

Artnet • *High Cotton* • Charlie Finch

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Joe Zucker's "Cotton Paintings," on view at Mary Boone's uptown space, were first exhibited at Bykert Gallery and the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1976. Former Bykert owner Klaus Kertess has reconstructed the exhibition exactly.

Marking the denouement of Vietnam and Watergate, in these pictures Zucker deliberately called forth the ugliest part of American history, slavery and the cotton trade, and sought to turn, as he characterized it, "repugnance into beauty."

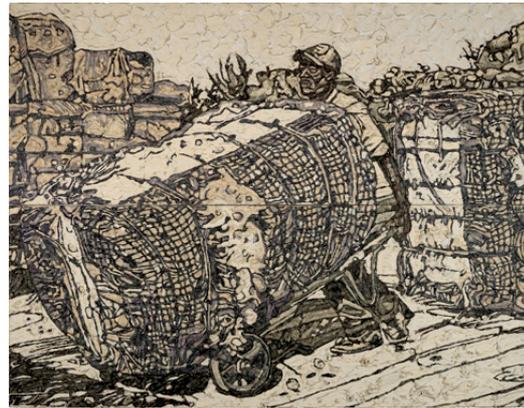
These beautiful paintings were constructed by balling up cotton wads in Rhoplex and arranging them in tactile waves on canvas diptychs. The subjects of the works range through the whole panoply of Big Cotton, slaves moving the bales, paddle-wheel boats transporting the cloth, slave women lying in the fields exhausted from work, even crows alighting and cotton gins whirring, all transformed into blurred images of incomparable subtlety, which, upon inspection, will send shivers up your spine.

As Zucker points out in the exhibition catalogue, everything about cotton infused him with a sense of the sin of America, whether it is Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia law school, the grand creation of a slaveholder, which Zucker depicts in one of these works, or the very bolt of cotton canvas lying around in his studio at the time.

Two months ago, Roberta Smith called for New York museums to give Joe Zucker a retrospective. Boone Gallery director Ron Warren told me that this show has been planned for two years. The works, which are not for sale, and come from sources as disparate as the UBS Collection, the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the estate of Horace Solomon, are valued for insurance purposes at \$300,000 a piece, a bargain. After major collectors see this show, Mary Boone will find it difficult to resist offering these paintings for seven figures—they are that good.

Joe Zucker, Mar. 25-May 1, 2010, at Mary Boone Gallery, 745 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10151

Charlie Finch is co-author of *Most Art Sucks: Five Years of Coagula* (Smart Art Press).



Paying Off Old Debts (1976)