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100

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VON RYDINGSVA

ALEXIS
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PAINTS
FUTURE

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Whitte

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DAY
JACKSON
ON THE
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TRACI

TANER CE
RICHARD
TATIANA B





Rising of the Surface

A painter emerges from behind the scenes

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE

"SOME OF MY EARLIEST memories are of driving at night by myself on the freeway, listening to this very weird, scary, paranoid show," says Brooklyn-based painter Dennis Hoekstra. As a teenager growing up in Southern California, the bizarre mélange of legitimate scientists and doomsday preppers crying about government-controlled weather patterns on the Orange County radio station KFI-AM 640 started a lifelong fascination with the reality-fiction divide.

"It's the same thing I do with my work," he says. "It feels like this is the environment you'd be listening to the show in."

Thus far, Hoekstra's hand in such environments has been largely hidden—by design—because aside from a few solo projects, the spaces in question have been considered the brainchildren of installation artists Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe. Four years ago, while preparing the exhibition of *Black Acid Co-Op* at Deitch Projects, Freeman and Lowe met Hoekstra

at a party and quickly became friends.

"He would take Halloween very seriously and create these fantastic spectacles," Lowe says, referring to Hoekstra's obsession—which lasted from fifth grade through his college years—with building elaborate, walk-through "rides" with his O.C. friends. As such, the duo asked Hoekstra to work on a room that replicated the blue paint peeling off a water-damaged, abandoned football stadium in Buffalo, New York. "He did it exactly," Lowe says. "He's got an incredible eye for detail."

Hoekstra's attention to detail has worked its way into every Freeman-Lowe installation since *Black Acid Co-Op*, including a reinstallation of Lowe's *Helter Skelter* bodega for a collector's warehouse in Birmingham, Alabama, and the pair's recent modular *Artichoke Underground* piece for the Unlimited sector of Art Basel. "If you look at Dennis's phone pictures, there are really no family or friends or

party shots," Lowe says. "It's all just drips and stains and various textures. It's like this encyclopedic index he's working on," he adds, recalling a research trip to Austin when the two shot every "shitty bathroom" they could find for the installation of Lowe's *Werewolf Karaoke* re-creation of the CBGB bathroom at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford, Connecticut. "As he works more with us, I think, he finds more direction for his own work, and more, strategies evolve," Lowe says.

Hoekstra, whose early solo efforts included a series of peeling enamel pieces on rosin paper and glass, sees his studio work as a test laboratory for the installations, and vice versa.

That process is also unfolding with Robert Lazzarini, who met Hoekstra at the after-party for the Freeman-curated "Blind Cut" group show at Marlborough Chelsea in New York. "He's really keyed in to distressed surfaces and the subtleties of wear and tear," Lazzarini says. "Of course that's important with my work."

It's so important, in fact, that Lazzarini enlisted Hoekstra's faux painting skills for his "(damage)" show at Marlborough in January. Outfitted in his signature paint-splattered white lab coat, Hoekstra reached into his bag of tricks and cement-dusted Lazzarini's warped "Cash for Gold" neon to perfection. His *pièce de résistance*, though, was rust-aging (a difficult technique he had avoided since high school) the sculptor's stainless-steel, 344-piece, computer-rendered razor-wire fence sculpture, which looked as if it had been hit by a runaway 18-wheeler.

