

Jonathan T.D. Neil, "Schoolwerth's Lesson: Collage and Filter Part 3," *Consecutive Matters*, August 28, 2026.

...CONSECUTIVE MATTERS

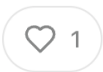
Schoolwerth's Lesson: Collage and Filter Part 3

How things can be themselves and images of themselves, and why trompe l'oeil is the code we need to be able to see this, amongst other things.



JONATHAN T. D. NEIL

AUG 28, 2026



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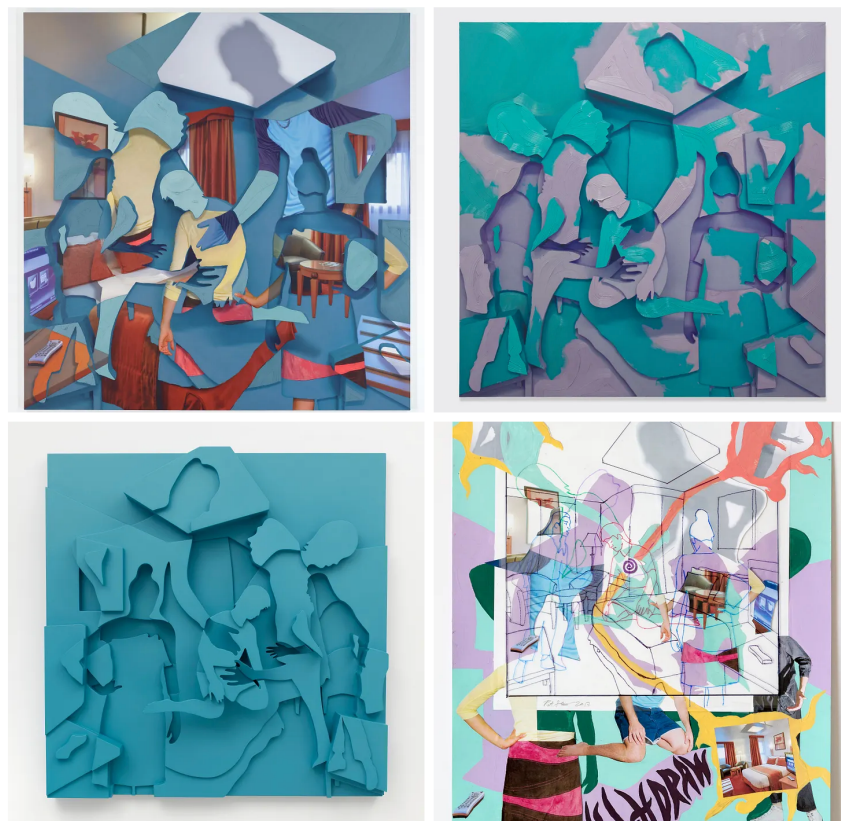
Over the past decade, the artist Pieter Schoolwerth has created a body of work uniquely attuned to the condition of painting's always already "being, imaged."¹ It should come as little surprise that such a concern is manifest in Schoolwerth's close attention to the articulations and representations of space in, and by, "painting" broadly conceived.

"The process that I'm using to produce paintings," Schoolwerth explained in 2016, "echoes the way that technology produces digital space in the world." And "what became interesting" about that process, Schoolwerth noted a year later, "was to try to conflate the shallow space of modernist painting and relief sculpture with the shallow space of the computer screen, as both present a paradigm shift away from the conventional model of perspectival space."

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At the time, Schoolwerth's process entailed the hand-cutting of styrofoam into various shapes (figures, furniture, domestic objects; many derived from digital files), all of which would be bound together to create a work in relief that could then be affixed to a wall for photographing. Schoolwerth would then further process the resulting images using a computer application and print a final composite image on canvas, to which he would add his own brushstrokes of paint. This "painting" would also be recreated as a CNC-milled wood-relief work that echoed the styrofoam "model" with which Schoolwerth began.² The painting and the model would then be exhibited together, as they were in *Model as Painting*, the artist's 2017 exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery, the most comprehensive and programmatic presentation of Schoolwerth's thinking about the new spatial dynamics of contemporary painting to that point.



A sequence from Pieter Schoolwerth's "Model as Painting" series. Note the repetitions of planes and shadows, of planes become shadow and vice versa.

