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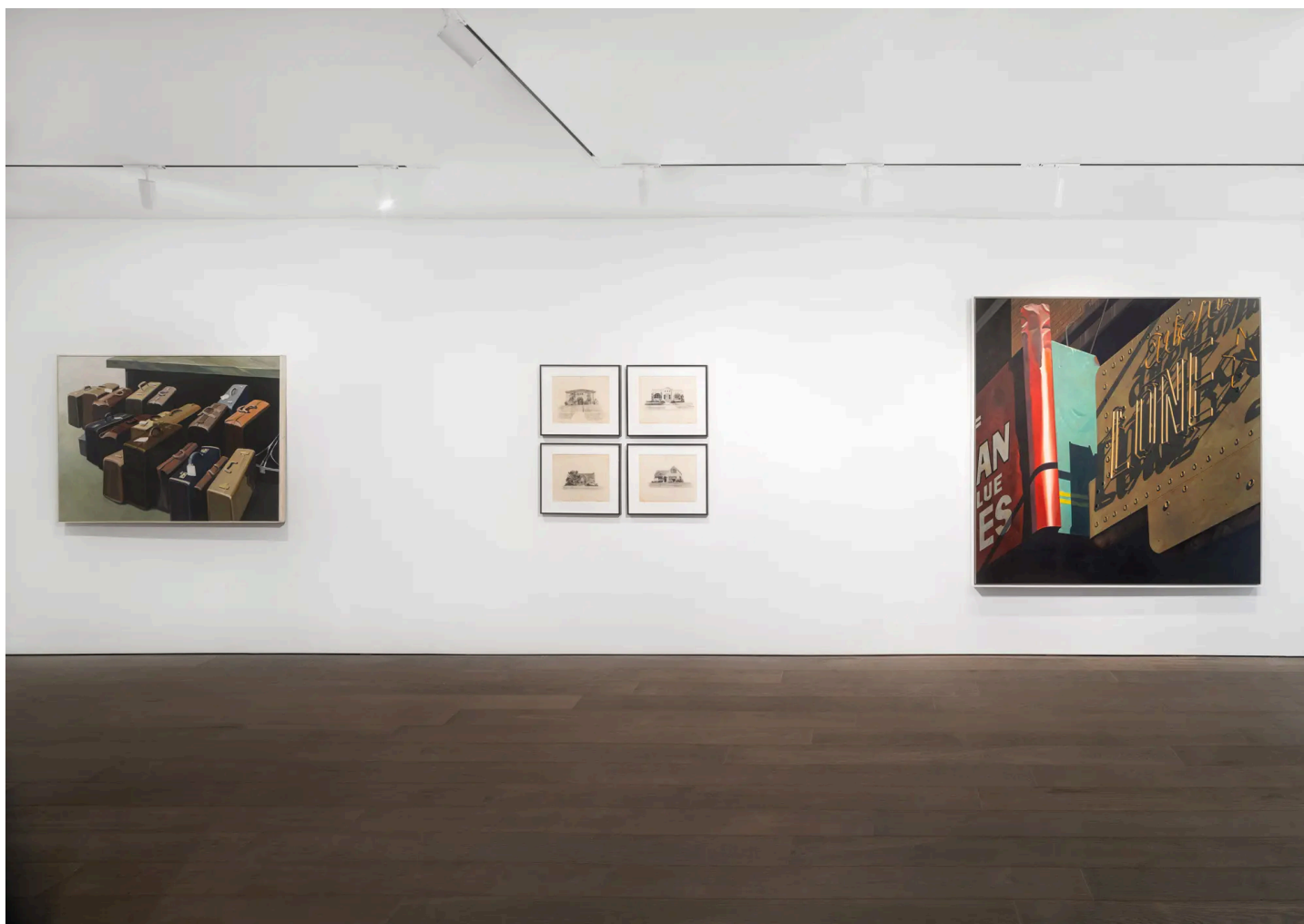
ARTSEEN | JULY/AUGUST 2024

Robert Cottingham's
Americana (Works from
1965 to 2018)

By Ekin Erkan

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Installation view: *Robert Cottingham's Americana (Works from 1965 to 2018)*, Fleiss-Vallois, New York, 2024. Courtesy Fleiss-Vallois.

Galerie Georges-Philippe & Nathalie Vallois's *Robert Cottingham's Americana (Works from 1965–2018)* is an excellent summary review of the artist's career. The exhibition proceeds chronologically. This allows for viewers to appreciate continuities and advances in the artist's approach to composition. The show begins with two works

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Cottingham's skill as a draftsman, stylistically closer to the academic vernacular of his Pratt Institute student years (1959–1963). These augur Cottingham's more impressive drawings of Manhattan storefronts, marquees, and advertising signs, like *Buschs* (1974) and *Flagg Bros* (1975). Cottingham here, and in the paintings for which these drawings serve as preparatory exercises, executes an advance in his compositional formatting, sectioning off space and weaving monumental signs and facades into grid-like diagrams.

