

Fascinating Rhythm: Tayo Heuser's Pulse at the Phillips Collection

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Pulse Installation at the Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.

Image courtesy of the artist.

Superior art comes from adventurous artists. When I first encountered Tayo Heuser's work, she followed a Neo-Surrealist bent, in keeping with the Post-Modern return to imagery. Today this Rhode Island artist might be considered a Neo-Modernist, dedicated to the language of [abstraction](#). For this reason she was commissioned by the Phillips

Collection to respond to their Mark Rothko paintings in their series *Intersections*, an art project organized by Vesela Sretenović, the museum's Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Heuser's installation *Pulse* demonstrates her quest for the "inbetweenness" of existence: the layering and unnameable which resists linguistic limitations. In this case, the "inbetweenness" is based on memory: Heuser's recollection of responding to Mark Rothko's [Color Field](#) paintings when she was a child. She remembers the sensation of floating. To convey this idea, Heuser constructed ten gently irregular rectangles that seem to hover on the walls of the grand, spiral staircase situated at the center of the museum. These sculptural forms, made of thermoplastic sheets covered by hand-made paper, serve as fields for ink drawn geometric interactions and interpenetrations.



Tayo Heuser . Candy for Rothko, 2009. Handmade abaca and linen papers with ink. 60 x 40 x 9 in. >

© Tayo Heuser; image courtesy of the artist

The fragile appearance of these rock-hard reliefs subtly corresponds to Rothko's dynamic emergence and submergence of color planes, which the New York School artist called "breathingness." In Heuser's *Pulse*, "breathingness" radiates in beautifully selected tones of blue, orange, red, yellow and gray embraced by different concepts of the grid, as in *Candy for Rothko*. The colors convey Rothko's hushed expression of nature's vitality, its soft rhythms imbued with the mystery of the life force.

Heuser also understands Rothko's intersection of Zen calm and Existential anxiety: the balanced and the precarious. This dichotomy manifests itself in the presence of geometry complicated by undulating lines -- the appearance of stability coexisting with instability.

The two create a tension which seems to reiterate Rothko's take on existence itself: its perpetual state of flux and becoming.

However, Heuser's mode of communication deviates from Rothko's dictum that paintings operate most effectively on a giant scale. Instead, Heuser subscribes to the strategy of *sotto voce* (the lowered voice) that requires the listener to lean forward and concentrate on a whisper ... or silence. Therefore, the viewer lingers within close range of the *Pulse* surfaces and then moves away -- away from the staircase itself -- in order to take in the whole ensemble.

The totality can feel deliciously dizzying. There is exuberance in these works, despite the Heuser's desire to invoke Rothko's sadness and mental distress. *Pulse* is a far cry from Heuser's Neo-Surrealist flirtation and more in tune with her ability to dig deeply into the human psyche: its secrets and -- as Heuser puts it -- its "quietude."

Tayo Heuser's next exhibition will take place at the [Dorsky Gallery](#) in the Astoria section of Queens, New York City, February 2011. I look forward to seeing what comes next.

Pulse was part of *Intersections*, a series of art projects organized at the Phillips Collection by Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Vesela Sretenović. Begun in 2009, the artists who have been included are: Jennifer Wen Ma (October 15, 2009 - January 3, 2010); Barbara Liotta (October 22, 2009 - January 31, 2010); Tayo Heuser (November 19, 2009 - November 7, 2010); Linn Meyers (February 11 - May 2, 2010); Kate Shepherd (June 10 - September 5, 2010); Regi Müller (April 2010 - May 2011); and Jae Ko (September 30, 2010 - February 20, 2011).

[The Phillips Collection](#) is located in Washington, D.C.