

Chicago Spleen

Ari Norris: *Just Dust* @ David Salkin Creative

4/26/2024

If we consider monumentality as a preoccupation with time that refuses to acknowledge itself as subject to its machinations, the work in Ari Norris's *Just Dust* seems to be operating on opposite terms. Instead of pleading to eternity, Norris appeals to something that actively invokes an expectation for disappearance only to stubbornly stay still. At hand is an office space cataclysm alongside four delicate wall works playing apophenic games of art-historical eye spy. It all of it feels that if you turn around it will be gone, and I would argue that is another gesture designed to circumvent monumentality. Whereas a monument requires of itself a certain feigned indifference to its audience – eternity has no real audience – Norris's sculptures seem to have a tremendous fealty to any given eye.

If you aren't a blue-chip artist exhibiting in warehouse spaces, or have a team of assistants to aid in elaborate fabrication processes, the pursuit of large-scale sculpture isn't often feasible. This simple fact makes *And This is the Moment*, Norris's precarious filing cabinet tsunami, feel like a refreshing reacquaintance with the possibilities that games of scale can offer a practice. The entire show toys with trompe l'oeil, a tried and true Chicago crowd pleaser, but Norris's sculpture nakedly reveals the kind of gimmickry inherent to the technique.

In the interest of Midwestern humility, Norris doesn't try to make any of his materials – wood and paint for the filing cabinets, paint and resin for the wall works that mimic miraculously styrofoam – seem like something more than they are. Rather, like the radioactive green relish that blankets a hot dog, Norris prompts his wares to look less like themselves in order to express their capacities in unexpected ways. Comparisons to Chris Bradley or Tony Tasset, whose underrated *Snow Sculpture for Chicago*, sits just down the street from 1709 W. Chicago, feel inevitable, but Norris doesn't seem so much interested in verisimilitude as he does with sputtering on representation's brake pad, keeping the work just short of tipping over the edge of being too much. A picaresque of utilitarian characters breaks out on the filing cabinets' tumbling surfaces, a roll of painters tape scales the incline like a skilled alpinist, others watch the unfolding catastrophe from the summit. Pencils shoot through what ought to be steel, erasers hold on for dear life, and stray skids of blue tape and scuff marks become painterly embellishments on the sides.

As for the titular series *Just Dust*, four painted resin works mimicking dusty, pareidolia inducing chunks of styrofoam, each appearing as if dust had settled on it *just so* to create the impression of four wintry paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder: *Hunters in the Snow*, *The Census at Bethlehem*, *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap*, as well as *Adoration of the Kings in the Snow*. Each

work gently rests on the surface and it feels as if any stray breeze – or sudden gust of air should the sculpture collapse – would wipe all traces of the image from the surface. Norris has made the move to depopulate the landscapes, complicating the painting's reproduction and proposing that maybe what is bound to last is rarely human. Styrofoam will last longer than your favorite painting, and the illusion of a looming cataclysm will induce more anxiety than sudden clatter of metal spilling over. All is still, but wanting to go further, like the awkward silence at a funeral, just the thought of a laugh will cause the whole thing to come down. Ashes to ashes to dust dust as they say.

Just Dust is open. Unsure when it closes.