

Michon Weeks

Miller, Liz. "I Am Curious About Perception." *Liz Miller Blog*, October 2019.

<https://www.lizmiller.com/blog/2019/10/16/i-am-curious-about-perception-i-wonder-how-much-information-our-brains-need-to-recognize-an-object-an-interview-with-michon-weeks>

LIZ MILLER BLOG

"I am curious about perception. I wonder how much information our brains need to recognize an object" : An Interview With Michon Weeks

October 18, 2019

It's been over a month now since I visited Michon Weeks' studio in Northfield, MN, and several weeks since the opening of her solo exhibition *Airplane, Boombox, Car* at Rochester Art Center. Some work is easy to leave behind, but Weeks' work is not: It has stayed in the forefront of my mind, and after letting it spin there for a bit, I decided I needed to talk to her again. I'm honored to share Weeks' words and images on the blog this week, and highly encourage you to get to RAC before the show closes on October 26th. Here's our conversation:

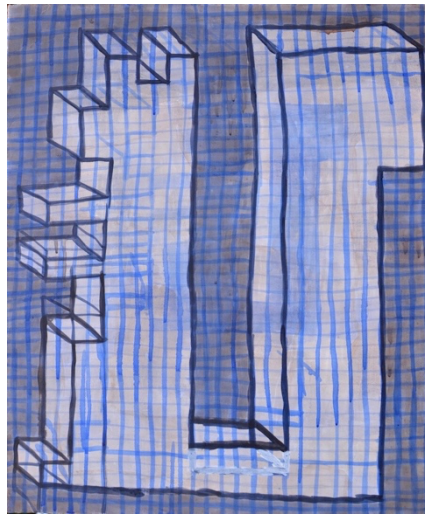


Michon Weeks' solo exhibition *Airplane, Boombox, Car* —on view at Rochester Art Center through October 26, 2019. photo courtesy of the artist

Liz Miller: You paint everyday objects in a distinct style that renders them simplified and enmeshed in a distorted grid. How did you arrive at this style of painting, and how do you feel that it influences the way these images are interpreted by the viewer?

Michon Weeks: Drawing and painting within a grid is something that started developing in my artwork in 1997. I was looking for a process to simplify forms in a way that was both free and structured.

I know that some people find my paintings confusing because of the ambiguity and others like the quality of abstraction that opens the painting up to more than one interpretation. People tell me the grids remind them of textiles, Legos, or mechanical drawings. For me the grids transform a complex thing, like a car, into a simpler structure. I like to build objects out of the minimum number of squares, blocks, or dots possible for recognition so that the image exists right on the edge of recognition. I think the grid breaks objects down into more understandable forms and gives concrete form to an idea.

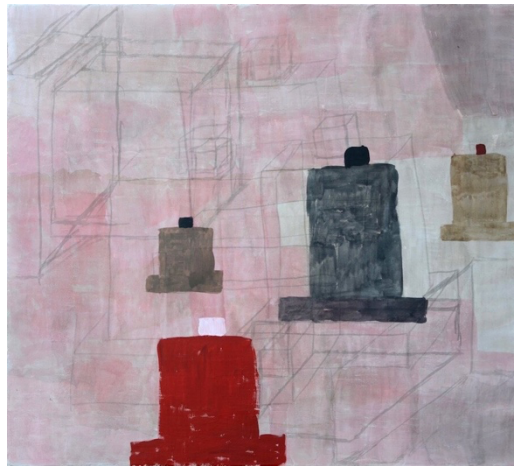


Above: Michon Weeks, *The Squirrel (M.F.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 24" x 20". Below: Michon Weeks' solo exhibition *Airplane, Boombox, Car*—on view at Rochester Art Center through October 26, 2019. photos courtesy of the artist



Liz Miller: In your current solo exhibition *Airplane, Boombox, Car* at Rochester Art Center, and in some previous projects, you connect with members of your local community to gather experiences and anecdotes about objects, and you relay those conversations through abstract paintings. In this sense, the work becomes about both individual and collective experience, and individual and collective memory, as experienced through ordinary objects. What has been the most surprising thing you've learned during these community-inspired projects?

Michon Weeks: People are interesting and complex, but I don't know that unless I spend time with them. Community-inspired projects like this one grant me a system for connecting with people. When I get to know someone, I become more interested in them and care more about them. I started this project because I wanted to be a better neighbor to my choir-mates. They surprised me by becoming interested and appreciating my artwork. I experienced their "neighbor love".



Above: Michon Weeks, *The Stocking Cap (D.B.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 18" x 20". Below: Michon Weeks, *The Sewing Machine (S.B.)*, acrylic on linen, 24" x 18". photos courtesy of the artist



Liz Miller: Your most recent paintings are a bit looser and more gestural in the paint application than some of your earlier works where the grid was more pronounced. In my mind, this makes the space between the painting and the rendered objects a more significant one—it's not as easy to attribute the painting to the object it was inspired by—the painting complicates depiction. How are you thinking about this transition?

Michon Weeks: With the newer paintings I am more focused on studying the materials and what they can do. I start the painting by asking, "What does the football (for example) want to look like in this painting, painted by me?" I don't know what it will look like when I start the painting. I want to be surprised. I also want the work to be resonant, which only happens when I get out of the way. So when an object becomes abstracted beyond recognition I just go with it and trust it. I am curious about perception. I wonder how much information our brains need to recognize an object. So I like it when it lands right on the edge of abstraction and recognition.



