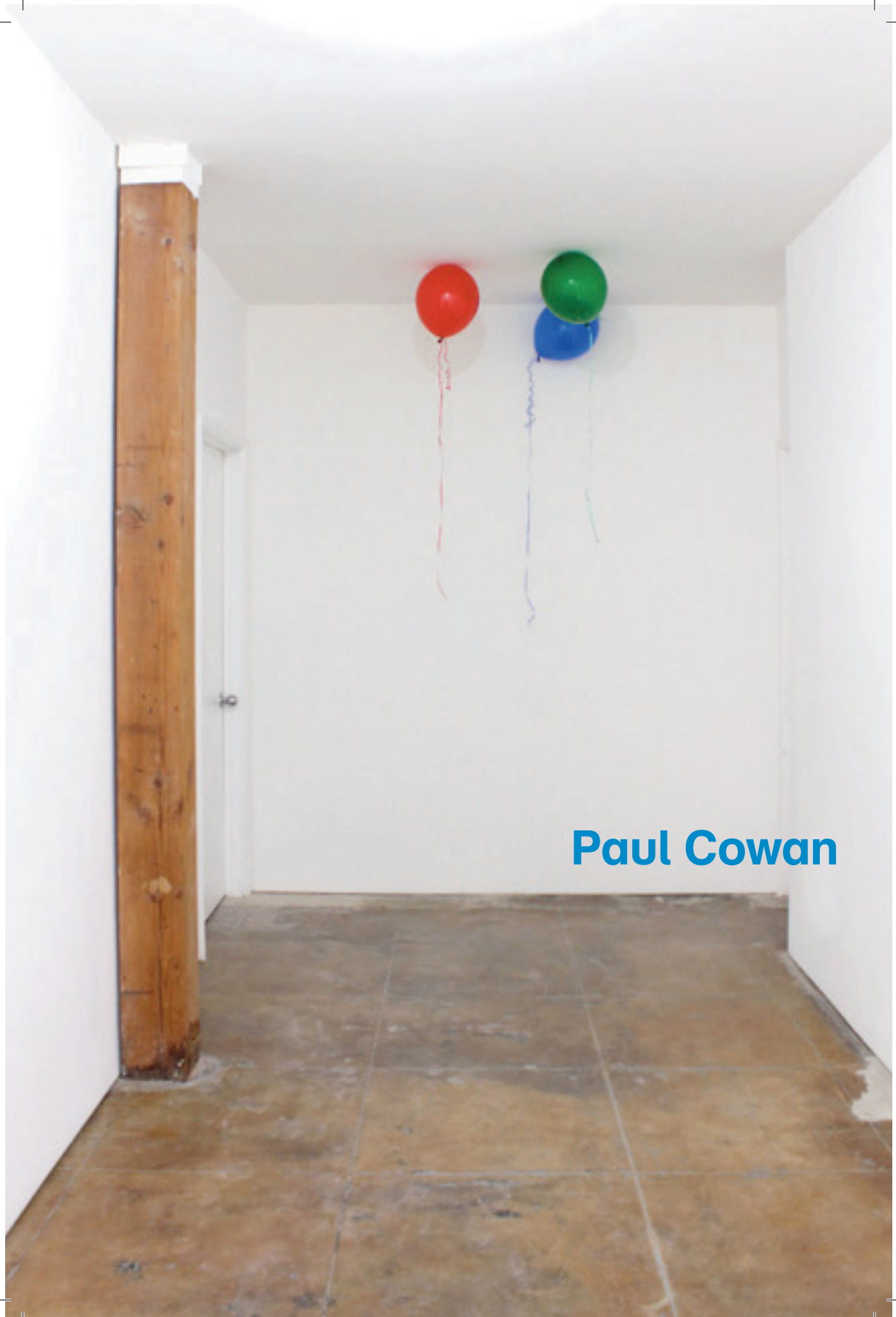




Paul Cowan



Paul Cowan. Untitled, 2011. Oil on canvas and latex balloon. 40 × 32 in. (86.4 × 68.6 cm). Image courtesy of the artist and Green Gallery, Milwaukee.

