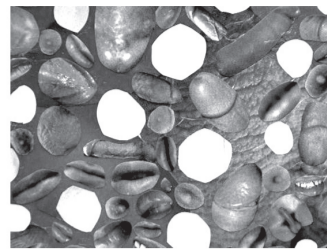
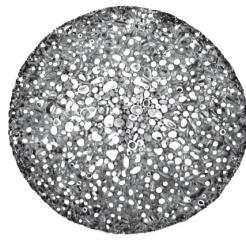
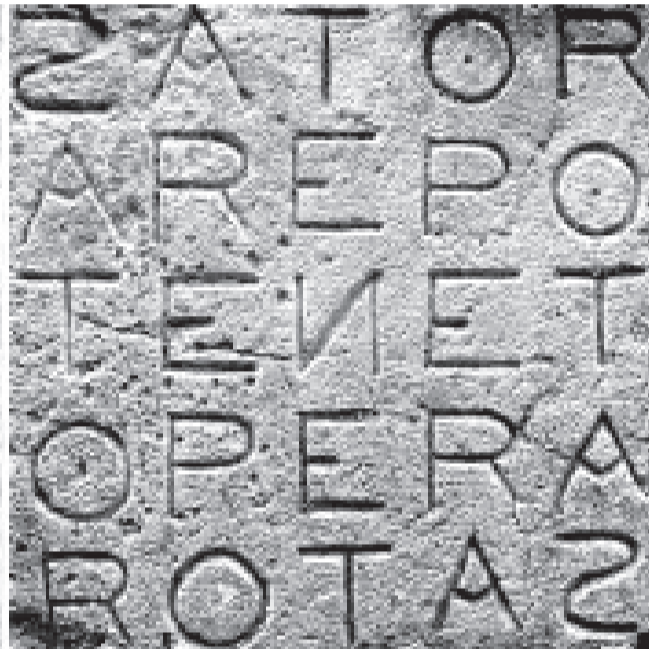
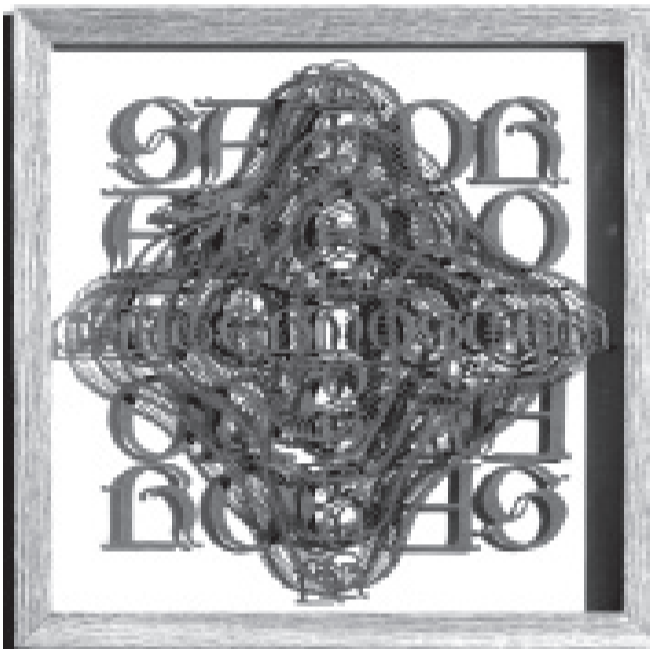


# Let us Not Pine After an Absent God

*Unveil* at Tiger Strikes Asteroid (January 8-29, 2010) gather together a number of complimentary and, as I will hope to show, conflicting attempts to investigate the contemporary power of the art object or image to disclose, unveil or unconceal. And the exhibition purposely leaves obscure precisely what art unveils. Whereas for Corey Antis, unveiling has distinctly phenomenological connotations, investigating the manner in which painting unveils unveiling as such, in Ben Pranger's sculptures the notion of unveiling is cast in prophetic tones: both secular, as in his interest in the scientific messianism of Buckminster Fuller, and sacred, as in his reference to the Book of Revelations. However, for my purposes here I would like to simply focus on the problematic dialectic that emerges between the sacred and profane notions of unveiling in Hunter Stabler's *Sator Square*, Adam Parker Smith's collages and Dona Ruff's *Aureola Series*.



