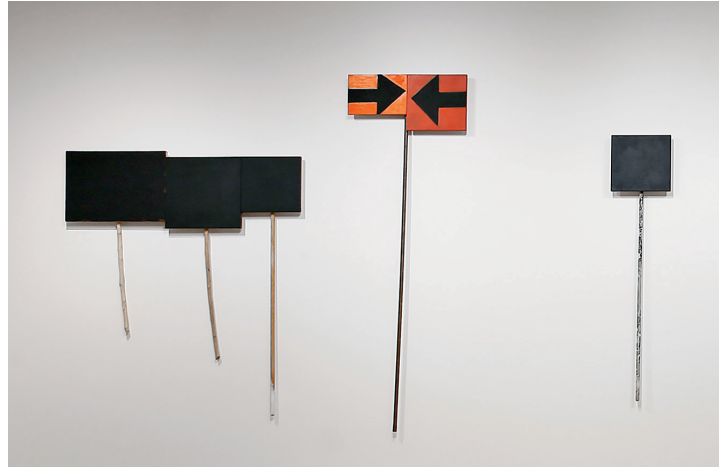


# Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

NOVEMBER 2017



View of Denzil Hurley's exhibition "Disclosures," 2017, showing (left to right) *3 Panel Glyph #2*, 2012–14, *ZD5, Coupled Glyph*, 2016–17, and *ZF3, Glyph D*, 2014–16, at the Seattle Art Museum.

## DENZIL HURLEY

Seattle Art Museum

Known for his quiet abstractions, Washington-based painter Denzil Hurley titled this exhibition "Disclosures," showing eleven recent mixed-medium paintings and five small ink studies. Almost all the works are monochrome, and many are mounted on sticks or poles, like signs carried at rallies. In their makeshift quality—the sticks are repurposed mop or broom handles or pipes—they evoke impromptu street actions rather than convention-hall campaign events. *ZB4, Four Square (S)*, 2013–15, consists of four black paintings of various sizes suspended from a twelve-foot, horizontal copper rod, as if to be carried by marchers advancing side by side. *ZD5, Coupled Glyph #4* (2016–17), unique in the exhibition for its upbeat color, might be a jerry-built directional sign, with two small orange-painted canvases abutting at the top of a stick, each inscribed with a big black arrow. But one arrow points right, the other left, conveying only baffling contradiction.

Several works on view incorporated the blank wall of the white cube. In *ZBA2, Blue Glyph* (2016–17), for instance, an indigo-painted rectangular frame at the top of a stick encloses only empty space where a message might be. For *ZB2, Notch Glyph* (2015–17), Hurley stacked four long black monochromes to a height of eighty inches. The two bottom canvases measure eighty inches across; the top two fall short by about ten inches. The resulting impression is of a monumental black square with a white "notch" at its upper right corner. Hurley alluded to Malevich's iconic *Black Square* (1915) throughout the show and, in *Cut-in/Cut-out A4D* (2016–17), to the Russian's *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), a single white square afloat on a white ground. In Hurley's reprise of *White on White*, the inner

rectangle is a negative, literally cut out of the larger, mottled-white monochrome, exposing the wall behind the painting. As in *ZB2, Notch Glyph*, whiteness is presented as absence. Even as Hurley maintains his formalist stance, explaining in an interview on the museum's website that he is preoccupied with "color, layering, stacking, erasure and . . . surfaces," his modernist project opens onto issues of race. With the subtlest of moves, he weds abstraction to extra-aesthetic concerns: Black Lives Matter protests come to mind, with the chilling recollection that the white-clad Klan has had a presence in the state of Washington since the 1920s. "Suprematism" begins to connote something other than a once-revolutionary style of painting.

A didactic label noted that the artist conceived of this series while visiting Barbados, his original home, his fascination with repurposed materials and modular forms sparked by the island's built environment. A crayon-and-ink study from 2012, *Portal and the Deep Blue #1*, suggests a doorway glimpse of sky or ocean from a dim interior. In the related painting, *J2#1, Portal* (2015–17), looming nearly seven feet tall, the blue is gone; only a stark black rectangle confronts the viewer, propped on a piece of lumber that serves as a threshold into a dark pictorial space. Tellingly, in the time between Hurley's sketching and painting, the possibility of a beautiful transcendence gave way to foreboding ambiguity.

—Sue Taylor