

Automatic Realism

The Daily Pic: Gerald Ferguson let his subjects paint themselves.



"50Ft Rope," by Gerald Ferguson. (Courtesy Canada gallery, New York)

"50Ft. Rope" is a "frottage" from 2000 by the artist Gerald Ferguson, who died in 2009 at age 72 and is now getting a modest retrospective at Canada gallery in New York. Ferguson is famous as one of the forces behind the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the 1970s, when it was a major player in the worldwide push for conceptual art. That makes Ferguson's lifelong commitment to the old-fashioned, "optical" discipline of representational painting all the more potent and strange – almost poignant. Of course, Ferguson's idea of "representation" is different than most; you could say he lets his subjects paint themselves. "50Ft Rope" is just that: The record of the presence of that rope, which he covered with his canvas and then revealed again by rolling black paint over it, the way a child rubs a penny hidden under paper. Luke Murphy, curator of the retrospective, talks about an "unembellished, stripped down factuality." Ferguson wanted his work to be about rope, rather than him as a fancy-pants painter "expressing" himself. (Which makes the picture's Abstract Expressionist good looks just another of its ironies.)