

The image features a dense, textured background of numerous small, dark-colored screws, likely made of metal, scattered across a dark, possibly black, surface. The screws are oriented in various directions, creating a complex, repetitive pattern. In the center of the image, the name "Steve Tobin" is printed in a white, serif font. The text is clearly legible against the dark, busy background.

Steve Tobin



Steve Tobin

Paintings



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Paintings

Essay by Robert P. Metzger

Photography by George Erml

The Banana Factory
Bethlehem, PA



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Introduction

It is an honor for the Banana Factory to host the first exhibition of Steve Tobin's new paintings. Mr. Tobin is an artist of international renown living in a neighboring small town in Pennsylvania. When I first visited his studio I was struck by the intensity of his work. There were exploded ceramic sculptures, bronzed roots and termite hills, and waterglass installations cascading down from the roof of his rustic barn. His passion was evident in all his work, with each piece resonating with the raw materials he used.

His new, awe-inspiring series of paintings is no exception. Mr. Tobin's paintings are made with thousands upon thousands of bolts, screws, nails and buttons whose utilitarian qualities are transformed into stunning objects of rich, textural beauty. The dense sculptural quality of the work is a powerful evolution of his relationship with nature and serves as a driving force blurring the constructed divisions between painting and sculpture. In their environment, these "paintings" ironically echo the landscape of abandoned mammoth blast furnaces and rusted vestiges of Bethlehem Steel that stands only a few, short blocks from the Banana Factory's Binney & Smith Gallery.

This exhibition is a generous gift from the artist to the community. The artistic integrity that accompanies Steve Tobin's work enhances the reputation of our community and our art center. The Banana Factory honors the responsibility of mounting an exhibition of international quality and extends its sincere gratitude to Mr. Tobin for his community spirit. We would like to thank Ashley Development for underwriting "Steve Tobin: Paintings" and this catalogue. We would also like to acknowledge Binney & Smith for the creation of our gallery space and Cornerstone Group, which generously sponsors our exhibitions throughout the year.

Janice Lipzin
Director
Visual Arts and Education
Banana Factory

Steve Tobin – *Exalted Fluxions*

The dazzling artistry of Steve Tobin charges through his recent series of paintings like a heat-seeking missile. Tobin has spent the last two decades exploring the phenomenological experience of objects, using a variety of materials ranging from bronze, ceramic, glass and steel to dynamic combinations resulting in room-size installations. His probing of traditional media, which artists have developed over many centuries, resulted in significant headway in his approach to the process of art. Eschewing trendy Warholian irony, he has relentlessly experimented with various materials by creating new processes to refine his vision. Tobin's tenacious, stylistic investigation rejuvenated and extended centuries-old materials to fit audacious new processes, transforming space and scale.

His techniques of exploding wet clay, encasing organic forms in bronze and combining incongruous materials mark his sculptural achievements with a dramatic physicality and iconic brilliance. This revisionist approach in which Tobin unapologetically rewrites the rules to extend the limitations of materials provides a renewed synergy between art and science on a large stage. Starting his academic career immersed in mathematics and physics, he has long been fascinated with the intersection of science and the arts. Beginning with his early experimentation with three-dimensional space, Tobin's intense connection with nature was evident. In particular, he envisioned the void not as empty dead space, but charged with particles of energy and motion.

Tobin's extraordinary new crop of work attests to his accomplishments as a painter, while maintaining his predilection for actual physical depth involving shifts of surface and scale. This groundbreaking series contains countless intricately-crafted small objects, fragments of industrial culture which equate to fragments of human experience. These paintings are steeped in a rich tradition reaching back to 1912 with the Cubism of Braque and Picasso, whose innovative hybrid works introduced collaged elements which heretofore were alien to the techniques of painting per se. Duchamp, of course, used Cubism as a point of departure for his "readymades" in which industrial objects were removed from their utilitarian context and elevated to the realm of "Fine Art," while the Dada collages of Kurt Schwitters were made up of street litter.

The overall style of Pollock's Abstract Expressionist drip canvasses and the linear arabesques of Mark Tobey's white writing paintings are extended into three dimensions in Tobin's work. All three artists created an illusion of continuous connected movement through a uniformity of all parts of the painting, but Tobin has added real depth to the surface as well. This approach was in conformity with a very old tradition of "horror vacui" in which the entire painting was equally activated, extending to the very limits of the canvas and implying an expansion even beyond the picture frame. Tobin continues this tradition, presenting an abstract space of vibrating luminosity, where the eye has difficulty focusing on a particular point of the painting. Like his predecessors, he is liberated from the mantle of representation, creating an illusion of continuous movement by plummeting into the depths of memory and the unconscious.

