

# Weathered Wood & Chu

By STEPHEN MAINE

Two current exhibitions apply a pictorial strategy usually associated with Minimalism — the “unitary” or all-over image — to representational painting with differing results but with equally resounding success. Exquisitely wrought paintings of weathered planks of wood by Alex Hay, currently on view at Peter Freeman Inc., are as indivisible in their gestalt as the scenes of crowds packed edge-to-edge by Wayne Gonzales, at Paula Cooper Gallery.

In the 1960s, Mr. Hay attracted notice for paintings and sculpture that were exactly scaled-up versions of quotidian objects, such as mailing labels, cash register receipts, and legal pads. That work was similar conceptually to that of his contemporary Claes Oldenburg, but it was emotionally reserved, without Oldenburg’s antic sense of play. Mr. Hay and his wife, Deborah, were also visible on the performance scene that coalesced around the Judson Dance Theater. In the early 1970s, the Hays moved to Arizona, and Mr. Hay replaced his painting with conceptual work.

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He resumed painting a few years ago, and now produces swooningly beautiful enlargements of painted boards that show the evidence of passing time.

All are vertical rectangles ranging from about 4 feet to 5 1/2 feet high. Even the largest one, “Anomaly Blue” (2006), doesn’t come off as a magnification, because its scale feels absolutely right, and in keeping with its sensuous, eggshell-matte surface. The painting evokes a response almost as tactile as it is visual, recalling instantly the feel of rough-hewn timber cladding. But this is no *trompe l’oeil*. Using frisket paper stencils and spray acrylic, Mr. Hay locates the abstraction in literal, deadpan depiction. The woody ochers of “Past Time” (2007) are flecked with eccentric shapes describing vestigial bits of dull green and crackling white. At close range, the space becomes atmospheric, as copious sanding imparts a soft focus to some of the transitions between color chords. As paintings, they are developed much like the abraded and recoated surfaces they describe.

The two earliest of the six canvases in the show, “Gray Wood”

## ALEX HAY: NEW PAINTINGS

*Peter Freeman, Inc.*

## WAYNE GONZALES

*Paula Cooper Gallery*

(2003) and “Raw Wood” (2004), were exhibited in the 2004 Whitney Biennial. As their titles suggest, they are the most chromatically restrained. Mr. Hay’s palette has since broadened to include complex variations on primaries and secondaries, as in “Yellow Time” (2007). Here, the grooved striations of wood grain are picked out in a slightly denser yellow, suggesting an eroded landscape. It is a wonder that these paintings manage to be so impersonal and yet so intimate.

Mr. Hay does not work from photographs, but Mr. Gonzales does, exploiting their inherent abstraction in 16 acrylic paintings that accept as a given the generalized and incomplete information of their sources. All are dated 2007; seven titled “Cheering Crowd” are painted in choppy, cursory strokes in three or four neutral tints. These largish works are derived from a pair of high-contrast photos depicting what might be spectators at a sports event. Relatively legible figures inhabit the bottom of the canvas, but the crowd dissolves into broken flickers at the top. While the steep rake suggests bleachers or a similar arena-like setting, the object of attention is unknown.

The undifferentiated crowd becomes a faceless throng, a mob subject to any number of psychological triggers. Other, smaller canvases each titled “Waiting Crowd” show a group milling about expectantly; harsh light and long shadows suggest they are outdoors, perhaps at an airport or in a parking lot. The elevated vantage point and tight angle of view recall the focused intent of a surveillance camera, but, as in “Cheering Crowd,” we are watching only the watchers.

A single work from the “Waiting Crowd” series offers a glimpse, at the top of the canvas beyond the assembled masses, of distant, neo-classical architecture. The painting is unusual, too, for the optical resolution of the image, and its dirty yellow light. It might be a political rally, in which case the visual egress unique to this work equates with political access, or the promise thereof.

His show’s political overtones would be less distinct if not for “Untitled” (2007) the 6-foot-wide canvas, which, hanging behind the desk, is the first work the visitor

Alex Hay, “Raw Wood” (2004).

encounters. In it, the Benday dot screen familiar from standard printing processes is grossly exaggerated, but the image — American flag-draped coffins arriving by aircraft — is immediately recognizable as the type currently barred from the American press. The piece addresses the question of what may be considered an “abstraction,” in painting and in public life.

