

Wet Conceptualism

By William Corwin



Installation view: *Wet Conceptualism*, Opening Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Opening Gallery.

Hand-written, rough, colorful, sentimental, or DIY, yet indicative of a complex concept-driven interior thought process not fully compliant with an aesthetic or formalist framework, one that is indicative of traditional “art”: these are the calling cards of “wet conceptualism.”

Chrysanne Stathacos’s *Mirror Goddess Hair* (2022) is a floor-sited accumulation of objects at the center of the gallery, and literally and figuratively embodies “wet:” an offering of roses has long since dried, leaving a twisted star-like arrangement of stems and a beautiful mess of leaves, thorns, and petals. This is surmounted by hair, then a circular canvas and finally a mirrored silhouette of a woman—the symbolism rests midway between Cycladic sculptures and Ana Mendieta, and somewhere between a

ON VIEW

Opening Gallery

Wet Conceptualism

December 13, 2022–February 7,
2023

New York

pile and an artful arrangement. Similarly Jimmy Durham's *Articles 2 & 3 from the 1986 – Pinkerton's Agency Man* (1989) places a small white canvas inscribed with the disingenuous oath of a gun-for-hire: "I shall always regard myself as a member of an honorable and important profession." The art is the text, but Durham has inscribed it with his own hand and added an inscrutable signature. There is a gnarly red arrow leaning below it, pointing up, encouraging us doubly to read but not to take it at its word.



Installation view: *Wet Conceptualism*, Opening Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Opening Gallery.

The notion of wet conceptualism is posited against mainstream conceptual work, in this context “dry:” what comes to mind in this context are works such as *An Oak Tree* (1973) of Michael Craig Martin, or the oeuvre of Joseph Kosuth. There are borderline cases presented in this novel and convincing survey of sweeter, more rosy conceptual art: ironically, co-curator (with Sozita Goudouna) Warren Neidich’s piece *Art Before Philosophy After Art* (2015) sits firmly on this middle ground. Text based, it demands reading, presenting a title-as-text-as-list. But the text dissolves in a murky green form, a modernist assemblage, the Braque-like form underlines Neidich’s point that wet involves seductive color and significant form, formalist signifiers, on top

of an insistence on the didactic-as-form. Similarly, Allen Ruppersberg's *Untitled (Five Posters)* (1978–2014), Carol Szymanski's *Reverdy 12 Tone Conversion Chart* (2022) and Jimmy Raskin's *Cone Diagram (diptych)* (2011) all present philosophical text-laden two dimensional pieces utilizing print. Ruppersberg's text floats on solid and rainbow-colored backgrounds in the classic concert poster type, Raskin's diptych utilizes a cone diagram posited against a shimmering conical party hat, and Szymanski codifies semi-spoken interjections (such as “blah” and “ouf”) in chart form, but heightens the absurdity of the project, placing a yellow neon “hmmm” adjacent.

The mystical and personal emerge in the more sculptural and performative tranche of works. Agnieszka Kurent's *Post Fordite* (2020) a sculptural interpretation of manufacturing in America includes polished fragments of accumulated auto paint—called Detroit Onyx—embedded in epoxy. Its conceit as a naturally occurring sedimentary rock pulls the viewer back into the realm of Duchamp. Olu Oguibe's *Shoes* (2020), a slightly modified pair of converse sneakers do the same—indicating how subtly coloring the shoe's tongues can instantly provide a political reading of beat-up footwear. Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) appropriates the classic cooking-show typologies, amplifying the gestures of cutting, dicing and chopping into a feminist declaration, and Coleman Collins's substantial wall-plaque *Sequential Shift* (2022) literally uses the artist's DNA to both generate form via CnC technology and serve as the captions to images of Nigerian sculptures that emerge from his genetic and family history.



Installation view: *Wet Conceptualism*, Opening Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Opening Gallery.

The most intriguing discovery is Constance DeJong's *Frequency Hopping 2* (2019), a tri-partite text looming on the surface of a vintage lightbox. There are readable but disembodied passages of text, interspersed with wave diagrams, over-layed with handwritten scribbles in pen and pencil. It's a succinct and lovely elegy on writing and observation, and how the two both reinforce and get in each other's way. Charles Gaines's *Landscape: Assorted Trees with Regressions*, 1981 also contrasts the inherent chaos in transliterating apparent reality, in this case photographs of trees, and a gridded alphabetical approximation of those photos. Playing with the literal and poetic is Leslie Hewitt's *Untitled (Dreambook or Axis of the Ellipse)* (2019) a large mounted photograph resting snugly in a wooden box/frame positioned on the floor. An inky doodle on a piece of paper rests on a floor in the photo, and a rather abject wooden board sits morosely atop a pile of books. The image revels in refusing to be a photograph of anything in particular, but the books and the drawing indicate there is a story or message, or at least an intention. Wet conceptualism, like more traditional Conceptual Art, seeks to measure and quantify intention, but it softens the propositions, and at times pulls our heart-strings.

Contributor

William Corwin

William Corwin is a sculptor and journalist from New York.