Tobin's energy-charged fields, which can be seen as both flat and infinitely deep, also have roots in the idealized geometry of American Minimalism with its grids, stacks and boxes in compulsive repetition. Minimalism's use of austere, static, labor-intensive components found a counterpoint on Tobin's opting for low-tech industrial fasteners as the ideal carrier for activating light in his work. In addition to the Minimalists, Gunther Uecker, who was a member of the Ground Zero group in Germany, and Soho-based Arman share an affinity with Tobin. Uecker used nails in repetitive relief patterns, while Arman arranged a myriad of manufactured objects in transparent containers, embedded in cement or sliced up in various sculptural formations. Each of these artists has taken multiple found industrial objects and by manipulating and arranging them in unique ways – adjusting the atmosphere so to speak – breathed unexpected emotional life into them.

In a similar fashion, earth artists such as Richard Long in Britain have taken various found natural elements including rocks, earth and driftwood and arranged them in lines, circles, squares or spirals. Despite Tobin's use of machine-made found objects, the actual visual look of his painting is closer to the earth artists than to the Minimalists. His painting suggests cosmic dimensions as well as such terrestrial forces as expanding waves, cloud patterns, wind-driven sand dunes and geological

formations. On another level, the hand of man is alluded to in forms resembling the furrows of plowed fields or the folds of a curtain. Tobin's feeling for nature is enhanced by the directional movement of his brushwork, which creates a sense of immanent or circular movement in the same way that atoms and planets proceed and move through space. The viscosity of the paint determines where each element will rest. Tobin then manipulates the elements to approximate nature's distribution of leaves, branches or stones on a forest floor. One feels pulled into the space through the visual actualization of gravitational forces. The viscosity of paint combines with gravity to achieve an astounding gravitational alignment. Working on a flat horizontal surface, Tobin achieves balance through this pull of material, similar to Pollock's rhythmic distribution technique. In the work of both artists, the effect only becomes visible when the art is taken from the floor and placed on the wall. Tobin's eye for parceling out the placement of each object is far from random, yet the process is inexact and highly intuitive, approaching the dispersion of leaves or the surface of water when touched by wind or weather. Tobin's key link with nature, then, is a painting surface which is always in a state of flux. With a slight twist of paint, he brings a visual elegance to objects heretofore known only for their functional elegance, taking them from mundane to the exalted. His paint covering allows the viewer to see the fasteners again – for the first time!

Discarding the self-imposed limitations of Minimalism, Tobin daringly recontextualizes these industrialized by-products, transforming them from the realm of the functional to a metaphysical place where the end-product is a work of art. By arranging the fasteners in a painted field of relative absence of depth, he creates his own microcosm of the universe. Within a deceptively formalist vocabulary, each painting unfolds in small gestures, revealing hermetic secrets inherent in the spectacle of irresistible flocking. Through their arrangement, color and texture, the fasteners are transformed, belying their origins in a factory which stamped them out daily by the millions. The spatial synthesis retains the tension of opposites between found and handcrafted objects, achieving a mesmerizing coalescence.

Each tiny element in the painting has been absolved of its original utilitarian function as an industrial fastener from a technology geared toward smoothing out all the edges. By means of brushed color, adhesives, scraping, sanding and raking, Tobin has metamorphized them into idealized components of fragility and perfection in a boundless field of light and shadow. These man-made discards, once geared toward efficient function, have been reanimated by the hand of the artist into vibrating luminosity, firmly anchoring his compositions.

Like planet earth with one side always in the shadow, Tobin's paintings are essentially black and white shot through with flashes of yellow and rust color. The latter two colors relate to bright sunlight and the hues of the earth. The glowing highlights bear witness to intensive sanding and meticulous brushwork, bringing each small metallic element into sharper focus. The dense coexistence of the tiny components ignites a metaphorical struggle for dominance as they jostle one another, overlapping and retreating. This mini-drama is heightened by the movement of the brush, catching a fierce, undulating energy. The circular, billowing movement surges back and forth across the surface, echoing the ways atoms or planets move. The bipolarity of color points up the rhapsodic dichotomy of yielding to the night and breaking free at dawn. Tobin's Yin and Yang, however, permits cast shadows at night as well as in broad daylight.