Salami is cruelly literal in this regard and *Hella Diamonds* is a close second. Whereas the literal in *Sator Square* served to initiate the viewer into an esoteric depth, with Smith's vision we have no comforting exit from the piteous colonization of our desire by the commodity. Such truths, however, by no means provide an echo of a complex and vulnerable universe, as the news release suggest. Rather these collages seem to expose a universe buried, if I may borrow a formulation of Jacques Rancière, beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. But to



Hunter Stabler's *Sator Square* seems paradigmatic, precisely because of its mock sophistication, of a contemporary impulse that fetishizes craft and invests in the hand made a redemptive force. The intricacy and complexity of Stabler's cut-paper does not serve a merely decorative function. The various cuts, twists, and folds in the design serve to unfold a latent, invisible mystery—the mystery in this case of the *Sator Square*. Without going into the archeological record in detail, this ancient graffito, whose earliest appearance is traced back to 79 AD, is a latin palindrome that spells out *Rotas Opera Tenet Arepo Sator* (the sower [Farmer] Arepo has [as] works wheels [a plough]). Since the palindrome itself contains the anagram *Pater Nostra* (the Lord's Prayer) that can be made into the Greek cross, the remaining letters, A and O, letters symbolizing *alpha* and *omega*, some interpreters have suggested that it functioned as an early code that enabled early Christians to clandestinely announce their presence to other Christians. Due to these esoteric connotations, the *Sator Square* has entered into folk traditions and contemporary new age spirituality as a magical talisman capable of warding off calamity. Isn't the suggestion here that art is itself a talisman, drawing on hidden forces which exceed the understanding? Is art a cipher for esoteric, hidden meaning? The artist a shaman? Stabler might indeed be exposing the manner in which decorative gestures have substituted for religious palliatives. However, I fear that it is precisely for such a palliative that the piece longs. In stark contrast to Stabler's reactionary attempt to invest the decorative with an esoteric use-value, Adam Parker Smith's collages depict a profane universe stripped of any sacred meaning where consumption depends upon libidinal investment.

expose that this is indeed our universe hardly goes far enough. The work clearly capitalizes precisely on the grotesque and abject spectacle that it purports to unveil without the hysteria that one finds in Paul McCarthy or Jason Rhodes, or the unparalleled cynicism of Jeff Koons. Donna Ruff's *Aureola Series* would appear to chart a middle ground between the sacred and profane. Her tasteful abstractions we are instructed allude to Afghani gold and Islamic art (traditions of which I am woefully ignorant). The title, however, clearly centers the series within the legacy of Christian art works (aureola refers to the golden cloud surrounding for the most part the Godhead in Christian paintings). This melding of eastern and western traditions could indeed be read as symptomatic of the ease with which the late liberal subject appropriates the foreign in a blind and dehistoricized manner, following the dictates of her "good taste." However, when looking at these paintings, I could not but conjure up images of the aerial views of Afghanistan's rugged terrain and the geometrical patterns that take shape in the paintings began to remind me of targets, of geographical coordinates that chart out territories that either await or have been bombed. If such an hypothesis is tenable, the work assumes an explosive new dimension. Ruff's paintings would then establish an analogy between the process of abstraction that leads the liberal subject to extract decorative elements from the Islamic and Afghani tradition and the technological, geographical and cultural abstraction required of the bombardier or the new breed of gamer that remotely incinerates villages by unmanned drones. We would then glimpse that art cannot indeed be neutral and that every document of civilization is indeed a document of barbarism.

-Alexi Kukuljevic