

## Kenji Fujita's Vernacular of Accumulation

By Stephen Maine

When we were kids, we played a ridiculous but subtly instructive board game called “Chutes and Ladders.” A player’s progress toward the goal, marked by a cartoon drawing of a blue ribbon, was by way of a tedious, back-and-forth path across a checkerboard-like grid.

A player’s marker could skip way ahead if it happened to land at the bottom of a ladder, or lose significant ground if it landed at the top of a chute — all determined by a roll of the dice. (I’m not suggesting “Chutes and Ladders” as a metaphor for the art world, really I’m not.)

The game board itself, a square interrupted by slithering curves and thrusting diagonals, bears a strong formal resemblance to Kenji Fujita’s recent studio output, particularly a stunning new series of compact, playfully seething wall-based constructions titled “Accumulations.”



Kenji Fujita, “Terrain #3” (left) and “Terrain #2” (both 2010-16)

*Kenji Fujita: Will and Weather*, on view at Soloway through October 23, includes six of these thoroughly engrossing works, none of which is much more than two feet in any dimension, and many rather less. There are also three similarly smallish floor-based sculptures that resemble overloaded bags of colorful debris, and five collage-like paintings that incorporate bits of felt and fabric. With all but one work dating from this or last year, the exhibition is a welcome return to the spotlight for a truly extraordinary artist whose last solo show in a New York gallery was more than two decades ago.

The “Accumulations” might remind viewers of the work Fujita became known for in the mid-to-late 1980s through shows at Cable Gallery and at Luhring Augustine and Hodes in New York, and in L.A. at Daniel Weinberg. Seemingly cobbled together from scraps of whitewashed and pencil-marked lumber, unfinished luan plywood, hardware and paint, the wall sculptures at Soloway reprise the ordinary materials and casual-yet-calibrated construction of the earlier work. If anything, they are looser still — the part-to-whole relationships are more fluid, the organization apparently more improvised.



Kenji Fujita, “Accumulation #6” (2016)

“Accumulation #6,” like the other works in the series, combines simple, geometrically imperfect squares, circles and rectangles, with straightforward S- and J-curves, jig-sawed out of thin board, playing against and through them. An open, boxy structure, primarily of 1×1 or similar wood stock, delimits a volume of space that the flat shapes strain against, as if fleeing their confinement.

Occasionally a slightly more elaborate arabesque makes an escape, such as the comparatively flashy little wiggle dangling from the bottom of “Accumulation # 3.” But typically, a work’s visual complexity arises from the unassuming choreography of those basic shapes — along with what appear to be salvaged segments of utilitarian woodworking projects — and the interpenetration of planes thus implied. Pebbly paper disks the size of coins and poker chips are stapled to the armature, slowing the viewer’s scan, and the carefully countersunk heads of the screws used to hold everything together contribute to the work’s consummate aptness of scale.



Kenji Fujita, side view of “Accumulation #3” (2016)

Even so, despite their undeniable, concrete presentness, the “Accumulations” prompt allegorical speculation, and the viewer’s mind wanders to larger things. The Laocoön Group, the Hellenistic masterpiece of baroque, coiled drama, of muscle and bone, of form and void housed in the Vatican’s collection, is a distant antecedent of Fujita’s spatial-pictorial hurly-burly.

The tension between containment and release is fertile humanistic ground, and the viewer wonders if the oppositional pressures animating the “Accumulations” could be applied to the relationship between the individual and the institution.

The “Accumulations” are compositionally similar to Mel Edwards’ “Lynch Fragments” — small, dense, welded-iron wall works relating to America’s history of enslavement and institutionalized, racially motivated violence —

to which Edwards has periodically returned since starting the series in the early 1960s. And on Fujita’s website there is a suite of four images derived from Ansel Adams photographs of the Japanese-American internment camp at Manzanar, California. Presented without editorial comment, the images imply that Fujita might elsewhere also address, if less directly, ideas of enforced constraint — racial violence of another stripe.