The essential irony of these works is the bridging of abstraction with realism. Tobin's insistence on a single manufactured object and the need for its repetition yields multiple associations with the human condition. The beauty of the ordinary springs from the closely-knit unity amongst the chosen elements. In our post-industrial age, these paintings convey the germ of a narrative that proclaims a tale of collection, placement and ecstatic transformation of these cast-offs from a not-too-distant past. Tobin succeeds in authentically uncovering this inchoate narration, yet on a purely visual level these subtle works triumph as abstractions. They possess a rare equilibrium between geometric precision and gestural freedom. The engrossing fields of shifting movement threaded across the surface engage the viewer with an eerie, out-of-this-world intensity as they linger in the mind like a half-forgotten dream.

Robert P. Metzger
Guest Curator

Color Plates



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
12" x 12"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
18" x 22"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
22" x 18"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
33" x 22"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
33" x 22"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
33" x 22"



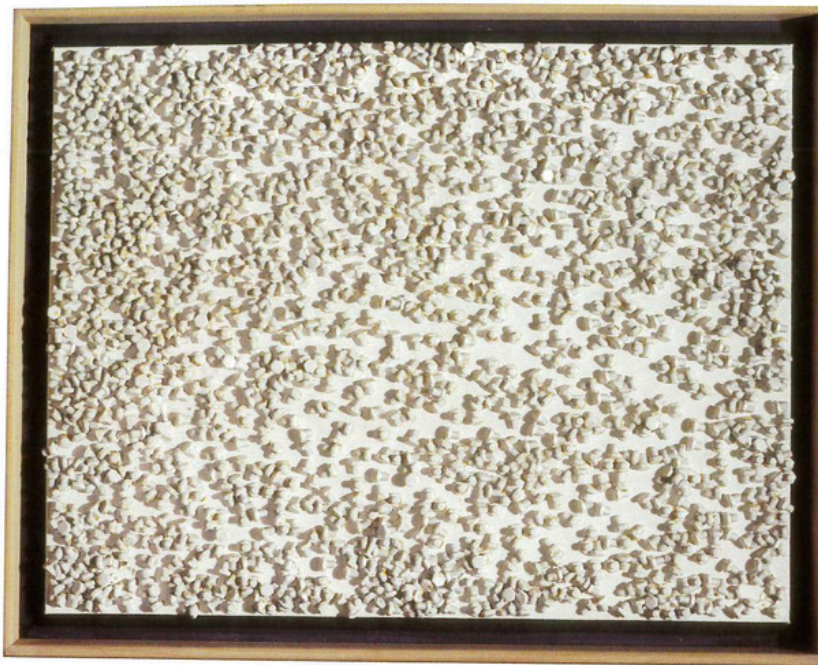
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mixed media on canvas
38" x 26"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
30" x 22"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
22" x 18"



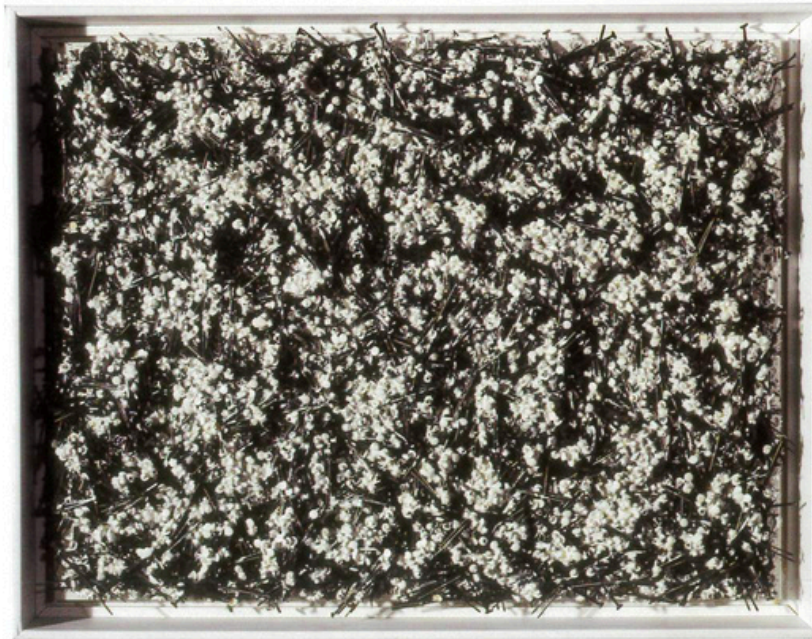
Untitled (top)
mixed media on canvas
16" x 20"



