

FrameWork 3/15

Ashley McLellan on Krista Buecking

Stepping into Susan Hobbs from the dreary winter is like stepping through time and space to sunny Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. A familiar yet indistinguishable synthy jingle plays loud in the gallery space. It is unclear whether the colours and gradients in Buecking's drawings denote ideas of the sun rising or setting, but the answer seems irrelevant. I feel on the cusp of grasping something familiar but which is just out of reach, shrouded in ambiguity. This current of knowing and unknowing, which hints through parody of an inability to ever fully know, runs through all the works in the show.



MATTERS OF FACT (codified form A) is a large-scale, hand-drawn subtle colour gradation. A saturated periwinkle blue at the top fades through the middle into sky blue, and at the bottom is a barely perceptible light blue reminiscent of a clear sky on a hot day. Painted directly on the Plexiglas frame is a yellow line that begins near the middle of the glass on the left side, travelling up in a relatively steady, steep incline, before plummeting down, peaking once more and ending at the right border; in other words, appearing like a double-peaked line on a graph.



MATTERS OF FACT (codified form B) transitions from teal at the top, warming into a washed out peach hue in the middle and a saturated peach tone at the bottom. Painted on the surface of the Plexiglas are seven black symbols that resemble broken up letters or code, removed from their context and now floating atop the sunrise, casting shadows on the surface of the drawing.

The hand-drawn colour gradations that form the base of the six drawings on the main floor of Susan Hobbs are so meticulously rendered that any index of the artist's labour is imperceptible. It's as if this hazy mist was digitally created; as though a digital image is zoomed in so close that any figuration scatters into this sensual, coloured surface; an "image scattered into data."¹ By removing any evidence of her labour, Buecking creates a tension between seen and unseen. What I imagine takes her many patient hours, leaves no trace. Her work belies her effort, appearing as though quickly and digitally produced. Instead of bringing to the surface this dedication to uniformity, Buecking's work betrays her, masking itself as a manufactured work.

Accompanying the visual experience in the gallery, an audio soundtrack has been flipping back and forth between The Drifters' 1960 hit *This Magic Moment*, sounds of birds chirping – an effect I can only describe as shimmering – and silence. On the hour, the soundtrack is interrupted by a digitized voice announcing, “It’s two o’clock,” while a white clock with black arms hanging high on the wall, *MATTERS OF FACT (all things being equal)*, verifies the passing of time.

In his essay “Images Scatter Into Data. Data Gather Into Images,” Peter Galison tracks the push and pull between image and abstraction in the sciences. At war are two opposing sides: one argues that images create an understanding of the complex forms and calculations, the other that images obscure. Image and abstraction, then, are caught in-between; at one moment shedding any hint of the other only to circle back and realize how, when taken together, a better understanding emerges.

This tension is at play in Buecking’s work, which itself exists somewhere in the middle of this dialectic. The graphs and symbols are extracted from their original communicative form to become abstract; recognizable shapes that point toward a concrete understanding but which are in actuality emptied out. This tension is doubled by the fluctuation between the actual, physical process undertaken by Buecking and her allusion to the digital processes that create and utilize ‘codified forms.’ Returning to Galison, “Even within the image tradition, the picture was always on the verge of being resorbed by the computer, snatched from human eyes and transmuted back into the whirl of numbers.”² In other words, the drawings appear as if they have been translated back and forth between image and non-image to an image again. In their final state on the gallery walls, images appear as abstractions and abstractions as images.

Within the space, we are looking at the graphs and symbols used to verify the concrete matters of fact that build the case for a neoliberal, capitalist system; invisible forces given visible form. Yet, Buecking has removed them from their context, stripped them of their power, and presented them as visual forms to assess and consider. What is striking is Buecking’s ability to highlight how our relationship to these methods of measurement and verification offer about as much information within the context of the gallery as they do within the context of, for example, an infomercial toting the benefits of some magical product. They represent forms of power that seem to promise so much. At the same time, the hazy, meticulous gradation and soft colour choice aestheticize these forms of power and re-cover what Buecking has laid bare. Through this I seem to be able to come to a better understanding of them; as forms *not* facts. There is a magic moment of bringing something close enough to catch a glimpse of understanding but it remains just far enough away that I never reach a full understanding.



Upstairs provides hope that this understanding may be closer than I thought. Colourful geometric objects are presented on a low white platform alongside a presentation pad and easel, with ‘standard tropical foliage,’ adding life to the display. *MATTERS OF FACT (equivalent forms, manipulatives)* isolates the forms painted on the Plexiglas in the lower gallery and turns them into material objects.

Reinforced by the lack of shapes and symbols painted on *MATTERS OF FACT (codified form G)*, they seem to have been removed from the surface and transformed into the objects before me. On the same platform a presentation pad and easel display the only fully recognizable graph, with an *x* and *y-axis* and a few differently sloped lines. The objects look like tools developed for hands-on learning, and taken together with the graph seem to finally reveal the abstract ideas Buecking is alluding to. However, she pushes the parody of these forms one-step further, as there is no information or legend describing what the graph represents. The tools are before me yet I am unable to decipher the intended lesson.

This translation of material form to immaterial idea and back again, brings forth the question of what is lost and gained through multiple translations? What I gain is an understanding of my own precarity within the abstract system I have always existed within, but have not been able to stand outside of. What is lost, or was already lost, is any belief in this economic and social system to reveal itself and make good on the neoliberal promises of some future perfect. As if to solidify this realization, the standard tropical foliage remind me that not everything is concerned with the oscillation between image and abstraction, material and immaterial, and what the push and pull of these forces might hide or reveal. Instead, quoting writer and composer Ned Rorem, “Plants do not wish to rule the world like us—they have higher concerns.”³

¹ Peter Galison, “Images Scatter Into Data. Data Gather Into Images,” in *Iconoclasm*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 300.

² Galison, “Images Scatter Into Data,” 319.

³ Rosemary Barton, “Parliament Hill’s plant war finds green savior,” *CBC News*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/parliament-hill-s-plant-war-finds-green-saviour-1.2534323>.