

**Claude Viallat at Ceysson & Bénétière: 2018 Seattle Art Fair**  
**August 13, 2018**  
**By Lindsay Martin**



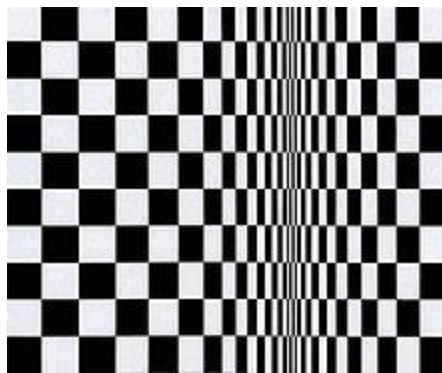
*Claude Viallat, Seattle Art Fair. 2018*

The 2018 Seattle Art Fair was a celebrated event with galleries from the local districts of Seattle next to global art businesses, each cubicle containing a curated ambiance of regionalism and/or worldly historical importance. The divide between art exhibition and art market still seemed as prevalent as last year, while certain galleries attempted to experiment and others crowded the space with their shelved items. As one scanned the busy cubicles, dated paintings with 1980's frames looked dusted off and set out to blend with new work that added breadth and technique to an otherwise largely painting affair. Some exhibitors such as Portland-based Melanie Flood Projects supported local artists and treated the space as an event to discuss work, while Seattle's Patricia Rovzar Gallery packed in local favorites in hopes of a new purchase. Dystopia was a celebrated theme, including Nato Thompson's curator's talk, "*We have always been, loving and fearful, robots,*" and "Probably Chelsea," an installation of DNA scanned faces hanging on wire that contained part of Chelsea E. Manning's DNA, created by Heather Dewey-Haborg and Chelsea E. Manning. One booth that seemed to defy both the sale aspect and a trend-seeking prestige of the Art Fair was Ceysson & Bénétière, who exhibited new work of established Supports/Surfaces painter, Claude Viallat.

Claude Viallat's pieces are a stunning representation of a sixty-year-old practice that remains evocative with new, freshly dried paintings that all contain his signature symbol similar to a lima bean or bone shape. Viallat, as Bernard Ceysson states is a "contentious defender of modernism since 1964 when he began working with the idea of a repeated pattern to refuse the idea of subject;" always questioning the found substrate as a boundless identity. The Supports/Surfaces artists began the movement in France during the 1960's Charles DeGaulle

era, where although the economy was expanding, the country was still “traditionalist and repressive.”<sup>1</sup> The French Student Revolt of 1968 and protests on nuclear weapons called for artists to take action with their own set of problems sourced from the art market. The younger artists carried revolutionary thinking into their work by seeking to abolish a dated concept of substrates. Following the revolutionary mindset of the time, twelve artists broke down the confines of the substrate tradition to avoid the image in pursuit of another painting conversation. Together, they placed the substrate (the system) into the main point of discussion, interrogating the purpose of painting altogether, yet fully embracing that interrogation. It is rare to see these works travel so far west; the last time they were exhibited in this part of the world was at Reed College’s Cooley Gallery in Portland, Oregon in 2014.

Although using alternative materials in painting is now a frequent practice, Viallat’s work triumphs alongside the younger generations by a long term practice rooted in found material, color and paint. By committing to his practice for so long, his work becomes a recognizable beacon for subversion; a flag for revolutionary thinking. This four day exhibition also proves that found material is still as jarring as ever in the art vernacular, as his works command the eye and the attention of the viewer and bring together the expressive traditional work with the contemporary critical experimentations. Five large fabric scraps hung on the gallery walls, pinned as if the sagging and drooping of the fabric was entirely preconceived. The pinning of these pieces evokes a casual demeanor, but serious contemplation occurs when Viallat’s pattern extends in the holy white space. His pattern shouts to spectators and draws attention with his large scale paintings full of bold black lines that one could see across the Art Fair.



*Bridget Riley, Tate. Tate.org 2017*

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<sup>1</sup> *Protests Mount in France, 1968.* A&E Television Networks, BBC.



*Claude Viallat, Seattle Art Fair. Photo by author, 2018*

Viallat's painted color unifies fabric and pattern, and the three components become a dance that takes the viewer's eyes up, down and throughout the composition. One recalls Op Art illusionists such as Bridget Riley because the pattern creates space and depth in each painting through color. Op Artists, like Viallat's pattern, gives the impression of movement through the pattern, as the pattern ebbs and flows with color or size throughout the composition. Each shape is not mechanically created but painted with a well-trained hand, as the artist sculpts each bean rhythmically and repetitively with luscious acrylic paint. The bean shape is a trademark of Viallat's, as it is a way for him to create a composition without the literal and conceptual burden of the image and allows him to avoid competition between image and support material. Claude Viallat's work is a deep acknowledgment to painting, but also crafts conversation around topics of revolutionary artwork, sculpture and alternative materials.

