

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS HOUSTON

James Sterling Pitt

Seven Sisters

805 Rhode Place, Ste. 500

April 13, 2024 - May 18, 2024

By Elliott Zoocy Martin ☒

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James Sterling Pitt, *Untitled*, 2018, acrylic and alkyd on wood, 5 1/2 x 7 1/4 x 2"

The third exhibition at this newly opened gallery pairs recent ceramics by James Sterling Pitt alongside a group of sculptures the artist rediscovered after they were in storage for fifteen years. Pitt unearthed them in 2023 while preparing his studio's relocation from Santa Fe to Houston. The older pieces—softer, humbler, pared down—feel like Ur-works for the newer offerings on view.

The 2008 drawings mark Pitt's first foray into object making following a horrific 2007 car accident that caused a traumatic brain injury. At the beginning of his recovery, Pitt started creating diaristic works on paper that functioned as calendar entries: tools to help document the passage of time. In many of these pieces are forms resembling spirals and sun dials. There are also taxonomies of various cyphers and symbols: mnemonic aids to counter short-term memory loss. A pencil, watercolor, and gouache drawing, *Chart #7 (Young Earth)*, 2008, presents a loose grid of empty globes, signifying the tabula rasa of the wounded brain.

In 2009, Pitt started translating these sketches into modest, three-dimensional objects. He fashioned a number of prosaic tabletop sculptures using wood found on sidewalks. Time is everywhere in these works, including circular, clocklike arrangements of spokes made from cast-off elastic hair ties. Their soft and gentle facture is a result of the artist's once-compromised eyesight, which left his world in a state of near abstraction.

By contrast, the latest pieces, dating from 2018 to 2023, are more refined and solid. The forms are still abstract but much crisper, more delineated. *Untitled*, 2018, features two overlapping half ovals—one white, the other green and thickened by an application of pulped wood—calling to mind the nodding-head figures of Philip Guston's paintings. *Untitled (Time)*, 2010, a wooden ovoid painted white that encases two chevron-patterned triangles whose vertices face one another and meet like an hourglass—also reference Guston by way of his oft-used clock motifs. Indeed, taken together, the two bodies of work in Pitt's show speak to the neuroplasticity of the human brain, and the tenacious artist's ability to re-create, rediscover, and renew.