

# PRINT-INTERESTING

## MATT NEFF: SECOND SIGHT

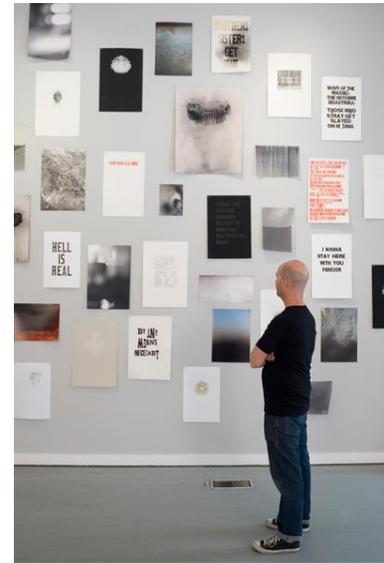
Posted by Amze Emmons on August 3, 2014 | No Comments



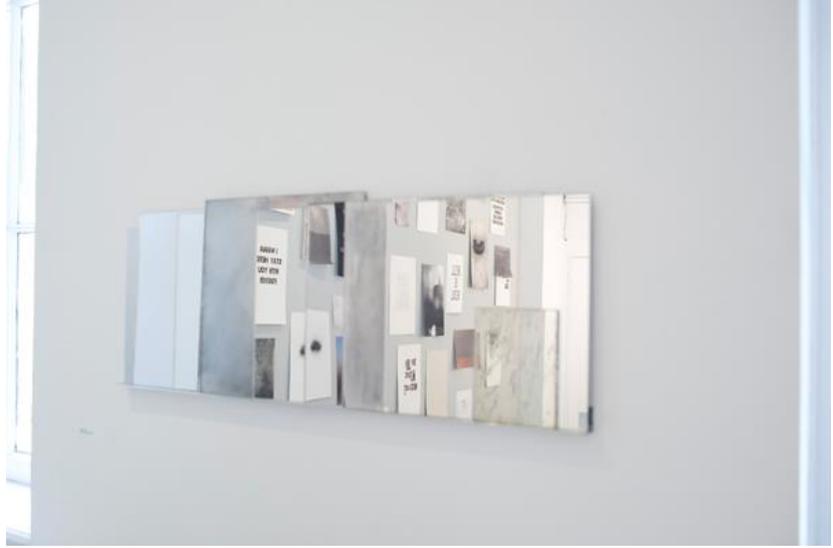
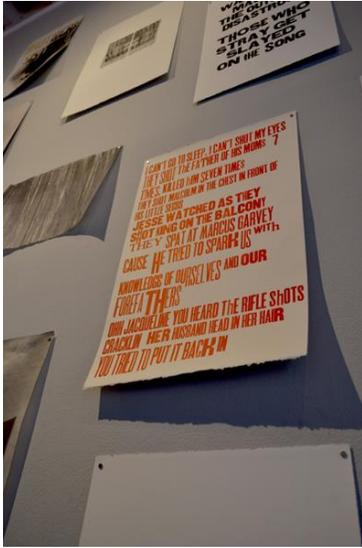
Matt Neff's recent solo exhibition, *Second Sight* took place at The Print Center (TPC) in Philadelphia, from April 4th- June 7th, and was curated by TPC's Executive Director, Elizabeth Spungen. Neff is a Philadelphia-based artist, he teaches at PennDesign, where he also manages the remarkable art factory that is [Common Press](#).

The exhibition also featured *Second Site*, which was a kind of intellectual laboratory organized by Neff and consisted primarily of him holding open hours in the gallery, and organizing a series of events, including, a performance by *Sonic Measures*, and a "conversation about historical and contemporary issues of race, community and art in America" titled, *The Philadelphia Negro Reconsidered*, with Tukufu Zuberi, TJ Ghose, Keir Johnston, and himself; which centered on Neff's professor, the late Terry Adkins, and discussed the eponymous suite of prints by Adkins produced in collaboration with Common Press,

which itself was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois' 1899 demographic study of African American's living in Philadelphia, which also shared the same title (the prints were concurrently on display in the downstairs gallery at TPC). The *Second Site* also hosted it's own tumblr, which served to further churn the aesthetic experience created in the exhibition. If this is beginning to sound like it added layers of complexity to the otherwise intense exhibit then you are getting the picture.



While this prolific artist has had his hand in many projects and exhibitions around the city, this is the first large survey of Neff's work. And the experience for me has really defined the value of looking at a large body of work in context with itself; as a result my understanding of Neff's work changed completely. Prior to this exhibition I understood him to be producing a large series of letterpress and screen printed text or images, interesting and well executed but felt like one-off range-finding more than deep research. As you can see above, Neff was not thinking about those prints as stand alone works, but as indexical elements in a much larger constellation. The prints themselves range from wood type letterpress prints quoting lyrics the seminal hip-hop group, The Wu-Tang Clan, to iterations of funerary flowers, ruff collars, chandeliers, all of which are printed with an idiosyncratic approach (often utilizing sugar, ash or powdered graphite flocking) yielding a slightly ethereal one of a kind image, as well as a number of what we used to call out-of-focus photographs. When seen as a whole arrangement the body of work points to a complex, rigorous investigation.



The artist's statement lays out the underlying structure to his investigations:

'Neff's work is concerned with historical and current negotiations of power and privilege with regard to race, gender, and class. Formally, he is interested in a lack of image, anti-icons, and, much like semantic satiation, the repeated and shifting use of common materials like sugar, graphite, air, and ash to evoke visual mystery and a visceral reaction to objects and images.'

Neff's relief sculpture and objects are as beautiful as they are enigmatic. Seemingly driven by a process of accumulation or collection. The materiality of each operates with a specific history and generally evokes some kind of nostalgia. Whether he's built a totem of carbon paper, or a shelf of sanded, fogged mirrors, Neff is engaged with the way the things accumulate symbolic value through a kind of analogous logic or sympathetic magic.



The critical content of the objects is much more opaque than the meaning of the prints, this might be off-putting to some viewers, but the material decisions in the 2d work can be used as a kind of cypher for drilling deeper into the sculpture. Close reading reveals hidden labor, like the bottom lit mineral chunk that is revealed to be made of sugar that has been built-up from seemingly endless screen print runs, or very strange, bioluminescent print (powered by bacteria!?). And Neff's Second Site office hours provided plenty of opportunities for curious viewers to have questions answered, a generous approach that revealed the shortcoming of even the best wall didactic.







Neff is a hard-working and talented artist. And that he is mission-driven is also clear, his commitment to making work that is engaged with 'historical and current negotiations of power and privilege with regard to race, gender, and class', comes through in the work and I would argue it is made richer by the intrinsic logic of his process. He's produced an ambitious, strange, compelling, and ultimately cohesive body of work.

