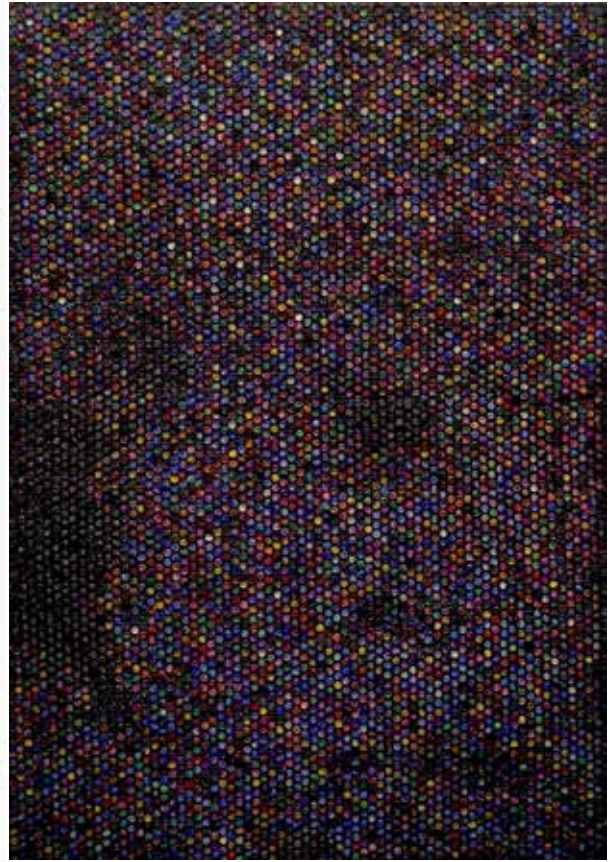


John Mendelsohn, *Dream Garden 5*, 2016, acrylic and latex enamel on terry cloth on canvas, 24" x 18"



John Mendelsohn, *Illuminated 2*, 2015, acrylic and latex on bubble wrap over canvas, 40" x 28"

Earthly Delights in a Post-Apocalyptic World

John Mendelsohn at 57W57 Arts and 490 Atlantic Gallery in New York City

by Gwenaël Kerlidou

In two concurrent shows in New York this winter, John Mendelsohn continues his exploration of unconventional materials and processes in painting as well as a game of hide and seek with the viewer, alternating exposing and revealing with implying and concealing.

The two shows share a common playfulness originating in the viewer's befuddlement (and possibly the painter's as well, as the initial viewer) as to how each painting comes together. In the first show at 57W57 Arts, the *Dream Garden* paintings use colored

sand sprinkled over painted terrycloth to unexpected visual and tactile results, while at 490 Atlantic, the *Illuminated* paintings, made with clear bubble wrap plastic stretched and painted over a painted canvas ground, mesmerize the viewer with their enigmatic scintillating.

If the materials are clearly industrial or commercial and yield a strong physical presence by themselves, they are also subverted and transcended. Both series allude indirectly to natural entropic processes such as instability, dissolution, fading, movement and

stasis, which contribute to a disquieting sense of existential anxiety and an image that seems to be perpetually unraveling and in the throes of undoing itself. This high drama is counterbalanced by a lightness of touch, a conscious restraint from its dark entropic side to the benefit of the more elegiac side of color.

Both series develop on identically sized formats, each painting a variation on the main theme. This layout emphasizes the tension between the Apollonian nature of Mendelsohn's painting practice, the childlike playfulness involved in uncovering the surprising possibilities in combining non-art materials and the pleasure of shaping them into paintings, confronting the Dionysian, strictly organized structure of the series (the

Greek tragedy's choir), each painting in essence keeping watch on the variations at work in the others.

The image of the garden is a recurring metaphor in Mendelsohn's work and in his discourse about it. But I suspect that far from defining the boundaries of the Painting field, it qualifies it in opposition to Voltaire's 18th century *Candide*, who kept insisting on the need to cultivate our garden; an advice too often understood as a retreat from engaging in the affairs of the wider world. Mendelsohn upends *Candide*'s recommendation by extending the practice of painting into its own kind of gardening, or rather in cultivating the gardens of abstraction as a strategy to engage the world, and of painting as a garden to be cultivated for personal pleasure, rather than as a field painfully tilled for the common good.

Hinting back to earlier paintings from 2011, titled *Paradise*, a visit to Mendelsohn's two current shows also brings to mind a walk through another kind of garden, such as the one depicted by Hieronymus Bosch in his famous triptych hanging in Madrid's

Prado; *The Garden of Earthly Delights* – an oddity in Bosch's opus, which mostly includes scenes of apocalyptic nightmares. These shows are an invitation to a delightful walk through a painting practice deliberately keeping in check its underlying nostalgia and anxiety.

Fast forward from the Flemish

early 16th century to today's troubled political context; In many ways Donald Trump's election is a kind of apocalyptic event of its own, and in their way Mendelsohn's paintings incite us to cope with the gravity of its consequences with a lighter touch than we would probably mean to use otherwise.



John Mendelsohn, *Dream Garden 3* (detail), 2016, acrylic and latex on terry cloth on canvas, 24"x18"



John Mendelsohn, installation view at 490 Atlantic, *Illuminated Series*, acrylic and latex on bubble wrap over canvas