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The experience of seeing these works never failed to confuse their critics: "The works reflect a comical, jousting process of circuitous production in multiple media... a collision of painting and sculpture, and digital and analogue processes, in a great multimedia face-off," wrote John Quin in *Frieze*. Howard Halle, writing for *Time Out New York*, explained that Schoolwerth's paintings were "addressing the well-explored paradox that paint, while concrete, is used to manifest something that isn't: pictorial space. The twist is that Schoolwerth sees this as a metaphor for a culture that dissolves reality into ones and zeros." Halle would go on to call Schoolwerth's attempt "to ascribe tangibility to a world rendered immaterial by technology" a "fool's errand."

While Quin took his cues from Schoolwerth's elaborate process, intimating that something was happening in the confrontation between media, Halle could only touch on the problem of space that Schoolwerth was circling. And the "fool's errand" judgement is actually quite perceptive. Nevertheless, what these critics and others missed was that the "collision" of painting and sculpture, the "multimedia face-off" that first explored this "paradox" of "pictorial space," one that also attempted to "ascribe tangibility" to a world becoming increasingly "immaterial," already had a name: *collage*.

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Recall how cubism in the period between 1909 and 1912 pressurized the representational space of painting unlike anything that had come before. As the techniques of picturing space were brought into close relief against the picture plane, the world behind that plane began to recede. This is the actual paradox: the elements of picturing—line, modeling, shading—were quickly becoming divorced from the things they were meant to picture. The progenitors of cubism—Picasso, Braque, Gris—experienced this paradox as a profound loss. To compensate, they drew upon artifacts from the storeroom of *trompe l’oeil*: bunches of grapes, a nail, a drawer pull—illusionistic tokens which more than one historian of the period likened to a kind of “code” that the artists deployed to protect their work from becoming, or even being regarded as, merely abstract.³

But as the pressure mounted—from Cézanne on one side, whose legacy Picasso and Braque took as a demand to eradicate any vestiges of a pictorial space that wasn’t up to the task of modernizing perception for the new century; and from photography on the other, the thoroughly modern machine that promised to mass produce that very same pictorial space and so smother this new perception in its crib—even these small tokens of illusion could not, quite literally, face the new reality.⁴

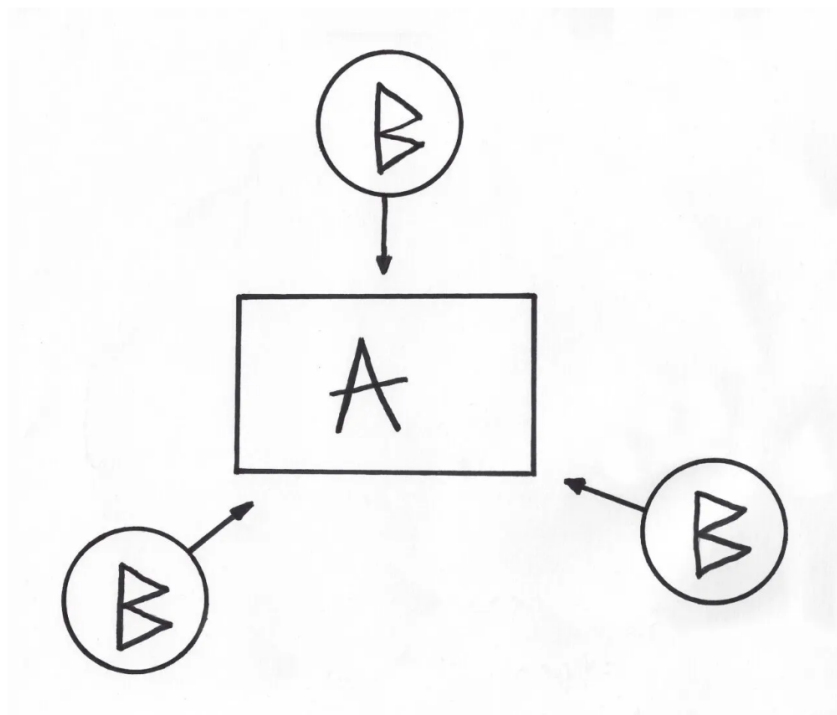
For that they turned to collage, to *papiers collés*: newspaper, wallpaper, sheet music, product packaging—tokens not of illusion but of mechanically reproduced text, graphics, and patterns, pasted on, and as, the picture plane. The result was the total collapse of depicted space, and its replacement by space that was now fully and multiply “encoded” in the work: musical notation, decorative design, typeset print, and advertising. It’s not for nothing that the writer and critic Jean Paulhan called the *papiers collés* “seeing machines.”