Hay until July 27 (560 Broadway at Prince Street, 212-966-5154);

Gonzales until June 30 (521 W. 21st St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-255-1105).

# Weathered Wood & Churning Crowds

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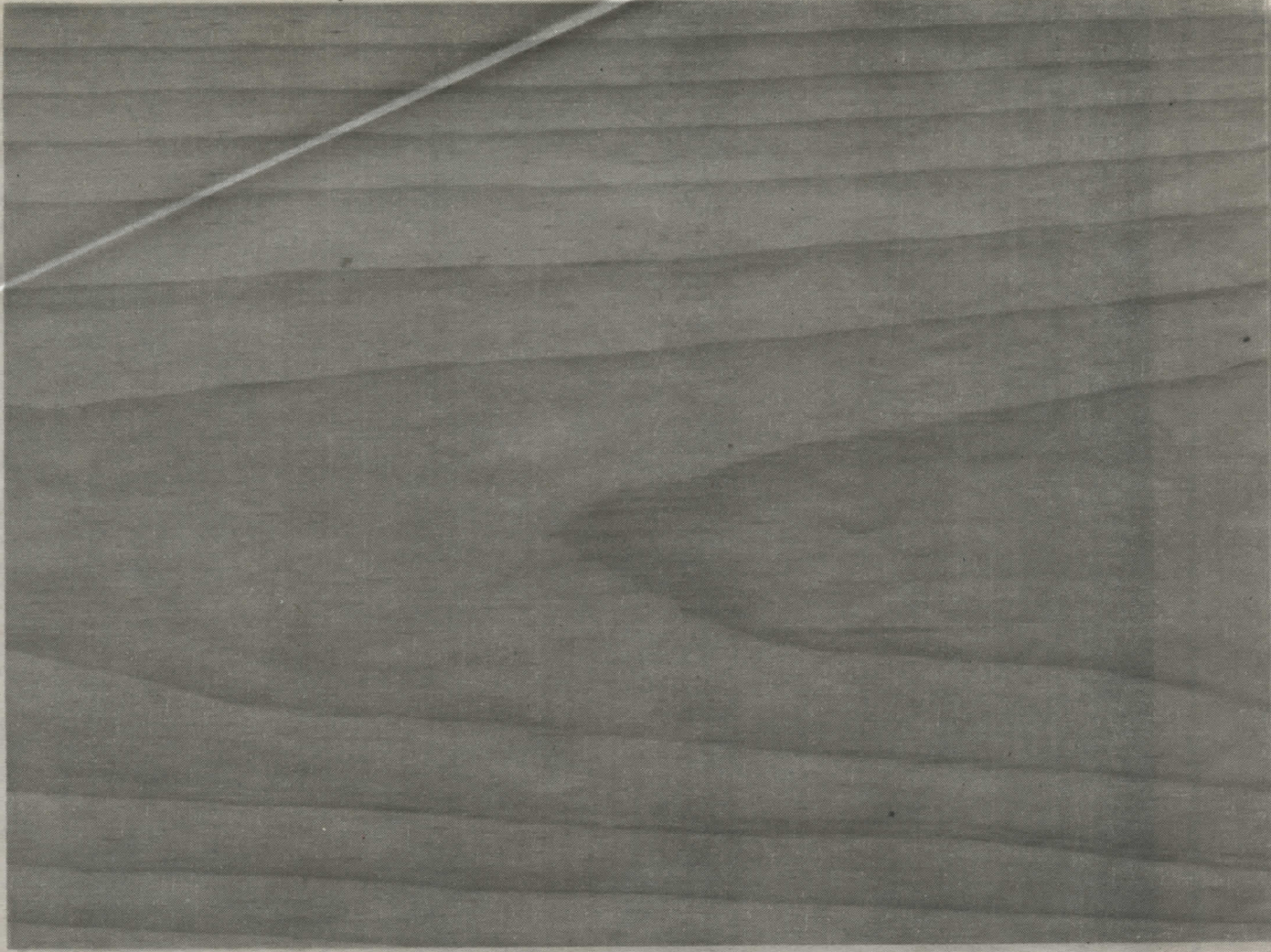
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