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HYPERALLERGIC

Building New Worlds Out of Grids

The work of Emma Soucek and the late Maddy Parrasch at Safe Gallery not only braves the space of the grid, but also revels in its inconsistencies and hiccups.

by [Louis Block](#) July 12, 2019



Maddy Parrasch, "Untitled" (2018), ceramic tiles on wood, 31 x 32 1/2 in. (all images courtesy Safe Gallery)

The first digital image of Mars was hand drawn. In July of 1965, impatient with the processing time required for a computer to translate Mariner 4's flyby data into an image, a team at NASA decided to produce the picture themselves with a paint-by-numbers technique. In orange and red pastels, they transformed raw pixel information into a legible image. The image is a map of uncertainties being realized. This grid is not an arbiter of form, it is a playing field susceptible to fantasy and wonder. It wobbles and stretches.

How generous to give into this grid completely. The work of Emma Soucek and the late Maddy Parrasch at Safe Gallery not only braves the space of the grid, but also revels in its inconsistencies and hiccups. Soucek and Parrasch imagine the grid as more than a compositional tool: their grids are ones that tie together perpendicular threads and techniques.



Emma Soucek, “spottieottiedopalicious angel” (2019), paper pulp, collage, acrylic, glue, 75 x 90 in.

Soucek’s “spottieottiedopalicious angel” (2019), the show’s centerpiece, strays furthest from the graphical confines of the grid. Issuing from the sharp diagonal of a multicolored field of flowers, an unlikely assembly of figures cascades in free fall: an early hominid drawn in grisaille, a basketball player caught mid-leap, a cardiovascular diagram of a somersaulting girl, a seated child rendered in a pixelated heat map. This whole tumbling parade, cut and glued onto soft yellow paper pulp, leads into a central shape — part Chinese finger trap, part wormhole. Yet, daubs of black and pastel colors forming vertical lines faintly evidence the underlying grid.

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Maddy Parrasch, “Untitled” (2018), ceramic slab, 8 1/4 x 11 in.

Nearby, an untitled ceramic slab by Parrasch contains cosmos in its egg-like form — cloudy striations of violet and green seem to move in perpetual slow motion, like telescope pictures of nebulae. The glaze seeps beyond the lines demarcated by the artist, betraying the controlled act of its application. It is no coincidence that these pieces come after Soucek and Parrasch visited Giotto’s frescoes in Padua and Assisi. The color never

seems to be applied, but rather embedded in the work's substrates. Soucek's pulp pieces are colored by the paper itself, blended with pigment to form a soft paste, and Parrasch's ceramics attain their final color through a wealth of techniques, grounded in the alchemical processes of glazing and firing.



Emma Soucek, "Part of the Easy Mo Bee and Miles Davis Fantasy" (2019), paper pulp, collage, acrylic, glue, 60 x 72 in.

The grid of data that NASA employees pasted on the wall in 1965 was neither a document to be translated nor a template to be filled in; it was a site for additional discovery. The image looks in two directions at once: backward, to the uncertain journey of radio waves emitted by the probe, and forward, to the imagined alien territory on the brink of a cold reveal. This picture's grid is not what decides its form — it is what reveals its location in a temporal dimension.

Parrasch's largest piece, a tile mosaic, playfully defies the precision of the square format. The uneven surfaces of the glossy black tiles, which serve as enlarged pixels, catch and distort the light in the gallery. Dispersed among the glazed ceramic are 3D-printed tiles with ink embedded in gypsum. Their images range from a lightning bolt to a snowflake to views of fish underwater. Those universal forms, glimpsed pre-fossilization or mid-state-change, are here immortalized with state-of-the-art printing technology. This grid holds both the lure of the ancient process of glazing ceramics, which yields unstable forms, and technology's promise of accurate image transcription into elemental

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material. Though digital imagery is an increasingly ubiquitous form of representation and social memory, it is still anchored to sensory experience: an image of a lightning bolt means nothing to someone who has not experienced the adrenaline rush of a blinding strobe followed by a thunderclap.



Maddy Parrasch, "Untitled" (2018), ceramic tiles in wood frame, 12 x 12 in.

Similarly, Soucek's "Around and 'Round in Circles Is a Ride That Goes Somewhere" (2019) expresses a kind of digital language through tactile means. In its concentric circles and radial pattern, it recalls superimposed targets and blast radii from war games. Its wobbly zebra stripes are pushed into order by the artist's fingertips. To speak of the *digital* in Soucek's work is literally to speak of the digits on her hands, creating a personal grid.

Across the room, another of Soucek's pulp pieces features squares and diamonds turning into place. A gentle planetary curve sweeps across the composition, divided into soft fields by wobbling cords of color. The lines seem to shimmer and dance with excitement for their incipient meeting. At their nadir, a leathered mummy, cut out and pasted, sits in a contorted heap. In the tender application of color and the playful treatment of collage elements, Soucek's work recalls a child's cast, its gauze and plaster hardened into shape and then adorned with schoolchildren's scrawl. In the absence of the body, the empty cast references both the deformation of the original wound and the hope and longing for healing. It is multivalent, open to contradiction at its knotted core.



Emma Soucek, “Halcyon On and On” (2019), paper pulp, collage, acrylic, glue, 60 x 64 in.

In an interview between the artists, published in a zine with the exhibition, Parrasch reveals Legos as her favorite toy. Individual units constructed specifically to allow as much freedom as possible to stem from their potential combination, a number of Parrasch’s small ceramic pieces seem to directly reference this kind of play. They recall Cy Twombly’s sketchy maps and Gonzalo Fonseca’s carved dreamscapes as much as they do puzzles. In an untitled piece from 2018, two printed tiles vie for a spot on a sharp diagonal. On the sidelines, future participants wait their turn: a jack-o-lantern, a washed-up stingray, a tile incised with an off-kilter grid. These artists’ practices evolved in close conversation with each other, in adjacent studios. While the myth of the artist privileges individual achievement, common models of play require a minimum of two participants for the possibility of exchange and challenge.

This grid is merely a slice of some unseen lattice. It bends, with impulse, with inevitability. It asks us to consider each point as a meeting place of divergent forces. What of our present moment do these pieces excavate? The dust to be swept off them takes many forms. The alchemy of Parrasch’s ceramics contributes to the heat death of the universe, but it also relates to new modes of image-making, and Soucek’s impulse is both destructive and regenerative in its frenetic recycling of material. We are all consuming at unsustainable rates, and we are faced with the prospect of constructing

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new forms with the detritus of our own making — a shapeless, speckled lump. To see constellations in the mire, and build them into new worlds, is admirable.

Maddy Parrasch & Emma Soucek continues at *Safe Gallery* (1004 Metropolitan Avenue, Brooklyn) through July 14.