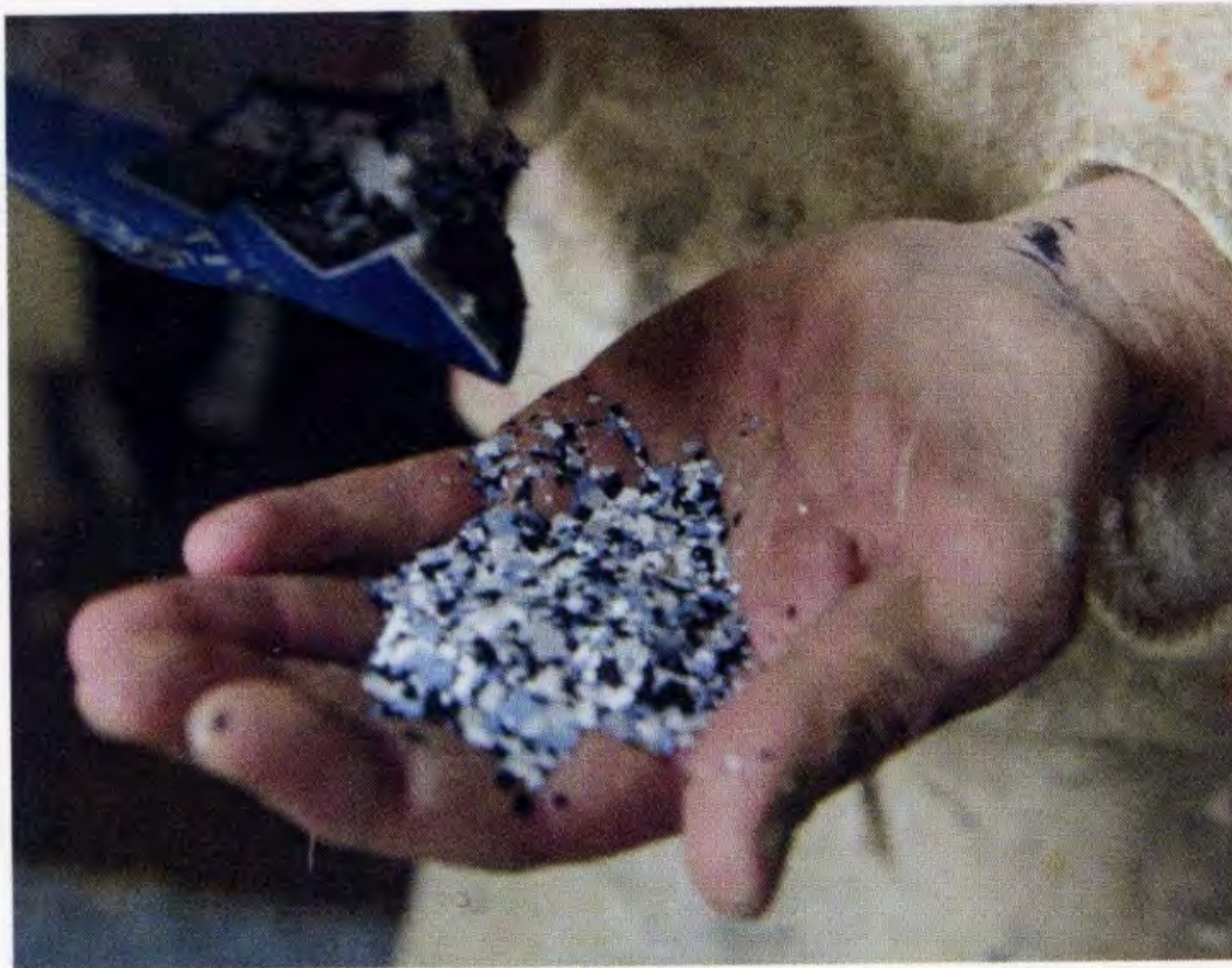
"There needs to be an air of unresolvability," Lazzarini told me before his opening. "So even when you're looking right at these things, it's confounding." Part of that bewilderment can be attributed directly to Hoekstra and his father, a master plasterer who spent 13 years as one of the "men in white coats" faux painting rocks for Disneyland rides like *It's a Small World*. His influence got Hoekstra into building. This manifested early on at summer camps, which offered giant piles of scrap wood, hammers, and screw guns in a giant mud pit meant for building forts—all while Guns N' Roses blared over the speakers. His Halloween environments built on that experience, featuring animated television sets, multiple rooms, and hydraulic lifts surrounded by vented chutes to give a sense of free fall. Hoekstra even worked his way through every post at Disney's secret eatery, Club 33, located above the *Pirates of the Caribbean* ride, just so he could bend the ears of Imagineers,

the park's ride designers, after hours.

Though he painted a bit in college, Hoekstra mainly focused on the theater, performing in renditions of *Hello, Dolly!*, *The Music Man*, and *Cabaret*. After college, he moved to San Francisco to work as a product manager for tech companies. While employed by Yahoo, he codeveloped an algorithm that could rank one merchant's data feed against another. He also launched a 3-D game engine with his Halloween construction friends.