Untitled (bottom)
mixed media on canvas
16" x 20"



Untitled (top)
mixed media on canvas
16" x 20"



Untitled (bottom)
mixed media on canvas
18" x 22"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
16" x 20"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
20" x 16"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
50" x 34"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
50" x 26"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
50" x 34"



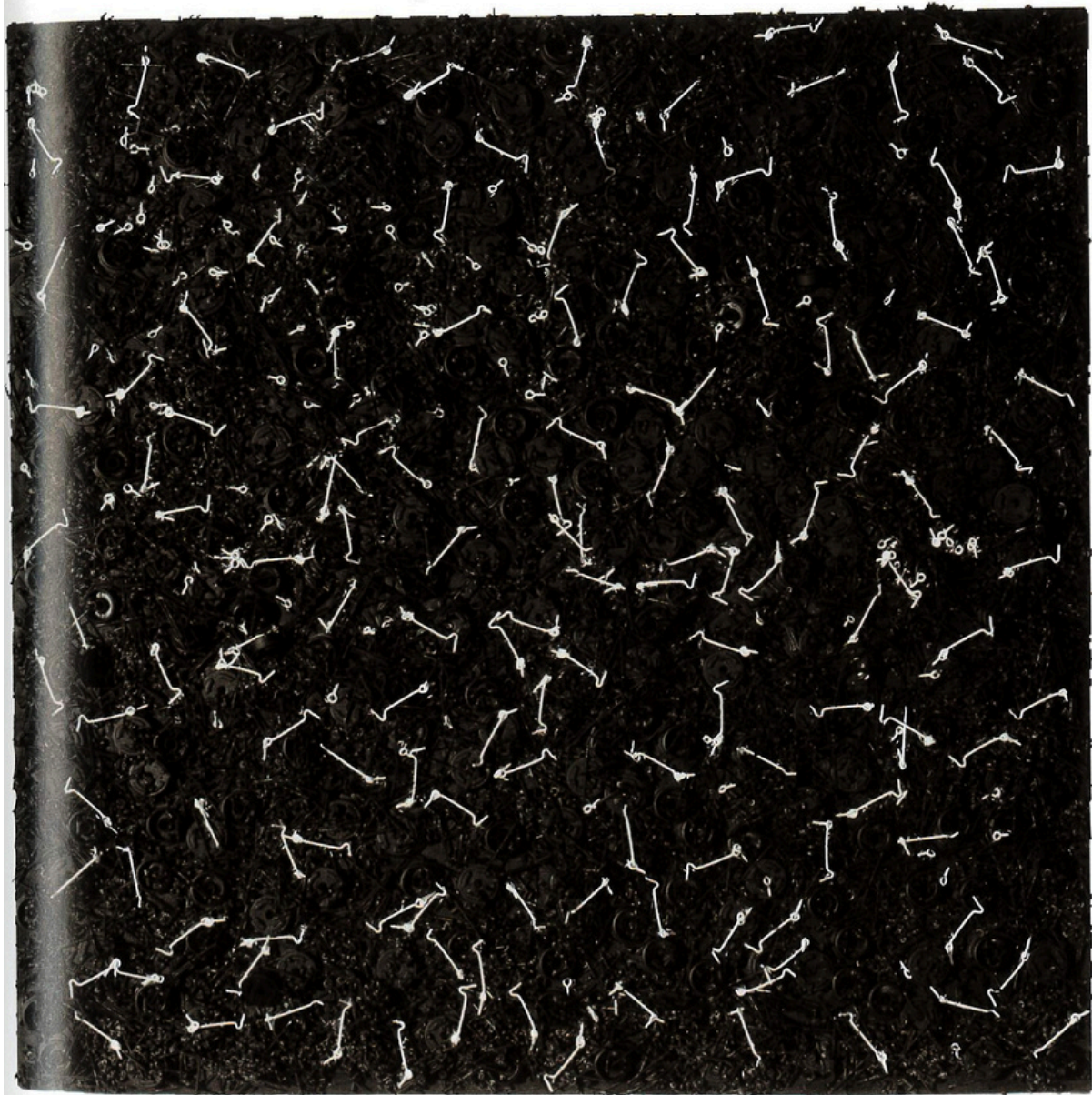
Untitled
mixed media on canvas
74" x 50"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
50" x 50"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
50" x 50"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
48" x 48"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
48" x 48"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
48" x 48"



