

ARTLIES

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Tom Orr: Identity
Marty Walker Gallery

- Cindy Hurt -

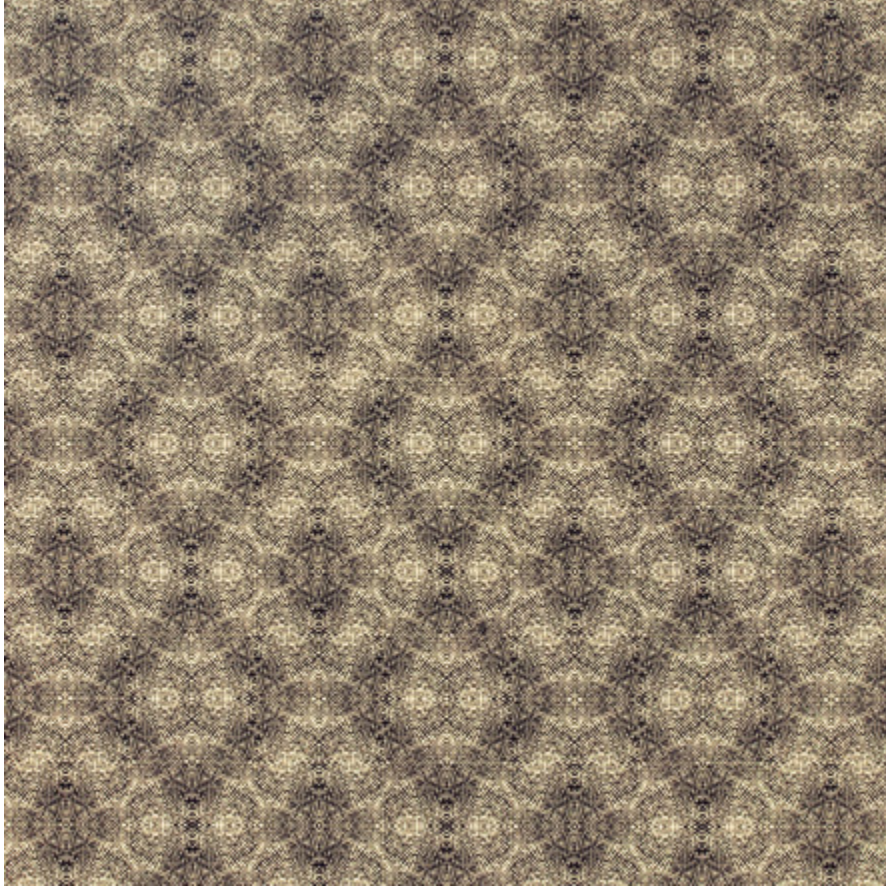
Tom Orr photographs fingerprints, enlarges them and then cuts, measures, paints, silk-screens, interlocks and glues squares of paper to thin sheets of birch plywood. Finally, armed with a single thumbprint and a ninety-degree turn, he starts this repetitive process all over again, creating another complex configuration. Orr began his investigation of fingerprint patterns some five years ago, working intuitively by establishing visual arrangements on his studio floor. The artist has since incorporated a computer into his process, but his extraordinary vision, precision, focus and rigorous method of production remains unchanged.

In Marty Walker Gallery's sparse, well-lit space, four 81-by-81-inch constructions surround the viewer. Orr's flat, two-dimensional constructions seem to float about three inches from the wall. Vibrating and pulsating, their edges blur. Shapes appear, merge and disappear. In *Fingerprint #001*, several broad vertical and horizontal bands in contrasting tones create alternating shapes—diamonds and circles layered with thin, overlapping white lines—which in turn establish formations of smaller ovals and triangles. In the three other constructions on view, all rendered in a varied but limited palette, Orr mines the same blueprint/thumbprint subject matter.

Although hints and clues from key words in Orr's titles imply meaning, the viewer realizes that the more you study each work, the more you "see." One is immediately struck by the presence of the micro image—a single thumbprint repeated hundreds of times. The fact that something as small and simple as this pattern can, like the rings of a severed tree, mirror the expanding universe is intriguing. On another level, though this work isn't purely decorative, it does reflect the soothing aesthetic aspects associated with repetition. On a more philosophical level, our fingerprints are taken the moment we're born and are the only remaining evidence of identity if stripped of all other possessions.

Orr's repetitive process and commitment to simplicity associates him with numerous artists—from Bridget Riley, Carl Andre and Agnes Martin to Wolfgang Laib—and some might go so far as to say Orr's longtime interest in optical patterns and illusion is too reminiscent of the "old days." As an undergraduate at Rhode Island School of Design, his interest in illusion aligned with the Op art movement, where artists explored and exploited the fallibility of the eye by provoking illusory images and sensations in the viewer. This purely physical, retinal experimentation was a short-lived movement, giving way to Minimalism and an interest in pure form and later to the idea-driven school of Conceptualism.

Eventually, however, everyone began to settle down, realizing nothing was dead, but an evolved understanding of multiplicity gave rise to postmodernism. Needless to say, Orr—a product of his environment—incorporates all of this history, including investigating optical patterns, the process of subtraction, seriality and conceptual concerns, to produce a beautiful body of work. His constructions are loaded with meaning.



Tom Orr, *Fingerprint #001*, 2006

Screen-print on wood

81 x 81 inches

Photo by Steve Dennie

The floating, ethereal quality of this work is elegant and refined, yet Orr does throw us a riddle. The sides of each construction are left unfinished, exposing raw lumber and the method of construction used to make his works appear to float—not merely hang—on the wall. He also leaves behind other traces of his labor, like a sticker displaying the price of lumber at the top of one brace. The implications are remarkable. Some might say this is all smoke and mirrors, dubbing Orr an illusionist. But we can clearly see from the long path of the artist's career that his fascination with illusion and obsessive interest in sequence and process has ultimately advanced the exploration of Op art to a new level, revealing a philosopher quietly at work. (PG.93)