

MARTOS GALLERY

"Anatomies and Administration in Jessica Vaughn's 'Receipt of a Form,'" *HUMOR and the Abject*, December 8, 2017

HUMOR and the ABJECT



Anatomies and Administration in Jessica Vaughn's "Receipt of a Form"

DECEMBER 08, 2017

In **Jessica Vaughn**'s current solo exhibition, **"Receipt of a Form"** at Martos Gallery, repurposed transportation upholstery and furniture act as effigies for bureaucratically-controlled bodies. Soiled, fibrous seats scavenged from the Chicago Transit Authority's elevated train cars, and scraps of unused fabric procured from an industrial upholstery manufacturer, point to invisible bodies--bodies whose daily

commutes, labor, and socialization are largely dictated by civic and commercial institutions. Vaughn's obsession with the unsexy administrative architecture of these ergonomic command centers manifests in sculptural work that accomplishes the difficult task of being simultaneously clinical and evocative.



Jessica Vaughn, *D-90 Blue No. 116* (2016), fabric scraps procured from manufacturer (09/2015-11/2016) on plexi, 55" × 48" × 1/4"

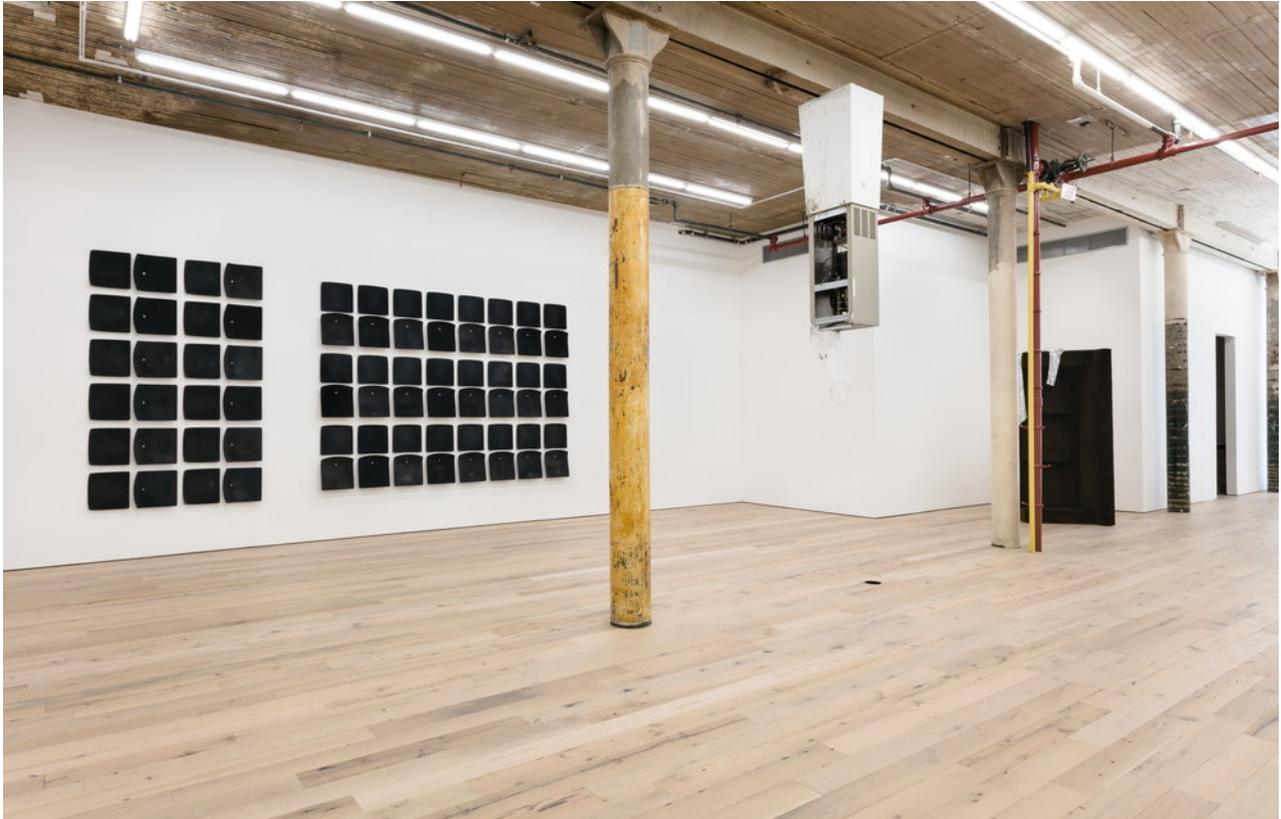
(All images courtesy Martos Gallery)

Six works, looking surgically gutted, lay across the gallery's main floor space. They're titled dryly after commercial color codes. Each of these began some time ago as a thick, heavy sheet of rectangular upholstery fabric, but has since had the bulk of its materiality extracted. Those vacant areas--sliced out as patterns to cover armrests, seats, and back supports--feel mildly uncanny. On intercity charter bus lines, or in the cabs of long-haul trucks across the United States, one can imagine bodies glued for hours to those materials' final destinations. Some of the cut-out shapes are clearly meant for contact with our bottoms or backs, whereas others look foreign and confusing. What, exactly, is the anatomy of a banal seat we rarely give a second thought to on a Greyhound?