But if indeed such commentary is embedded in these works, it is at the structural level, integral to the artist’s working method and completely subsumed within formal dynamics. “Accumulation #7” looks right at home on the whitewashed, pressed-tin walls of the gallery’s smallest space. Embossed (in this case) with a pattern of panels and rosettes, the material is a vestige of a fading low-end décor tradition, and it chimes with the curatorial conceit of “vernacular abstraction” with which Fujita has been identified.



Kenji Fujita, “Accumulation #7” (2016)

The conflation of “high and low,” a theme that gained traction in the 1980s, can be discerned in Fujita’s marriage of a determinedly rudimentary visual vocabulary to the genre-transcending, utopian aspirations of historical

Constructivism. And it's funny: "Accumulation #7" seems to be frozen in the action of spilling itself forward, as if arrested in its downward trajectory toward the floor — which leads us to the "Terrain" works.

If the "Accumulations" suggest 3-D variations on the box-of-snakes paradigm of abstraction (think Jackson Pollock, Brice Marden, Karen Davies, etc.), the "Terrains" might be sacks of rubble. Putty-colored and bulbous on one side (or, in the case of "Terrain #3," on its lower half) and bursting with chunky shapes in primary colors on the other, these pieces are made of various materials including sponges, felt, paper, Sculptamold, Aqua-Resin, plastic bags and "studio debris." All three are dated 2010-16, which I guess would be a long enough period of time for a studio to collect a good supply of debris.



Kenji Fujita, "Contact Improvisation #3" (2016)

The flat, collage-like paintings — collectively, "Contact Improvisations" — also hint at aggregation. Dated 2016 and made of vinyl paint, graphite paint, felt and fabric on gessoed burlap mounted to plywood, they allow each

formal element a certain autonomy, a disconnectedness that points to inclusion for its own sake, rather than for the integrity of the overall composition.

Each features bits of gray fabric with white polka dots — “vernacular,” again — as a dominant element, around which hover rectangular glyphs collaged or stenciled in Fujita’s unfancy palette. “Contact Improvisation #3” is distinctive in playing roughly circular shapes off the boxier forms (and the “box” of the canvas itself). The earliest (and smallest) work in the show, the delightful, 12-by-16-inch “Folk Forms #1” from 2014, is a comparatively tight composition of flat shapes that adhere more closely to an underlying grid. Its inclusion in the exhibition implies that the artist’s move toward a looser organization, which brings space and air into his new paintings, is a deliberate undertaking.

While every piece in the show is exciting and interesting, the “Accumulations” are, for me, also quite moving to behold. They are hung roughly head-high, as if ready for a face-to-face confrontation; you look one of them in the eye and it returns your gaze. As you move around it, every new angle reveals something new.



Kenji Fujita, “Accumulation #4” (2016)

Three “Accumulations” hang in the gallery’s second space (dubbed Soloway Alter Ego). In addition to the colors of the wood, both with and without a coat of thinned, slightly soiled gesso, “Accumulation #4” is augmented with

bubblegum pink and light cadmium green; to that gentle color chord, “Accumulation #8” adds a splash of yellow, and “Accumulation #5,” a jolt of purple. Other “Accumulations” emphasize red or orange. These chromatic inflections are relatively minor in material terms, and the colors are as straightforward as Crayola crayons, but they inflect the reading of each work in significant ways. The strongly colored form — usually, one of those snaking curves — emerges as the nucleus around which the rest are arranged.

Binary oppositions get slammed a lot in our “rhizome”-besotted era, sometimes with interesting results. But visual (and tactile) contrast is the motor that propels materials-based abstraction like Fujita’s, and distinctions between one thing and another thing have to be named to be understood: a chute is the functional opposite of a ladder. As to that binary exhibition title, *Will and Weather* describes the inscrutable mix of intentionality and chance that gives rise to artists’ works, and, it could be added, to their careers.

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