

The title of William Steiger's exhibition, "Road Less Traveled," is borrowed from a poem by Robert Frost. *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.* These lines remind us that there is power in choice, especially of taking the unexpected path and forging a new way. The themes in Steiger's work fit this sentiment. He explores imagery that is inherently nostalgic and speaks to the idealism of modernization. His recent works are of telephone poles, grain elevators, wooden bridges, architecture, and amusements developed at the beginning of the last century. These represent a time when technology offered the possibilities of utopia and inspired the collective fantasy of progress. Steiger's archetypal subject matter is familiar, yet there are very few references to specific locations, time of day, or even era. The images could be from today or 100 years ago. The objects are not placed in past or present, but they all seem uncannily familiar.

The art historical references within Steiger's brilliant work are rich. We are reminded of Charles Sheeler, whose interpretations of modern Americana explore the relationships between abstraction and representation. He often used photographic viewpoint as the impetus for his paintings. Steiger also explores vantage points mediated by photography. He often shows perspectives that can only be seen from above, or angles unattainable to the human eye. Formally, Steiger's works are rooted in the geometric shapes, grid, and repetition of minimalism. Psychologically, his paintings and collages are reminiscent of Edward Hopper's pared-down, empty landscapes, and lone figures; Steiger's work is also devoid of human presence and most often lacks contextual elements that would place the objects in real space. There are nods to Paul Cezanne's paintings like *Basket of Apples* and his distortion of objects to create multiple perspectives. One specific work by Ed Ruscha, *Standard Station* from 1966 also informs how I interpret Steiger's paintings and collages. Ruscha's screen print shows a gas station from an

exaggerated angle, and it is upon closer inspection that we realize the vanishing point is not along the horizon line in typical linear perspective, instead the bottom right corner of the paper doubles as the vanishing point for the receding parallel lines. This play between what we expect to see, and what we actually see, shows up frequently in Steiger's work. The works in this exhibit are from 2022-23, and are either oil on linen paintings, or smaller, more intimate, collages created from hand-marbled and found paper, gouache, and acrylic paint mounted on board.

Steiger's painting, *Switchback*, is a work that shows a mediated viewpoint. It is from an aerial perspective, necessitated by an airplane and a camera. The details in the work give the scene some verisimilitude, but a closer look reveals the artificiality of visual language. The river flowing through the patchwork of fields at first looks like highly reflective water. Little trees that dot the shorelines are mirrored in the river. Yet when we stop to investigate what we are really seeing, the switchback is simply a flatly painted, white colored swoosh cutting through green and gold squares. Our minds create what we want to see. Steiger has also played with this Gestalt phenomenon in his early works. Gestalt theory of visual perception suggests that we desire similarity, continuation, closure, symmetry, and order, and when denied this, we try to make it happen regardless. In some of Steiger's early grain elevator paintings, the delineation between the sides of the white buildings and the negative space of the sky are implied, not real. The viewer fills in the edge of the buildings because it is so uncomfortable to not. This is the same phenomenon that makes us want to complete a circle; our brains require closure and will fill in the missing parts to make a whole. In Steiger's collage *Grain Growers* two dormers on the far right are cut from one, seamless, marbled piece of paper, but at first glance they appear as two dormer peaks delineated by a wall. In *Elevator High Noon*, a little shed and a fence are made

from one piece of paper. The shed appears to be visually placed in front of the fence until we look closer and see that there is not a literal delineation between where the shed ends and the fence begins. There are intriguing idiosyncrasies that the viewer only uncovers with careful observation and beings to understand that the visible world is just an illusion.

Steiger's works are exercises in minimalist visual language. He utilizes the grids, geometry, and repetition of minimalism. He presents only that which must be conveyed in order to fulfill his part in the process, the rest is left up to the viewer. Minimalism extended the ideas formed in abstraction that art should be self-referential, and the viewer should only respond to what is before them. Frank Stella has said that what you see is what you see. Minimalist artworks are most often based in simple geometric shapes, like the square and the rectangle, and focus on simplicity, order, and repetition. Steiger presents his objects to us in a similar matter of fact way. Grain elevators are reduced to be flat rectangles interrupting vacuous white and grey skies. The iconic structure, The Empire State Building, and its surroundings are reduced to dark and light converging lines and flat rows of white rectangular windows. Minimalism's repetition is everywhere in Steiger's work and appears in the girders of the covered bridge, the web of wood holding up the Cyclone rollercoaster, and the rows of electric poles marching through the landscape. The reduced, often arbitrary color palette, and hard, crisp edges of minimalism are in Steiger's paintings, although he produces the shape edges painstakingly by hand. This is an irony antithetical to minimalism's desire to eradicate authorship in the artwork. Formally, his works are rooted in minimalism but they are also visually, conceptually, and psychologically pared down. The empty skies and unpopulated landscape in works like *Elevator High Noon*, *Blue Elevator*, and *Red Door* are vacuums that are devoid of human presence. They give a feeling of exposure, vulnerability, and unnerving isolation like we see in some of Hopper's paintings.

