Good For Now
by Thomas Mar Wee

Proposition 1: As hinted by its title—*Is now a good time?*—this is a show preoccupied with the provisional. These are works which, in their process, materials, and theoretical concerns, suggest an aesthetics of provisionality.

What is an aesthetics of provisionality?

An initial (provisional) definition: an aesthetics of provisionality is concerned with the making that happens right now, with what is made with the tools and materials immediately at one's disposal. Or, to crib Heidegger: it is work made with the daily equipment surrounding us, with that which is "ready-to-hand."[1] Provisionality means letting elements of chance into the process. It means not waiting for more ideal conditions. It means getting started now, because there will never be a better time.

This is not to say that the work on display at Foreland (Catskill, NY) is hasty, half-finished, or ill-conceived. Rather the opposite, as it turns out. The works shown here by artists Joseph Cohen and Sylvia Atwood are months or in some cases years in the making. These are highly deliberated and deliberating objects, which, after a long period of gestation, we have now been granted access. What I mean to say is that these works aim to make their provisionality legible: they invite the viewer in. To walk or sit with them. To check in. To bear witness to the cumulative result of long periods of experimentation and iteration, trial and error.

Proposition 2: The works exhibited in *Is now a good time?* are especially concerned with rendering the iterative, non-linear labor of art-making, which typically occurs behind the studio's closed doors, legible.

Both artists' work invites a closer study of the individual steps that go into the process of creating artworks that are eventually displayed. They poke fun at and critique the concept of the work of art as a rarefied, finished product fit for consumption. Highlighting process, this show welcomes the viewer to engage with the artists' respective studio practices. Here, I use the term "studio" in what I hope is the most expansive way possible. In my conversations with both of them, "studio" could refer to, at various points, the sidewalks of Providence, a CVS photo lab, a writing desk, and the various rooms in Tivoli, NY and Providence, RI where our respective conversations took place.

As you view these works—some of which even I will not have seen at the time of this writing—I invite you to stay attuned to the resonances, conversations, and side-talk that occur here between and across works by both artists. What can be gleaned—about this particular friendship, about the circumstances and material opportunities afforded to these two collaborators—from listening to what these works have to say?

Proposition 3: If we are to take seriously the query offered by the show's title, I propose that these works suggest, with perhaps a hint of irony, as one possible answer: *Now is as good a time as any.*

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Take Joseph Cohen's series of "paintings," as the artist calls them. The choice to call these *paintings* rather than *photographs* is a telling one. It is a tongue-and-cheek nod towards the way that Joseph intends for these works to be read within the genre of painting rather than photography. As an alternative name for these objects, I offer here the term "prepared photographs," *à la* the prepared instruments of John

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 98.

Cage and others. These are not photographs, per se, or at least not in a conventional sense. These works evade the traditional demands we make of the medium: to convey some kind of "truth value," to supply evidence, or to act as a mnemonic device. They fail intentionally, because Joseph is interested in something else.

JC: These paintings are sort of reworkings of two old works [*Stick Painting IV* (2021) and *Composition II* (2020)]. *They were made between 2021 and 2023. Most of these were made in two different studios, one in Connecticut, in college, and then one in Kingston, NY […] I'd found a camera on the side of the road a few months earlier and decided to start bringing it into my studio with me and using it as a tool to prompt a performance logic. I was thinking about what occurs in front of the camera and how I would respond differently in the studio if I was working in front of the camera.*

Joseph's phrase "a performance logic" seems to be the glyph that unlocks the cipher, offering insight into initially cryptic, even opaque works. To the question—which, like me, you will likely ask upon first encountering these works—"what am I looking at?"—the phrase "a performance" perhaps lends us a useful, although initially counterintuitive clue.

