

“Matter” brings together two new works by mid-career Philadelphia-based artists, Michael Grothusen (b. 1966) and Buy Shaver (b. 1961). This pairing of sculpture and wall text strives to explore the gaps between perception and belief in order to speculate how we might know and share anything with certainty.

The exhibition takes its title from Shaver’s text piece, *Faith as sm. Matter*, originally composed in 2012 and adapted for this exhibition as an installation. Rendered by hand in black paint on the gallery walls, the phrase envelopes a grouping of mobiles by Grothusen entitled *Self Portrait, by weight, not touching the floor*. These rod-and-cable structures, each suspended from the ceiling, support balanced sets of three differently-sized steel ingots, 2.25, 6, and 9.5 pounds, respectively. The sum of the weight of the ingots equals that of the artist’s body. Animated by small fans attached to the rods, the mobiles move in a slow and stately way within the gallery encouraging deliberate interaction with viewers.

Grothusen’s sculpture is a measurement-oriented representation that extends an ongoing series begun in the late 1990s that quantify data about bodies and memory. Pieces such as *The Most I Can Lift* or *The Highest I Can Jump* (both 1999) combine photo-documentation of a performative challenge with the physical presence of the actual weights and measures referenced. A more recent example from the series, such as *Self, by weight, pacing the floor* (2012), adds a kinetic dimension manifest by a bronze sphere rolling back and forth on an aluminum track. Despite the fact-based nature these efforts, each nevertheless allows for information gaps and subjective interpretations that also activate our experience of Grothusen’s project for this exhibition, including the implications of the mass of a human figure dispersed and levitating in the gallery.

Likewise authoritative in its room-filling capacity, Shaver’s contribution to this exhibition is visually straightforward but inscrutable and personal. As such, it reflects a hybrid practice that has evolved over more than two decades to incorporate works on paper, canvases and murals, as well as interventions in domestic spaces. Regardless of their scale and materials, these projects are distinguished by a tension between graphically precise approaches to presentation and enigmatic content. Text-based works, such as *Canada Twice* (2012-13) or *All Gods with Names* (2013) generally feature short statements that may at first seem simple but resist immediate decoding. Displayed on gallery walls, often with idiosyncratic type treatment, these references to memories or abstract thoughts take on the power of billboard messages as well as the sensation of an idea glowing inside the mind.

The phrase, *Faith as sm. Matter*, as Shaver states, “refers to one’s beliefs or faith in the spiritual as well as corporeal sense”. His conflation of the material and the intangible, the humble and profound, is embodied in the seemingly pragmatic abbreviation of the word “small” to “sm.”, which fosters other readings, including the possibility of seeing Grothusen’s ingots as a diagram of atomic particles. The resulting elision of “sm.” with “matter” yields the word “smatter” and the almost subliminal presence of the word “no” in the implication of the phrase “no small matter”, indicating “something to be taken seriously”.

Each work uses imposing means of display to propose an equation. Grothusen’s sculpture unites the 20th-century legacy of the mobile with the accuracy of a scale to offer an equivalence between the total weight of the ingots with that of his body. Shaver’s mural uses the commanding presence of monumental type to invite us to consider the possibility of “faith” being “small matter”. Both artists partake of conceptualism’s use of measurement and language but bend these often literal and objective applications to their own purposes.

Within each artist’s equation reside contingencies and loopholes that are in productive conflict with their declarative postures. Can we trust Grothusen’s statement about the weight of his body? The sum is demonstrated visually but not named. And while doing the math is possible, how might we distinguish the heft of the ingots from that of the cables, rods, and fans that support and animate them? Shaver’s “matter” is a noun referring to a physical substance as well as a verb that denotes “having significance”. Can we engage both meanings at the same time? And what are we to make of the word resulting from the three letters missing from the abbreviation “sm.”? These are only a few of the questions posed independently by both works.

The resulting combination of mural and mobiles invites viewers to engage in forms of active, empirical observation and interpretation that place science, faith, and the nature of art and representation in startling contact with each other. Advancing previous bodies of work by each artist, the juxtaposition also reveals parallel concerns and strategies that serve to illuminate both.

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