Above: Michon Weeks, *The Boombox (K.H.)*, acrylic on canvas, 2019, 20" x 24". Below: Michon Weeks, *The Mother (C.H.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 24" x 18". photos courtesy of the artist

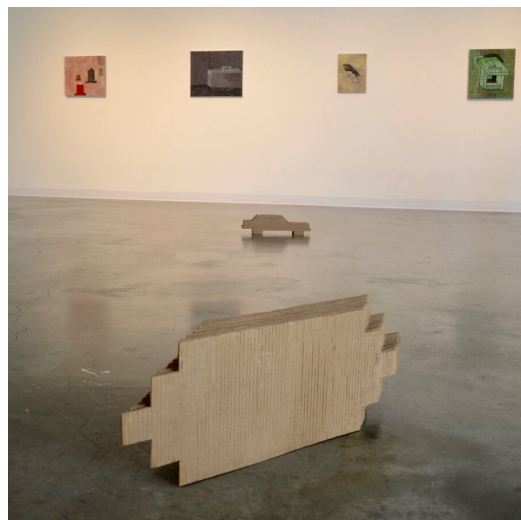


Liz Miller: The sculptural cardboard works in the exhibition inhabit a place between three-dimensionality and flatness...and that fascinates me as a painter-turned-sculptor/installation artist. How did you start making these works, and how do you see them fitting within your larger oeuvre?

Michon Weeks: I started making the cardboard sculptures last summer. I made a drawing of a dog within a grid. I thought it would look cool as a sculpture made from cardboard and I like the idea of making something that plays with the illusion of space. I usually don't know where I am going when I begin making something. The cardboard dog sculpture was different. I had a clear idea of how to make it from the beginning. I made an eight-inch model to test my idea and then made a larger 32" dog from cardboard. My husband, David, cut out the cardboard pieces for the large dog and squirrel sculptures. I found cutting the cardboard to be a bit tedious, but David liked it!



Above and below: Michon Weeks' solo exhibition *Airplane, Boombox, Car*—on view at Rochester Art Center through October 26, 2019. photo courtesy of the artist



Liz Miller: What's the most exciting exhibition you've seen recently, and how has it influenced your thinking?

Michon Weeks: Last week I saw a newly acquired lithograph print by Picasso at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. It was a line drawing of buildings and gardens as seen from a rooftop. Picasso's lines are somehow both free and specific. They appear geometric and organic at the same time. They zigzag over the paper in a way that seems both organized and chaotic. How did he do it? I made a copy drawing of Picasso's drawing to try to figure it out. With Picasso's drawing etched in my mind I visited the Walker Art Center three days later. I normally love visiting the Walker, but Picasso's small drawing made a lot of the artwork at the Walker seem safe, overly controlled, and lacking resonance. I plan to see Picasso's lithograph again sometime soon.



Above: Michon Weeks, *The Dog (J.D.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 16 1/4" x 22 1/4". Below: Michon Weeks, *The Golden Arches (B.B.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 12" x 16". photos courtesy of the artist



Liz Miller: What are you working on now, and where can we see your work next?

Michon Weeks: Recently I started studying the worms and insects in my backyard. I don't make artwork because I am interested in something and want to explain it to you. I am studying the worms and insects because I want to become interested in them. So far I have made small drawings of an angleworm, a stone centipede, and a sap beetle. I am learning facts about the worms and insects and how to identify them through the University of Minnesota Extension website. My next step is to make paintings and maybe some cardboard sculptures so that I can see what the worms and insects look like when they are distilled through the painting materials, my brain, and heart.

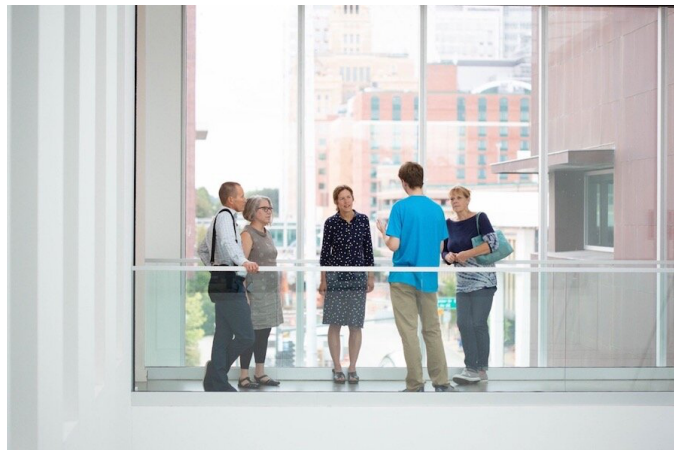
You can see this project unfold on Instagram. Also, I am traveling for three months beginning in February as I lead twenty students on the Environmental Science Semester in New Zealand and Australia. I plan to study the fauna of the habitats we visit along the way and show the work after I return.



Michon Weeks, *The Gate (W.M.)*, 2019, acrylic on linen, 12" x 16". photo courtesy of the artist

Liz Miller: When you're not in the studio, where can we find you?

Michon Weeks: You can find me teaching students how to draw and paint at St. Olaf College or I might be Nordic skiing at Hyland Park in Bloomington, jogging in the Carleton Arboretum or gravel biking on the hills outside of Northfield.



Above: Michon Weeks (center) at her recent opening reception for *Airplane, Boombox, Car* at Rochester Art Center. Below: Michon Weeks on a recent bike ride with her daughter-in-law Jill. photos courtesy of the artist



Born and raised in Washburn, Iowa, Michon Weeks earned a BA in Art from Iowa State University and an MFA in Drawing and Painting from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Weeks is an Associate Professor of Practice in Art and Art History at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN where she teaches courses in drawing and painting.

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