How to Catch a Viewer

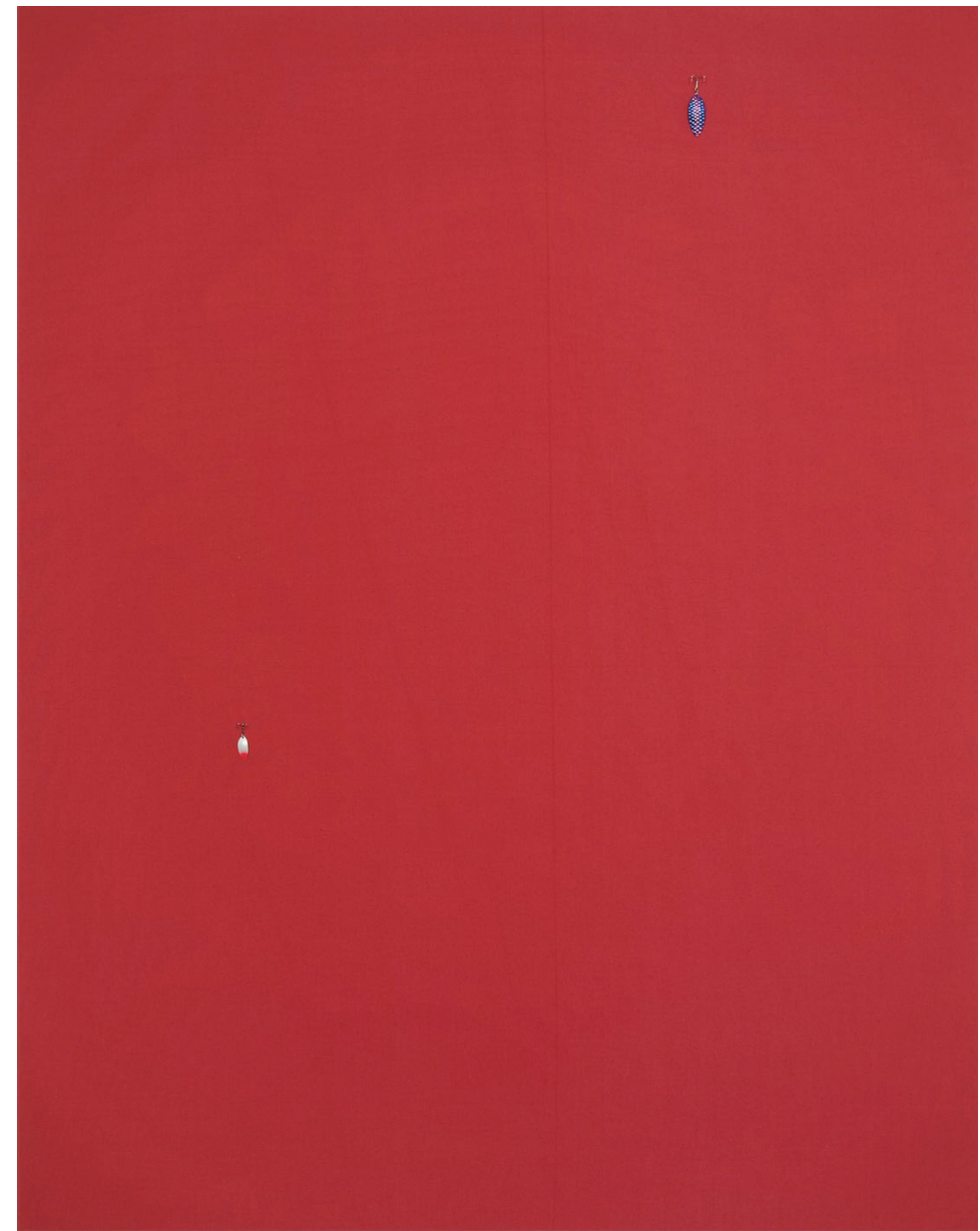
Michael Darling

One of the paradoxes of contemporary painting, a genre that is at an advanced stage in its long history, is that many artists have found it useful to narrow their options in order to generate new possibilities. Staring at a blank canvas may seem to offer an endless horizon of creative opportunities, but each brushstroke, each color, each compositional gambit is so fraught with history that it can be paralyzing to make that first move. To counteract this, numerous painters over the past few decades have restricted themselves to a greatly reduced palette of choices when confronting the canvas as a counterintuitive way to increase painterly potential and spur artistic growth. Robert Ryman, for instance, chose to paint only in white and on square formats, nurturing a sixty-year career that is full of searing observations and startling variety rather than the expected stasis or sameness. In the 1960s Daniel Buren limited himself to stripes of a certain width and with one color always in combination with white, and soon thereafter his studio-bound practice opened up to include the world around him as the “paintings” started to go out into store windows, bus benches, as flags, banners, and so on. In the 1980s Christopher Wool began making mostly black-and-white paintings with stenciled letters, seditiously aligning fine-art painting with utilitarian sign painting but finding new verve and direction in this cultural slumming. Michael Krebber, a German artist who has been an influential force in more recent painting, both of his own accord and as a teacher at the Stadelsschule in Frankfurt, Germany, has famously pushed his practice forward by trying to do as little as possible to make a painting. While this attitude in Krebber’s work sometimes takes the form of feeble marks laid across unadorned white surfaces, it also can manifest itself in borrowed content, as in a recent series of paintings where he transcribed art-world blog postings onto canvases.

