

WEBEXCLUSIVE

# MATTHEW CRAVEN *Oblivious* *Path*

by Pac Pobric

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The works in Matthew Craven's recent show at DCKT Contemporary rely heavily on representation. Most of his sources are anthropological surveys and studies: "Arrangement I (Unclassified)" (2013) depicts hundreds of coins, columns, sculpted heads, helmets, masks, and vases, all in black and white. "Discover / Uncover" (2013) shows two ancient remnants of apparently massive marble hands, both pointing upward, in front of a jungle scene. "Explorers I (Unclassified)" (2013) includes, among other things, Greek columns set against a desert setting; two classical statues before snow-capped mountains; and four stone monuments behind a waterfall.

The exhibition press release encourages us to see the work as a comment on lost civilizations. The art is said to "highlight a new connection to our past in an aesthetic that is intended to be both cinematic in scope and visionary in perspective." But cinematic they're not. These are static pictures, made of stable elements. And "visionary" is too strong a word. Very few artists can be described as such. Still, there is a kernel of truth here, even if it's an obvious one: these pictures rely largely on images of ruins, both Western and non-Western.

But the ethnographic theme is an unreliable place to begin. When it comes to collage, it rarely matters what is actually depicted, or the source of various elements. We don't have to know where Craven found the ancient ruins, deserted landscapes, busts, mountains, or waterfalls that make up his pictures to understand them. We don't even have to know why he chose them. The various bits and pieces don't carry any meaning from their original source. Just because he depicts relics doesn't necessarily make the work about artifacts, or how we come to understand them. The images are simply formal elements that Craven has used to great effect. The content of these collages is not in their individual parts or in any ostensible intention; it's in their configuration.

Craven's themes are simply a way of categorizing information. Without some organizational model, collage threatens to become a hodge-podge of ideas with no anchor. So Craven focuses on a certain set of images to the exclusion of others. It's a matter of economy. Craven consolidates his interest in recycled materials by relying on found paper, on which all of the works are mounted. Even his use of color is a matter of efficiency. In most pictures, he turns to it sparingly, but then there is a piece like "Stare" (2013), which is vividly colorful, nearly to the point of disorder. Its zigzag pattern of white, black, green, yellow, orange, blue, pink, and red is on the brink of confusion. Here as well, Craven is characteristically resourceful. He reels the picture back in and balances it carefully with the figure of a head at top left, a white triangle below it, and a black rectangle at right. It's an intelligent solution, and a stark illustration of Craven's ingenuity.

More than 100 years after the invention of collage, Craven proves its present-day viability. Even more importantly, the work speaks to a rule of experience: that any immediate distinction between form and content is impossible to make. In the end, it doesn't matter what Craven has chosen to depict. A good artwork is a good artwork, regardless of its "content." The real importance of this excellent show is how clearly it demonstrates that the meaning of a strong collage is always greater than the sum of its parts.