her stretched canvases make every attempt to partition the space of a single plane: *Notes* (2006) does not follow the rules of Abstract Expressionist composition—the all-over diffusion of integrated marks—instead presenting a collection of distinct vignettes, whose relationships feel at once mysterious and inevitable: a rectangle scored by a grid of vertical marks (like one of Guston’s books) above what looks like a set of windows, across from thick, graffiti-like gestures. To the right, we have rows of wavy lines that read as scrawled text, an isolated bit of cross-hatching, and a curious blue dot. In *Sand Blackboard* (2006), we have a geometric form (or a chunk of cheese) in one corner, an arrowhead shape, and what looks like an aerial view of a grand piano.

Adolph Gottlieb invents a similar language of compartmentalized action in his *Pictograph* series in order to “process the most diverse sources into a nonhierarchical, decentralized array—a cultural leveling device, a destroyer of distinctions,” writes catalogue essayist Dr. Harry Cooper. Griffin also produces a “decentralized array” of information, but is it—and does it aim to be—nonhierarchical? Are distinctions destroyed, or sharpened for emphasis? Without distinctness, there would be no juxtaposition, and we would not get the potent intersections at the heart of her practice. While Gottlieb performs a leveling of Cubist forms, Griffin shows off a diversity of forms, drawing



Exhibition view  
Abaton Garage, September, 2008

special attention to the borders between them, the margins that separate them, and the lines where they finally meet. She preserves and elevates distinctness to create dialogue: a conversation that starts between one shape and its neighbor, and soon begins to jump over and across the surface, swelling into a discourse that engages the entire cluster at once.

It is distinction and division that interest her most—where objects recede, things come apart, and layers peel back. Both *Notes* and *Sand Blackboard* contain all information within the borders of a painted frame—dividing the picture from its physical border—so images hover on the surface of the stretched canvas, instead of covering and concealing it. She creates a margin between picture and object, calling attention to their difference, their distinction. Taking the next logical step, she then nails her canvas to the front of the wooden frame instead of stretching it over the edges. Here, support becomes frame, a doubling of function that turns the painting-object inside out. Traditional stretching is designed to *hide* its support, creating an illusion of the painting as a free-floating, self-sufficient window into real life. Like Dziga Vertov showing the camera itself in the first scene of *Man with a Movie Camera*, Griffin brings wood and nails to the surface of the painting. In neither case does the image appear miraculously before us—tools and actions bring it into existence, and these artists reveal them as essential parts of the story.

Eventually, she eliminates stretcher bars altogether in favor of wooden sticks, often painted, which exceed the borders of the rectangle. In many of these works, she cuts away a chunk of canvas, leaving a hole that is still enclosed by the frame but empty of painted content. The surface behind the painting finally comes forward—much like the brick hidden under plaster in her photograph, only visible because of a hole. Here, we have space divided vertically, to identify and integrate the lowest plane of every art studio and every exhibition, the negative space that marks the borders of every painting—the wall.

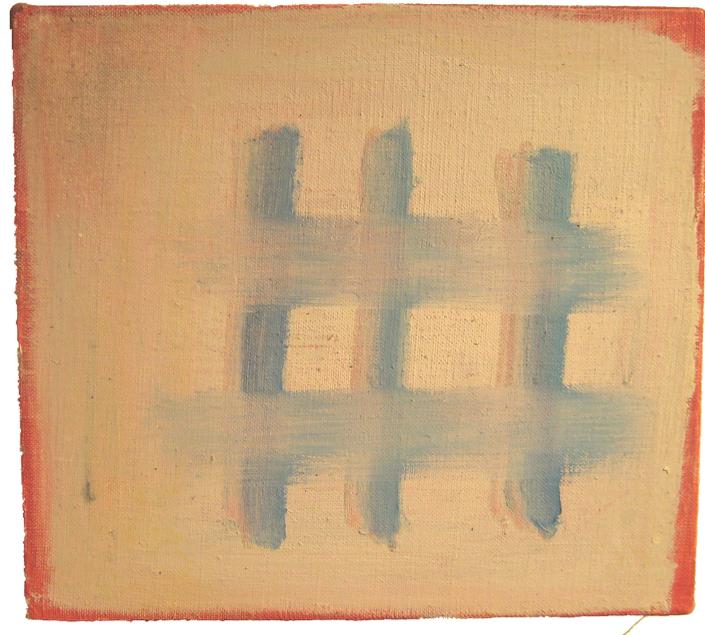
*Emergency Geometry* (2008) is one Griffin's most minimal, and most recent, works. It is composed of three compartments, clearly marked by wooden sticks that cut across the interior. A triangle and a rectangle are filled with pieces of canvas attached from the inside—one painted white and one left its natural beige. The irregular shape between them remains empty, framing whatever is behind it. In the image announcing this exhibition, Griffin holds the painting (if we can call it that) in front of a corrugated tin wall. Here, this gray, fuzzy-striped surface becomes part of the composition. If she had held it slightly lower, the crushed Styrofoam coffee cup, matted cardboard and other garbage in this environment might have entered the frame. Context becomes content, and the work is both painting and view-finder. As images enter and leave the frame, it comes to resemble a makeshift movie camera, generating an infinitely changeable *mise en scène*.

Jean-Luc Godard famously stated that “all you need for a movie is a girl and a gun.” Here, one of Griffin's most longstanding influences reduces the art of filmmaking to a pair of its most pervasive, and supposedly clichéd, tropes. Yet these tropes are always at the center of Godard's ground-breaking films: by placing girl and gun in a new context, he re-imagines and redefines them—addressing the long history of their use while embedding them with new meaning. Griffin too keeps the longest running tropes of art history—form, color, paint, canvas—at the center of her practice in order to re-assess and re-imagine them. She does this by dividing and subdividing the painting; breaking it apart in order to rebuild more honestly; opening it—literally—to let the world in. As we watch coffee and milk swirling around each other in Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, he whispers in voice-over: “Since thought divides as much as it unites...I must listen, I must look around more than ever.” The liquids retain distinctness and distinction for most of the scene; it is the pattern formed by their meeting that Godard lets us enter. Griffin's work is made of these same meetings, which mirror the divisions of thought itself, and keep us looking ever more closely at the world outside.



Frame no. #3 *Emergency Geometry*, 26 x 21 in., oil, wood, canvas, 2008

Becky Brown, August 2008



*Tablet*, oil on canvas, 9 x 10 in., 2008



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