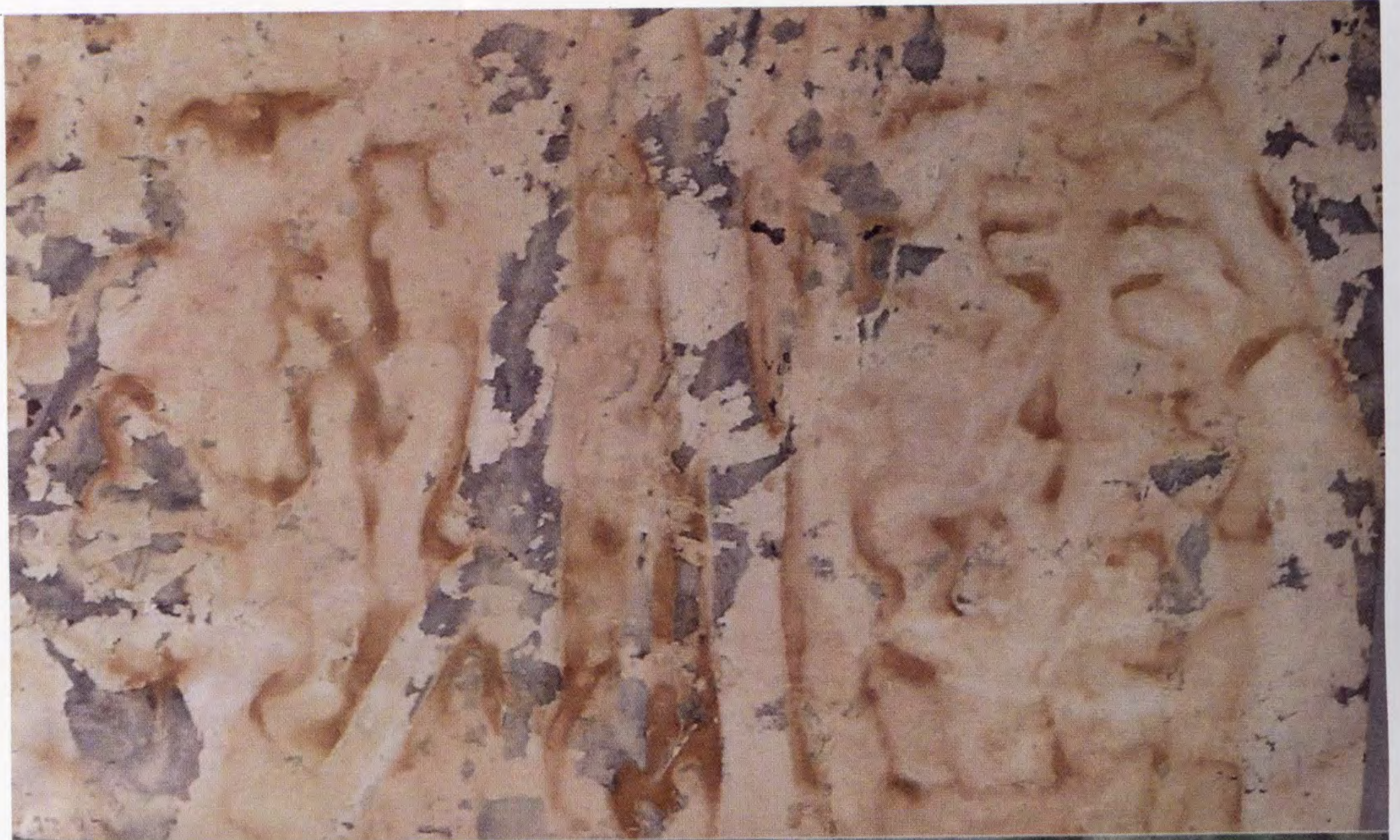
"A lot of that is similar to what I'm doing now because you're putting textures on walls and you've got these walk-through environments," Hoekstra says. "It's a very similar way of thinking."

In addition to his installation work, that thinking has manifested itself in a strong collaborative show with Noah Olmsted at Annie Wharton gallery in Los Angeles (now Wharton + Espinosa). Illuminated by sodium lights reflected off vibrating Mylar, the installation resembled an abandoned supply room and featured gray-scale collage images of faux painting legend Pierre Finkelstein and noted psychotherapist Belleruth Naparstek, as well as sculptural foam paintings replicating various brick and cement wall treatments. He also contributed cement-dust paintings that seemingly evoke Hoekstra hero Rudolf



Stingel but actually reference Finkelstein, the original man in the white coat.

