

Art in America

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Robert Cottingham: *Jane's Remington*, 2002. oil on canvas, 84 by 74 inches; at Forum.



Robert Cottingham at Forum and Dieu Donné Papermill

In his latest show at Forum, Robert Cottingham depicted a favorite subject, manual typewriters, in seven watercolors and gouaches, two graphite drawings on vellum and five large (as high as 7 feet) oil paintings on canvas—three years' work. Downstairs were six large (60-by-40-inch) paperpulp paintings, a series, "Components" (2003), showing cropped and rotated machine parts, which Cottingham produced last year in a 12-day stint at Dieu Donné Papermill. More were on view at the Mill itself.

Cottingham deliberately chooses ordinary manual typewriters of the sort that were in wide circulation from the First World War through the mid-20th century—"tools of the Everyman," as he has called them. Though there is a generic similarity among them, Cottingham gives each the particularity of human physiognomy. The views are methodically set up with variety in mind: a close-

up that fills the entire frame in an elegantly hieratic geometry, with the fanning curve of the type basket framed above and below by the horizontals of keys and carriage (*Jane's Remington Close-up*, 2003); or an overhead of the same machine tilted slightly off-axis, with the left knob of the carriage cut off by the frame (*Jane's Remington*, 2002). We look down at nearly the whole typewriter in this view, but although it looms large, it feels far away. Cottingham's paintings present an untouchable and pristine universe, though his approach is too straight on sober to be truly nostalgic.

Especially striking in a number of the works is his palette, with pastel grounds contrasted to deeper, cooler hues in plating and chrome. *Jane's Remington* is placed on a pale light-green ground and casts a violet shadow, a chromaticism that seems to release the machine from its own gravity. *Underwood Side View* (2003) shows a stately old typewriter in profile, exposing its logical yet formally ornate internal

mechanism. Shades of blue and black dominate in the straight and curving trajectory of the reflective metal frame, while a light tangerine background gaily infiltrates the machine's somber mien.

To make the paper-pulp pieces, Cottingham brought drawings on vellum to Dieu Donné; he selected the colors by placing the drawings over solid-colored sheets. Liking the way the vellum blunted the brightness of the underlying paper, he recreated this coloristic effect in the paintings, which were made by spraying wet, pigmented black linen pulp over a colored cotton base sheet. The veiled color and textured spray contrast with the sculptural weight of the composition. Like much hyperrealism, Cottingham's always verges on abstraction in its focus on details that seem to grow stranger the longer you look at them. In "Components," the enlarged and unfamiliar machine parts have nearly entirely escaped any representational function.

—Faye Hirsch