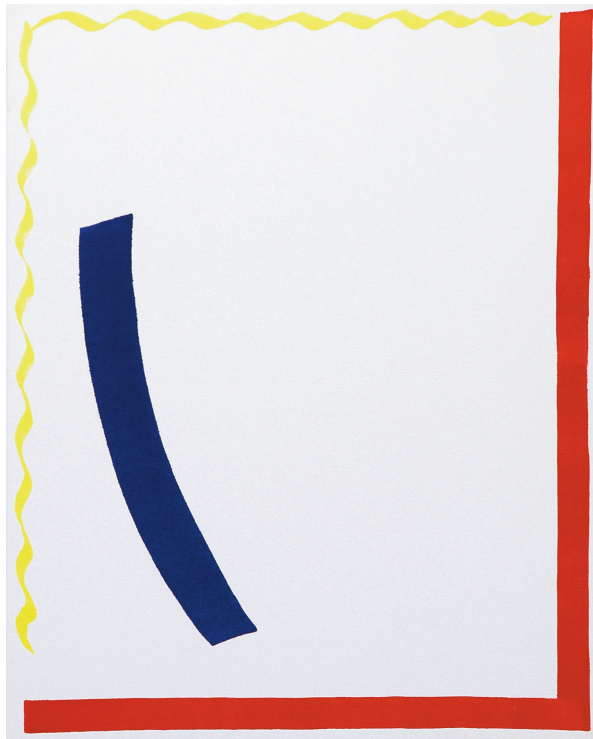
One of these 2011 Krebber canvases referenced a review of the work of the young Chicago-based painter Paul Cowan, at the time a graduate student at the University of Illinois–Chicago. Unwittingly or not, Krebber singled out a promising new member of this club of concerned painters who recognizes the dilemma painting finds itself in today but is devoted to finding ways to expand its possibilities. While in graduate school, Cowan developed a body of work that piqued my interest for its shocking simplicity and rich potential for growth, not unlike the work of his forebears such as Ryman, Buren, Wool, and others. In this series of paintings, he harnessed the format of musical notation to painterly composition and along with it brought sound (or silence) as well as inherent variation into the work. Thus a white canvas with five horizontal slashes of black paint is not just a satisfyingly minimal

arrangement of marks in the lineage of Piet Mondrian or Agnes Martin, but it is also a powerful cipher for silence, or perhaps a visual analogue to John Cage's famous work *4'33"* (1952), where, for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the musician plays no notes while the sounds of the world around the audience come into sharp yet unstructured focus. Likewise, this humble composition of stripes looms ominously as a symbol of potential, just waiting to be filled in any number of ways. And indeed Cowan did start filling in—with musical notes, with blocks of color, and sometimes with the sculptural accompaniment of colored balloons, which became visual analogues of the rounded musical notes that likewise moved up and down in accordance with the strength of the helium within them.