The two earliest paintings betray the influence of Edward Hopper's Impressionism-imbued loose facture and de-peopled autumnal scenes. Like Cottingham, Hopper incorporated diminutive perspective in works like *Roofs of Washington Square* (1926), allowing the metal protrusions to function as overhang canopies. Cottingham much admired Hopper and, in *Luggage* and *Bus II*, he recasts the dramatic interplay of moderate lighting with sharp, long shadows by towering structures. One is also reminded of Hopper's austere colored studies of the Judson Memorial Church and Washington Square, where bruised shadows fold into the fissures of earth-clay brick. Cottingham's *Bus II* titular bus's doors and body are painted in mute, ashen washes of dust-blue, catching shadows lit by the azure sky. The windows' gleam carries through to the bus's chassis. If French Impressionism's genealogy of influence—passed from Edgar Degas to Robert Henri to his student, Hopper, to Cottingham—is manifest, it is delimited to the flurried chestnut brushstrokes inside the angular faces of *Luggage*'s array of leather briefcases. Over the next decades, Cottingham trades the overhead lighting of *Luggage* and *Bus II* for oblique lighting, illuminating otherwise umbrageous urban structures.

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In the 1960s, Cottingham began working as an art director for the advertising firm Young and Rubicam and, as he notes in a 1998 interview with Robert F. Brown, he therein began “working with photographers and with type people, lettering people.” Upon leaving his advertising career in the late 1960s, he “took all the [photographic] information, processed it, and used that as my approach to making images, rather than the standard classroom advice.” The later

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Cottingham's truncation is a result of his utilizing a long-focus telephoto lens. Cottingham's tightly-cropped compositions and foreshortened views do not serve as an end in themselves but engender incomplete words, fragmented images, and parceled building facades. *Buschs* and *Flagg Bros* augur the most impressive works on display, a set of sprawling oil on linen canvases: *Lao* (1978), *Jewel* (1986) and *Lone Star* (1991). Underscored by a backdrop of washed-out scaffolding, *Jewel's* latticework cast of vertical lines ascend, descend, intersect, and interlock into motley matrices. In *Lao*, the shadows cast by a fire escape blanket the edges of a yellow placard while window supports parallel outer frames. In *Lone Star*, the edges of a crumpled carmine-orange pole and the ascender of a neon "L" are set into a parallel axis, their drama doubled by way of dovetailed shadows.



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Cottingham's judicious cropping sometimes hews in the direction of a pun, as in the three-letter *ODE* (1971), an extraction of a longer business name. Why "ODE," of all words? One answer is buried in a 1983 *Arts Magazine* response, where Cottingham notes that his "painting is coming close to becoming a sign itself." Rather than citing the tradition of Schwitters and Lettrism, this indicates that Cottingham takes neither his images, nor their semantic content, to be isomorphic to the empirical world. Instead of a world-word relationship, they are part of a self-enclosed formal cosmology afforded by the camera-eye. Cottingham is ultimately interested in the transition between edges, whether between sign and building, plaque and support, letters and ground, or light and shadow. In John Arthur's 1983 *Realists at Work*, Cottingham is quoted as saying that he is "not primarily interested in documentation," but this is hardly true. He is not interested in the *eye's* documentation. Indeed, in our everyday seeing we are not privy to such closely-cropped views as those afforded by *Jewel* and *Lone Star*. Where the "photorealists" (a label Cottingham rejects) contracted photography to license and extend the opticality of the human eye, adding rust spots or bolts, Cottingham performs the converse. He brings to bear the affordances of the telephoto "camera-eye," attending to the edges only it can espy.

Ekin Erkan is a writer, curator, and researcher whose writing has appeared in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, and *Hyperallergic*, among others.

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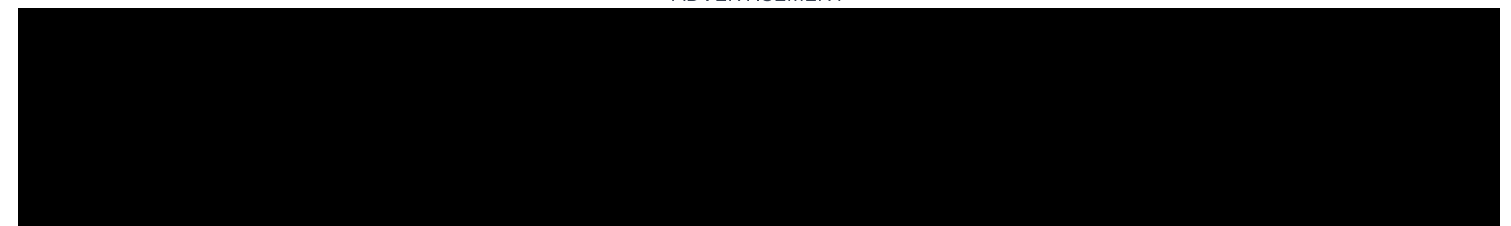
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