Hidden beneath these prepared photographs is a palimpsest-like documentation of an extended performance of sorts. What these photographs "depict," if they depict anything, is this performance. A performance which was initiated, I learn—in the case of *Stick Painting IV* (not currently on display)—with Joseph's Pollock-esque process. This process involved strapping buckets of diluted oil paint to their limbs, and with their movements, splattering a canvas laid out on the floor. This process produced the source material of several of these works: the painted canvas which serves as the latent subject of these prepared photographs. This canvas, I learn, which was originally intended to be suspended and displayed, proved difficult to wrangle. The solution, Joseph tells me, was to restrain it. To hang it from wire and stretch it across their body. This stretching—the artist's body mimicking stretcher bars—is one instance of performance: what Joseph refers to as "a performance for one." A performance which we, the viewers, have no direct evidence of.

Instead we get only a faint shadow. These photos taken with the aforementioned roadside camera, which entered Joseph's studio practice as a novel interlocutor, are a slantwise attempt to document this painting-performance. Via Joseph's treatment and interventions to these photographs—adding chemical baths, punching holes, scanning and printing them—their ostensible subject is distorted or obscured entirely until the result is something more akin to nonrepresentational, abstract painting.

Here we can chart a transformation—in scale, medium, and material—from the initial large canvas to the postcard-like (4 x 6 in.) "paintings" framed on the wall. This transformation, Joseph tells me, was in part the product of a change of material circumstances: moving from the larger studio in Middletown, CT where the "action-paintings" were originally made, to their current one in Tivoli– a desk in the living room of a one-bedroom sublet. Whether the product of necessity or intention, these smaller-scale works invite closer inspection. One of their most poignant details, to me, which Joseph points out in our conversation: on one of the prepared-photographs, *Spray tan*: a single black human hair (Joseph's) lies on the physical photograph itself, which the scanner then captures and reproduces, in a flattened, pixelated form. To borrow from Roland Barthes, this is the "painting's" *punctum*: "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[2]

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[2] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 27.

In his writings on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin was famously preoccupied with the figure of the ragpicker—that specter of modern urban life trawling through the gutters of 19th-century Paris. Describing the ragpicker's activities, in his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin offers what I'd argue is an example of provisional aesthetics:

> *He goes through the archives of debauchery, and the jumbled array of refuse. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.*[3]

One finds echoes of Benjamin's ragpicker in the found-object *bricolage* of Sylvia Atwood's *Providences*, made primarily with materials ready-to-hand: detritus sourced from the urban environs of Providence, RI. Their bases cast in concrete, these works—floating somewhere between sculpture and painting—have a totemic quality. Per Benjamin, these works dramatize a process in which pieces of garbage are assembled, sutured, juxtaposed, and thus transformed. No longer useful, the artist-as-ragpicker "refurbishes" this ephemera, refashioning trash into something valuable beyond its mere use-value.

Another interlocutor: Joseph Cornell. Like Cornell's shadow boxes, these works are products of *flâneur*-like wanderings and magpie-like acts of culling, rescue, and care. Both Cornell and Sylvia didn't stray far from home: Cornell wandered close to his mother's home in Queens, while Sylvia traces and retraces paths around Providence. Both Cornell's shadow boxes and *Providences* evince a sense of architectural discreteness, an interior tautness. Originally, Sylvia tells me, the concrete bases of these pieces were designed to be ornate frames for drawings until the frames themselves began to take over. The frame lends each work in *Providences* a sense of internal coherence. They bound each work as a discrete system. Sylvia, in our conversation, mentions her interest in the contradictions and tensions inherent in the concept of a "network": that schematic structure which is simultaneously highly ordered but governed by an often inscrutable logic. Visually, these pieces evoke a circuit board, a topographical map, or the veins of a city at night seen from above.

Rendering everyday, benign objects unrecognizable seems to be one of the intentions behind *Providences*. Broken into discrete components, the previous usages or identities of scavenged materials are made irrelevant. De-contextualized, wrested from their previous associations, these objects become components of a larger schema. A node in a network. One which functions to redirect or reactivate our attention. To re-sensitize us to mystery and meaning. To prompt us to see our surroundings anew.

[3] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 349.