The premise of these works could have sustained Cowan for many years (and perhaps he will return to them in the future), but, as evidence of his searching intellect and curiosity, he quickly developed other ways to fuse the core components of painterly practice—choosing materials, selecting colors, developing compositions, and, above all, stimulating the eye and mind of the viewer—with unexpected analogues outside the realm of fine art. Still working within the aforementioned tradition of limits, in these subsequent series he never picks up a paintbrush, and yet he places himself squarely within the arena of painting with a capital P. One ongoing group of works featured in this MCA exhibition allows Cowan to sidestep that ominous problem of the blank white canvas waiting for the genius alchemist to transform it into gold by starting first with fabrics already impregnated with color or printed with patterns. First barrier surmounted! Next, the artist studies these fabric store finds after he has stretched them in a time-honored way around a rectangular support, taking in the creases, folds, abrasions, printing techniques, and often gaudy designs that come along with them as cues to his next move. Using these preexisting conditions as a guide, he rifles through a collection of fishing lures—some hand-tied and furry, as befits the balletic rituals of fly casting, others shiny and sleek, to tantalize the eyes of fish deep below the surface of the water—and selectively attaches one or two or three to the fabric to complete the composition. Typical painterly principles of balance are followed, as are ideas of complementary and contrasting colors, while patterns in the fabrics as well as the lures also determine unexpected but pleasing allegiances and discordances. While on the surface these works could be seen as slacker contributions under the influence of a Krebber-like call to do as little as possible to make a painting, upon closer inspection they show themselves to be incredibly serious and sensitive contributions to the ongoing expansion of the genre. In them, Cowan attempts to satisfy our visual desires by arranging the figure-like lures against his colorful grounds with precise attention to the distribution of elements and color, but he is also bringing in other traditions of visual seduction, namely, the fatal attraction of fish to artistically rendered bait that also plays on optical and physical conventions. It is not just humans who are suckers for something shiny and pretty, the artist is telling us; it is a powerful rule of nature. And we are hooked.



Paul Cowan. *Untitled*, 2012. Fishing lures on canvas. 63½ × 50 in. (160.7 × 127 cm). Image courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago.



Paul Cowan. *Untitled*, 2011. Enamel on canvas. 30 ½ × 24 in. (76.2 × 60.96 cm). Image courtesy of the artist and Clifton Benevento Gallery, New York.



Paul Cowan. *Untitled*, 2011. Enamel on canvas. 20 × 17 in. (50.8 × 43.2 cm). Image courtesy of the artist and Clifton Benevento Gallery, New York.

This focus on what constitutes visual stimulation and allure is one of the real breakthroughs of Cowan's still-young practice, and yet he beguilingly couches this investigation in the realm of the everyday instead of the stuffy arena of theory. Aside from the parallels in music or fishing, Cowan has also looked to street-side commerce as another place to test the weakness of the eyes to optical seduction. Any glance down a busy commercial thoroughfare reveals the fact that our eyes seem to be drawn to red and yellow, probably best in combination. McDonald's, Shell Oil, KFC, Jack in the Box, and Staples all know this, and their economic might proves it. But local Chicago sign-makers that Cowan has befriended know it too, and their hand-rendered work, more likely found taped to the doors and windows of liquor stores or family-owned bodegas than in the war rooms of fancy ad firms, attempts to lure us into these shops on a daily basis. For the owners of these stores, the stakes are high, and catchy signs translate to sales that in turn sustain families and communities. These sign-makers have developed trademark motifs to catch the eyes of passersby, and these real-world analogues to the fancy brushwork of gallery artists fascinate Cowan. So, without lifting a brush himself, he has collaborated with these artists to put their signature flourishes on pristine white canvas instead of poster board, leaving out the products and prices and relying on their favored color choices (often yellow and red) and efficient wrist-work to draw in gallery goers. With this work, Cowan follows in the footsteps of artists like John Baldessari, Martin Kippenberger, and Francis Alÿs, all of whom hired commercial painters to make their work in a similar spirit of calling attention to the differences in motivation between the fine and applied arts. But Cowan is the first to find a compelling parallel between the even more rarified world of gestural abstraction (Baldessari used text, Kippenberger and Alÿs used figuration) and commerce that further illuminates the connections and differences between these realms.

Cowan loves the space of the in-between, and other series he has been working on lately exemplify this tendency. In this exhibition, for instance, he has installed industrial metal space dividers that are typically used in men's restrooms to create privacy between urinals. In the gallery context, they come across as Minimalist sculptures, parsing out intervals of space across the walls, but their lowly references and the noticeable fingerprints accumulated during handling keep them in a puzzling state of being. Once again, the impersonal and the highly personal collide in a provocative way, unsettling expectations and opening up new avenues for perceiving the overlooked and the underappreciated.

Michael Darling is James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Chicago Works 05

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Cover: Paul Cowan.
Installation view of *Caesurian Complex* at Young Art Gallery, 2011.
Image courtesy of the artist and Young Art Gallery, Los Angeles.

Paul Cowan was born in Kansas City and currently lives and works in Chicago. He received his BFA from Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and an MFA from University of Illinois at Chicago. He has exhibited at Clifton Benevento in New York, Shane Campbell in Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Young Art in Los Angeles, James Cohan in New York, Golden Age in Chicago, Michael Jon in Miami, and Green Gallery in Milwaukee.