Jessica Vaughn, *South Beach Blue No. 389* (2017), fabric scraps procured from manufacturer (09/2015-11/2016) on plexi, 57" × 38 3/4" × 1/2"

Vaughn seems consumed by what the rest of us perceive as arbitrary, going to great lengths to mount the skeletal fabric on beefy, custom-shaped plexi that mimics the existing industrial cuts. Her fusing of fabric and plastic encourages closer inspection of the patterns' edges, revealing inelegant frays and evidence of unsteady hands in the factory. This conjures a whole new population of unpresent bodies: the likely overworked men and women whose job it is to carve out functional segments from garishly-ornamented textiles.



Installation view of the group exhibition "**Invisible Man**" at Martos Gallery, New York, NY, May 3 through June 24, 2017, with Jessica Vaughn's *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005* (2017) visible on the left

When Martos reopened at its present location in Chinatown, the first exhibition, "**Invisible Man**" (titled after Ralph Ellison's charged 1947 novel), featured Vaughn alongside Pope.L, Torkwase Dyson, and Kayode Ojo. The show's aim was to create a temporary home for invisible bodies, with work that explored how those bodies navigate, change, and make use of their surroundings. Vaughn's piece in that show, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005* (2017), filled a wall with a grid of thirty-six seats blemished from use on Chicago trains between 1998 and 2011.



Jessica Vaughn, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #008* (2017), seven individual pairs of used machine fabricated public transit train seats (Chicago Transit Authority 1998-2011), 284" x 32"

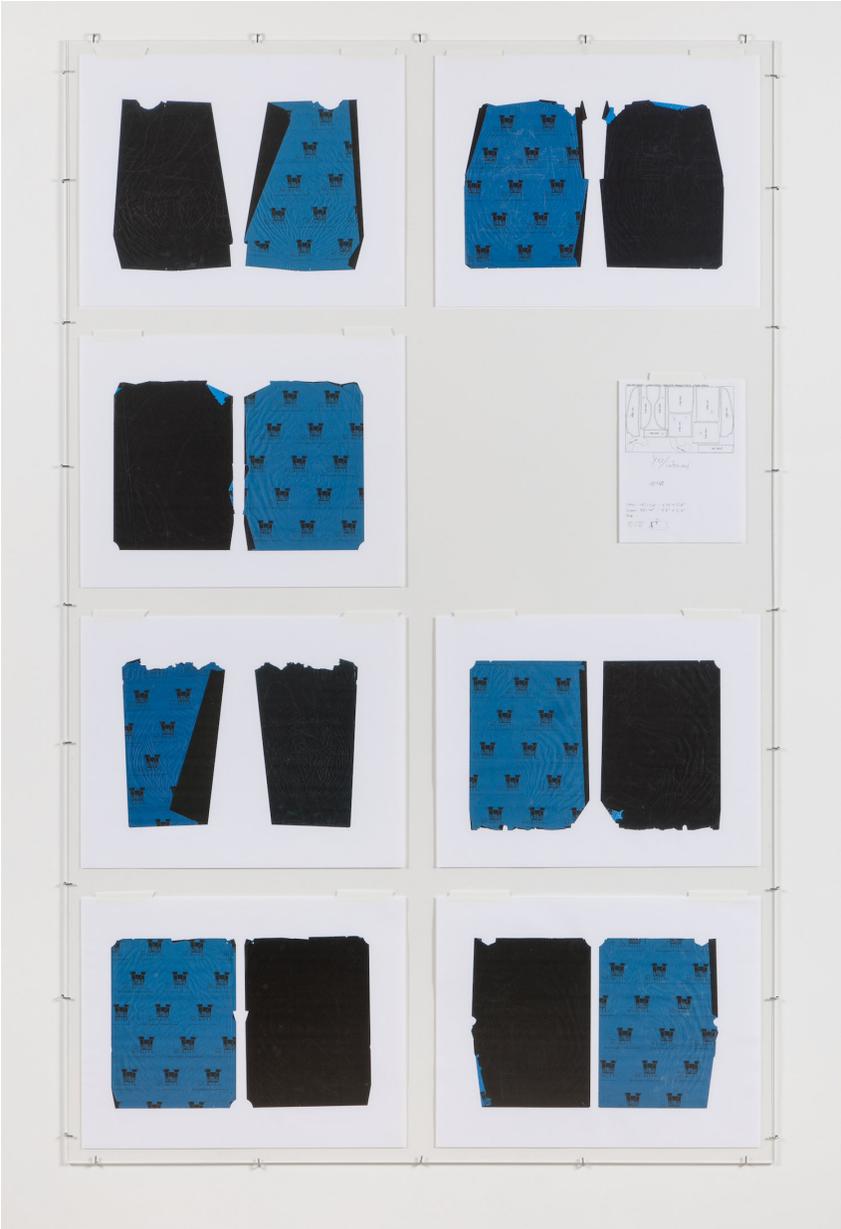
In "Receipt of a Form," Vaughn included a more intimate work of seven seats, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #008* (2017), from the same series. The conceptual lineage between that group show and Vaughn's first solo exhibition in New York is taught, with absent bodies--often the result of intentional erasure--as a paramount focus. *After Willis* refers to Benjamin C Willis, superintendent of the Chicago public school system in the 1960s. Willis circumvented public demands for educational desegregation by installing aluminum mobile classrooms at crowded, majority-Black schools instead of reconfiguring neighborhood school boundaries to more evenly distribute student populations and resources. Without consulting the title though, Vaughn's pieces are geographically aspecific. The stained, worn-out fabric-coated seats could be from train or bus lines in any major city in the United States. It's that very non-regional, mass-produced aesthetic that reminds viewers that municipal, county, state, and federal institutions largely dictate which bodies go where, and by what means.