Works like *Cyclone* and *Unisphere* portray fairgrounds after the crowds have departed. The images are like visual memories. They are not specific or particularly detailed, but they have enough to remind us of what was there. Many of these images seem personal to Steiger, who grew up in Illinois and remembers road trips across the big skies of the Midwest plains. He relocated to the San Francisco Bay area and was inspired by the landscape there and the works of Diebenkorn. Diebenkorn's work relies on negative space to suggest the landscape. This is seen in the vast, bare skies of Steiger's grain elevators, especially in *Blue Elevator* and *Wheat Pool North*.

Cezanne is thought to have said that everything we look at disperses and vanishes and nature is always the same, but its appearance is always changing. In Cezanne's famous painting, the *Basket of Apples*, the table tilts forward toward the viewer, and the horizontal edge of the table does not logically connect across the painting. Cezanne has altered the truth in favor of a successful composition; there is abstraction within representation. What we believe to be an authentic representation of reality is inherently abstracted. This concept is prominent throughout Steiger's works. In *Red Door* the horizon line breaks at each building and vanishes completely to the left of the scene. The same thing happens in *Mill River Bridge* where the horizon changes color from green to gold and drops off at an impossible angle. And, like Cezanne's table which is tilted toward the viewer so we can get a better look at the objects on that table, Steiger has tilted the ground in *Covered Bridge* and *Switchback* toward us. As famously quoted by Mark Twain, neither Cezanne nor Steiger have let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

Ruscha's *Standard Station* mentioned above has an impossible perspective that the viewer accepts as based in reality. We put trust in the artist to give us truth in representation. Like Ruscha's trick with perspective, Steiger's works often reveal a disconnect between what the

viewer sees and what we know. This may be the reason that Steiger chooses iconographic, and displaced images. They are familiar so we approach them believing that we know them. But closer observation reveals that we don't. Steiger's lines appear to cross over each other in wrong ways, girders and beams are entangled, and carefully engineered supports become like spiderwebs. For example, in the collage *Virgo Windmill* the structure of beams holding up the windmill intersects each other in impossible ways. The three closed horizontal girders in the tower change shape as they progress down the structure. They start off as a square, and end as a five-sided shape, not unlike the configuration of the Virgo constellation. In this windmill's support, there also seem to be too many vertical beams and they don't always connect to their counterparts like solid engineering would. Girders and beams are also interwoven in perplexing fashion in *Cyclone*. The framework of I-beams, tie bars, and cross braces are impossibly connected and they become like an abstracted and random spiderweb of drawn lines. All of the objects in Steiger's works are displaced and this adds to this intended disorder. They feel like memories, but we cannot connect them to specific places or times. Our minds want these grids and lines to be structurally sound, coherent, and logical. We trust that they are so until we take a closer look and see that there is scant likelihood of these images corresponding to the real world. I have always been intrigued by Steiger's work because it necessitates thoughtful, careful, and unhurried contemplation, and if we succeed, we are rewarded with a glimpse into the deceptions of visual language.

Steiger's work has been exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. He has had solo shows at the Queens Museum of Art and Margaret Thatcher Projects in New York, at Gallery Ihn in Seoul, Korea, and at Koki Arts in Tokyo, Japan. His solo exhibitions at galleries in the United States are too numerous to mention, and include shows in New York, Chicago,

Dallas, Philadelphia, and Atlanta. His works are in the permanent collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, as well as many private and corporate collections.

Many of the archetypal objects painted and collaged by Steiger epitomize the Western world's concept of progress. Yet, these objects are presented to us without contextual clues which makes them seem displaced. The scenes in Steiger's works could be from the past or present. They act like empty signifiers, loose enough to have multiple meanings, but specific enough to direct our interpretation in a particular direction. Steiger gives us images mediated through photography, from aerial views, or with unusual angles and odd perspectives that also reference art historical works. His body of work in its entirety, and the paintings and collages in this exhibition, show visual representation as an illusion. Steiger plays with the inherent abstraction within representation and gives us paintings and collages that cannot be taken at face value. The paintings in his oeuvre represent our collective memories. They are part of that shared pool of knowledge associated with the Western world's identity through industrialization and its insatiable desire for progress. Yet, the vacant settings devoid of human presence speak to emptiness and loss. His stunning paintings and collages reveal tricks and secrets that cause us to question visual language and bring us back to contemplate the images again and again.

Author's Biography

Melissa Kuntz is Associate Dean of Arts and Humanities and Professor of Art at Pennsylvania Western University. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in painting and a Master of Arts in Modern and Contemporary Theory and Criticism from SUNY Purchase College. She also has a Doctor of Philosophy in Administration and Leadership from the sociology department at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She has written many exhibition and book reviews for “Art in America” magazine, “Pittsburgh City Paper,” and “Chautauqua Daily.” Upcoming peer reviewed articles are based on her dissertation which was a quantitative study of gender, race, socio-economic status, and prestige of art school on gallery representation, museum collections, and exhibitions. Kuntz has exhibited her painting and drawings widely in the US and Canada. She currently lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with her husband and son.