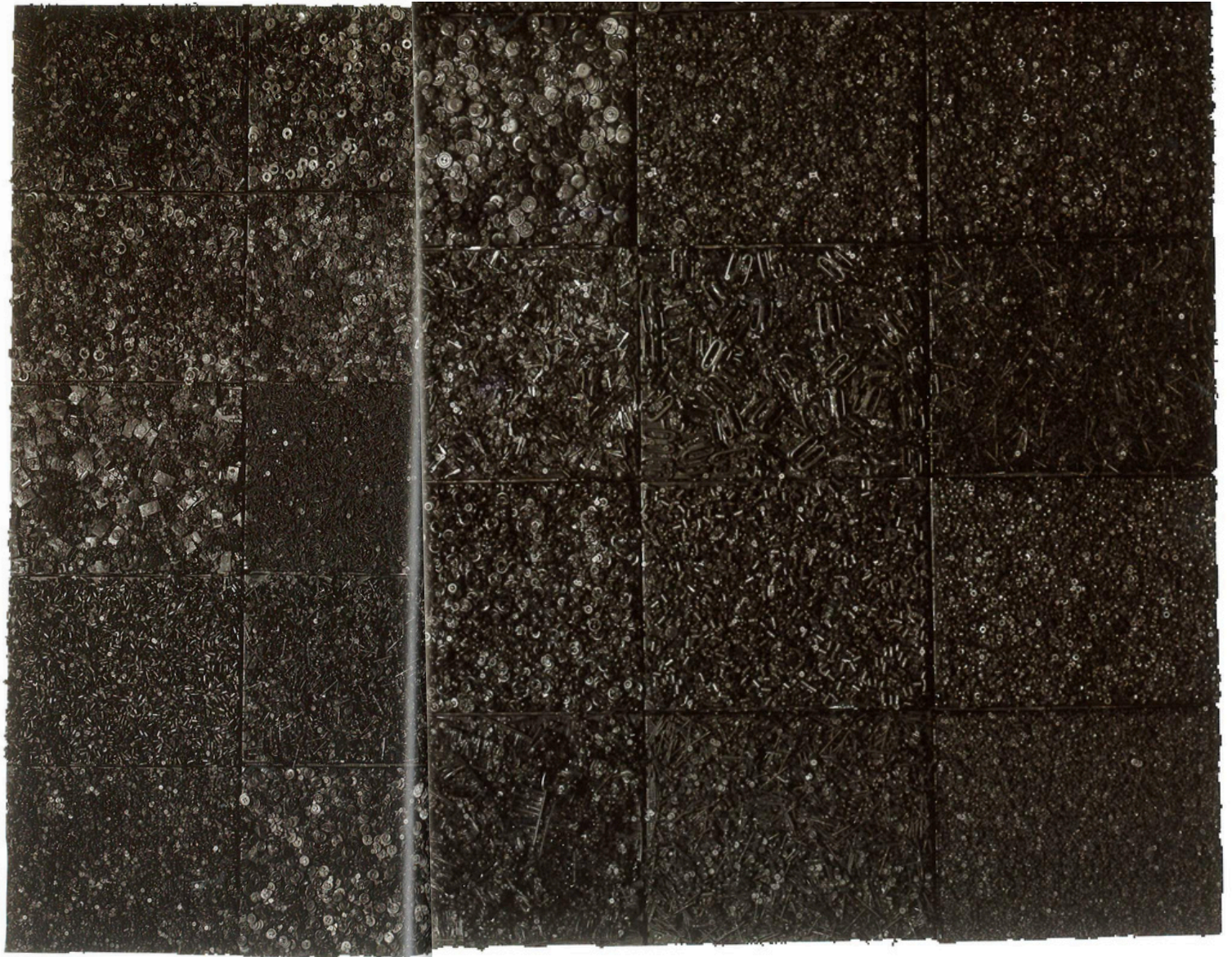
Untitled
mixed media on canvas
48" x 48"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
98" x 98"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
37" x 98"



Untitled
mixed media on canvas
82" x 102"