Jessica Vaughn, *surplus* (2017), fabric scraps procured from manufacturer (09/2015-11/2016) on plexi, 29" × 21 1/2" × 1/2"; 25 1/2" × 24 1/2" × 1/2" (framed); 32" × 21 3/4" (base)

A stack of smaller cut-out fabrics mounted on plexi, titled *surplus* (2017), sits on the floor in the gallery's far corner. Like the larger floor works, *surplus* engages the politics of unseen industrialized labor more so than the social geographies of cities address by the *After Willis* series. The title plays ironically with ideas of cast-off excess materials as a type of surplus, but also recalls Marx's critique of the "surplus value" exploited from laborers by business owners. When productivity increases consistently despite wages

remaining stagnant, only those at the top of the economic chain benefit from the production of more salable goods. This work's critical underpinning reinforces the troubling imperfections around the edges of the other floor pieces, as one realizes that the small errors resulting from increased output expectations won't slow the factory line. After all, blemished cuts can be sewn invisibly into the skins of chairs that no transportation customer pays attention to anyways.



Jessica Vaughn, *Learning From the Work of Others* (2017), digital prints, photocopy and plexiglass, 76" x 48"

Vaughn herself pays close attention to the minutiae of larger systems. *Learning from the Work of Others*(2017) includes digital prints on carbon paper, a largely out-of-date record keeping tool that allows information composed by an individual to be disseminated to multiple parties. In addition to acting as a type of receipt itself, carbon paper facilitates knowledge transfer and can be used for clothing patterns and making copies of texts. Although its lasting legacy is the “carbon-copy” addressee line in emails, Vaughn still utilizes it for diagrammatic and notemaking purposes in her studio practice. Also contained in the piece is a scaled-down, photocopied version of a cutting pattern for the industrial fabric sheets indicating a 73.95% efficiency yield. By making herself cognizant of the work performed by others, Vaughn identifies the microsystems that macrosystems aim to obfuscate in the interest of maintaining profitability through efficiency.



Installation view of Jessica Vaughn's "**Receipt of Form**" at Martos Gallery, New York, NY, October 26 through December 10, 2017

Efficiency is of the utmost importance to commercial manufacturers, city planners, and transportation organizations. Vaughn interrupts that efficiency by wedging herself into their disposal chain, contacting the companies and requesting that they give her what is effectively their trash. A former arts administrator

herself, she understands the exploitable formalities in a professional-sounding email exchange. It's a quietly funny bit of disobedience aimed at inconveniencing capitalist structures that toss off anything that no longer possesses an immediate use-value, but more deeply a layered critique of the disregard those systems display for the dignity of human populations. Invisible powers operate more comfortably when their laborers and constituents are also made invisible. For Vaughn, remaining resigned to that reality may equate being complicit in it. She seems to feel a calling to call it out, albeit stealthily. The economy of her visual vocabulary makes her politics uniquely poetic. This is work that encourages spending time with it, work that dares a viewer to dismiss it as minimalist or readymade. "Receipt of a Form" isn't just about the negative spaces that remain after material has been removed, it's a simmering collection of work that directly documents the cold transactional nature of body-centric architectures, personal and public. Vaughn doesn't need to resort to theatrics with the objects she appropriates; despite their outward banality, they arrive at her studio already marked with narrative.

Jessica Vaughn's "Receipt of a Form" is on view through Sunday, December 10, 2017 at Martos Gallery, 41 Elizabeth St, New York, NY 10013