"He wrote the book on faux finishing," says Hoekstra, who long ago stumbled upon Finkelstein's seminal text, *Recipes for Surfaces*, at Home Depot, where he buys all his materials. "Most of these books are like how to decorate a bathroom or stencil flowers. But this is one of the first ones where I saw a level of painting that was equal, if not superior, to what I saw in Disneyland." Finkelstein's insistence that he's an artisan, not an artist, is equally important to Hoekstra, who sees himself as a bit of an outlier in the art world proper because he never studied painting in school or spent much time navigating



FROM TOP:
Proof of Laser Satellite Storm Manipulation, 2013. Semi-gloss latex paint, universal pigments, perlite, duct tape, and wood glue on canvas, 72 x 60 in.

Hoekstra handling one of his unconventional painting materials.

The artist's studio in Brooklyn.

OPPOSITE:
Hoekstra in his studio, 2013.



the back rooms of the gallery scene.

That might soon change with his new suite of superflat, washed latex canvases (many evoke the sun-bleached colors of Bolinas, California), which he plans

easily pass for a rusted metal door with its white latex literally peeling off the front. There are rugged fold paintings—think of them as gutterized Hantaïs—that have traveled from California to New York in

“It had a level of painting that was equal, if not superior, to what I saw in Disneyland.”

eventually to show with Peter Makebish. “It’s very similar to what I do to create dusty floors,” says Hoekstra as we walk through his makeshift studio in Lazzarini’s floor-level workshop in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighborhood. Surveying the lot, Hoekstra explains how a veiny yellow piece resembling a crushed Bosco Sodi is reading “too hot” while others are “almost done,” like one representational canvas that could

Hoekstra’s suitcase. From a distance, another canvas looks like an aquatic-toned Rothko with a plastic sheet overlaid at the top. The abstraction and flatness bend with the light and angles, and from up close the contours appear so rough that it seems lightning has charged the paint across the fabric. It may explain why various collectors and artists have told Hoekstra the work induces pareidolia, the psychological phenomenon in which people

see their own imagery (faces, animals, forms) where they might not exist. Put more simply, they’re sort of like art world Rorschachs.

“I’m always taking these reference photos,” says Hoekstra, embellishing his psych-out by admitting the images he finally selects are “banal moments that have this sort of poetry to them.”

Taken as whole, the works are a smart marriage of paranoia and calm, reflecting the two poles in Hoekstra’s peripatetic life.

During installations, he explains, “You’re in this situation where you don’t really know if you’re going to be able to pull it off, and it’s always that way.” The resulting stress has led to panic attacks, which Hoekstra has reined in considerably after an ex-girlfriend suggested he listen to meditation CDs. He even distorted one soundtrack by Naparstek and played it during the Annie Wharton show. The soundtrack made a more recent reprise on late nights of Rebel Yell drinking at a Birmingham lake house with Lowe during the *Helter Swelter* installation.

“I’d have my CD playing all night long, and that’s the way I listen to the late-night conspiracy theory shows,” Hoekstra says. “They just play in the background. In some ways they’re similar.”

To test out his theory, I tuned in to KFI, the station that brought us the David Foster Wallace–profiled superhost John Ziegler. It was nearing 1 A.M. as I sat down to write this piece, and some crank was arguing that paranormal demons were the “greatest challenge facing mankind right now” because they’re so successful in convincing us they don’t exist. So successful, as it were, that we might be overlooking the role they played in the Boston Marathon bombing. I’m not sure I know quite how to articulate the deft mix of absurdity, clarity, and conviction that this man conveyed, and even less sure I heard any concordance with meditation soundtracks.

That said, I do understand the subtle vibration, that white-noise frequency they elicit if you keep the voices on low in the background. It’s the same frequency that hums off a room full of Hoekstra’s paintings, the cracks emerging between the seemingly superflat abstractions, when representation breaks down and the only thing left is this pulsing voice from the crackling (nonexistent?) radio speaker that’s whispering to you, “We’re being conquered, if we’re divided.” And then for a split second, you pause, needle that thought for a beat, and ask yourself, without irony, “Are we?” **MP**

Armageddon (armageddon), 2013. Semigloss latex paint, wax, and universal pigments on canvas, 72 x 60 in.