As the gallerist unfolded a new painting and exchanged it with another, one realized the convenience and power of artists who work with fabric: the work is easily transportable and interrogates the possibilities of nomadic painting as a challenge. All paintings are nomadic, but folding up the work like a towel in a linen closet proves nomadism in two-dimensional work could be pushed further. This questions the purpose of the substrate through the nomadic lense. The substrates Viallat prefers are twice-used linens, a unique method that he claims among his group of French rebels, whose substrates range from rope and window frames to metal grates. Viallat blends color, found object and painting together on top of old sheets, a forgotten blanket or a dirty rug, taking the pre-existing life of the linen and messing it's thread count with his own pattern. As the artist implies, I agree that this fabric is democratizing. Art can be created with anything; one does not need a canvas with a heavy frame to be a true painting. Claude Viallat is transforming a lonely old object into an optical illusion, but also activating the ready-made object as a substrate for painting.

One painting exhibited in the show is created with upholstery fabric and conjures nostalgia of the antique object, like a decorated chest or an antique furniture relic. The piece was discolored; soiled brown with age and deterioration, but then salvaged and elevated by Viallat's approval. This work, with four bean shapes and an added layer of stripes, resembles a painted mystical landscape by providing a horizon line from both a red paint stripe and also a sewn fringe. Claude Viallat ventures towards a new sense of pictorial space and the salvaged remnant calls for a new opportunity. This piece transforms his shapes and the material into new compositions that could inform landscape work to be more thrifty as well.

The socio-economic issues of artists in America today are very similar with France's artist culture in the 1960's. Most American artists cannot support themselves on their work alone and like rebellious students of 1968, the artists are left out of the growing economic equation. The work of the Supports/ Surfaces artists proves that their investigation was a necessary endeavor because they provide a conversational opening in the history of painting for others who are fashioning alternative substrates to join. Viallat's found-fabric paintings are economical and environmental, a feat that while many other artists at the fair tried to explore actually failed in regards to material. Instead of creating turpentine-laden huge oil paintings of deforestation, like Tom Uttech's in Alexandre Gallery, Claude Viallat attacks a system of the economics of painting by continuing, after decades of fame and success, to paint on a dirty sheet and pin it up with thumbtacks.



*Lindsay Preston Zappas, "The Best of Everything, 2014" [lindsayprestonzappas.com](http://lindsayprestonzappas.com)*



*Sam Belisle, Untitled 2017, sambelisle.com*

If I look at some of my emerging artist colleagues, I see curiosity for exploration of painting that can lie outside traditional choice of material, for economic and historically critical purposes. Boston-based figure painter Sam Belisle creates incredible figure paintings on cardboard and old door frames. Lindsay Preston Zappas creates painting installations from cardboard, often scraps reworked from another installation from her Los Angeles studio. In Portland, Karah Lain creates formalist collages with found material, often cardboard, sourcing materials as mundane as leftover computer paper or plastic wrapping. Alternative material investigation becomes part of the practice because it is ecologically responsible and necessary for an artist to create and experiment without emptying their bank accounts; the more material, the more possible work. Storage bins all over the city occupy paintings on large substrates. The momentum to create, reuse and transform painterly invention depends on the ultimate transformation of material but also the historical context of artists like Claude Viallat.



*Jackie Winsor's Bound Square, 1972. Moma 2014. Moma.org*



*Lynda Benglis Nu, 1974. Storm King Art Center.*



*Betty Parsons. "A Life in Art" NY Times, 2017.*

Yet, we do not owe the French Supports/Surfaces movement all the credit, as the sixties also created many artists willing to experiment away from the shackles of the golden ratio. New Yorker Betty Parsons, who advocated the work of Rothko, Pollock and Reinhardt at their early

inception, created wild color investigations on found wood during the same decade of Viallat's early work. Jackie Winsor's piece *Bound Square* from 1972 would have definitely fit in with some of the Supports / Surfaces work. One could not omit Lynda Benglis's work, like *Fallen Painting* 1968 or the Knots series. The difference between the Supports/Surfaces from Benglis, Winsor or Parsons is their unique approach to attack painting constraints was as a group, pushing for change as a unit. Benglis, Winsor and Parsons were busy grappling with the ignorance of New York's male dominated art community. They also pushed questions surrounding Post Modernism's painting proclivity of 'death,' which was also part of the fuel for Supports/Surfaces as well. How can painting go on after the picture plane is dismissed? From New York to France, painterly progress happened because of the appreciation for color, space and form. When the economic and cultural climate desires uprooting, painting follows suit. We are in a constant upheaval and still, tiny revolutions are captured with paint. The substrate is just as important as images that are captured and documented of our protests. Viallat's travelling work rounds up new troops for the substrate liberation.

<https://www.canadanewyork.com/exhibitions/2014/supportssurfaces/press-release/>

<https://hyperallergic.com/144790/a-supportssurfaces-moment-contradictions-paradoxes-and-other-ironies/>

<http://www.artcritical.com/2004/02/01/the-painting-undone-supportssurfaces/>









<https://www.ceyssonbenetiere.com/en-artfair-Seattle-Art-Fair-2018-69.html>