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So we should take Schoolwerth at his word when he states that his work is an effort to understand, or work through, how the "shallow space" of the image is its own "paradigm shift," equivalent to the one that "modernist painting and relief sculpture"—a.k.a. *collage*—initiated with respect to "the conventional model of perspectival space."

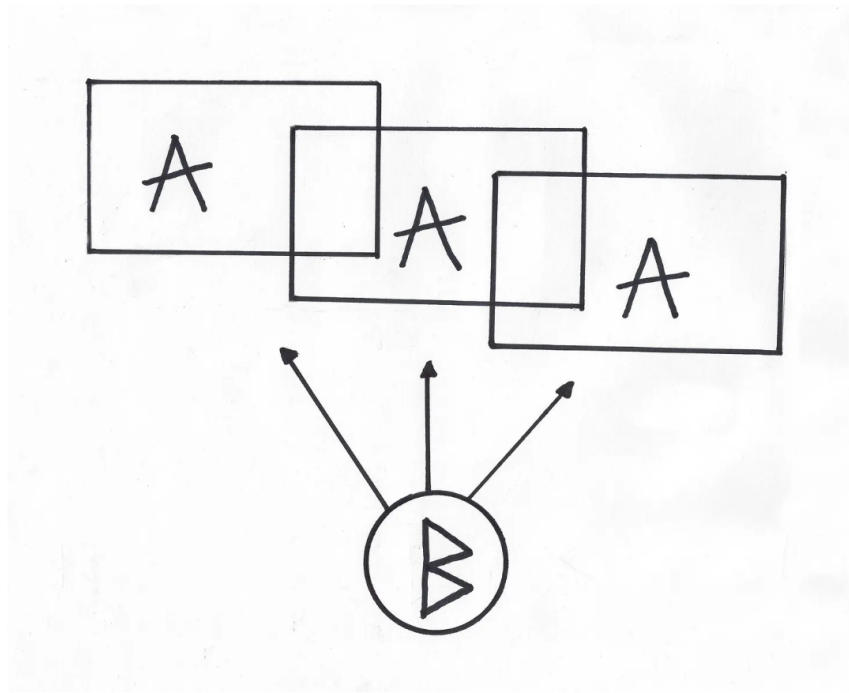
Schoolwerth has indeed described this model of space as "reverse cubism."⁵ And in contrast to the (popular) description of cubism as an aggregation and simultaneity of "views" of a given object or figure, as if the artist were occupying many different positions at once in the execution of a single picture, Schoolwerth's "reverse cubism" assumes a single view that is now tasked with picturing the aggregation and simultaneity of whatever is continuously delivered up to artist and viewer alike on various and multiple screens.⁶



Schoolwerth's diagram of conventional cubism: the artist "B" establishing many different views onto the scene of art "A"

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Schoolwerth's diagram of "reverse cubism": the artist "B" established in a single view of many different scenes of art "A"

But the popular "multiple-views" description of cubism does not open onto the full "paradigm shift" that Schoolwerth invokes. For as much as certain devotees of cubism have never failed to mention its historical coincidence and formal affinities with the new physical theories of relativity then sweeping the popular imagination in the 1910s—what is cubism, they inquire rhetorically, if not an attempt to show us "spacetime"?—such descriptions do not deal with the form of space and its representation as encoded.

Not "reverse cubism" then, but *reverse collage*, an arrangement not merely of "multimedia" and "multiple views," but of multiple encodings: an arrangement that sets the viewer to deciphering the space of painting articulated, like cubist collage, through a system of elements: grid lines, pictured text, the application of mechanically reproduced materials and, importantly, the layerings of multiple shallow relief planes defined and indicated by the drop shadows of *trompe l'oeil*.

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Schoolwerth's most recent paintings make just this case even more programmatically, exchanging interiors and architectures and figures, both painted and in relief, for "painting" itself: so many lyrical brushstrokes and passages of paint, both literal and depicted, which are attended by the drop shadowing of trompe l'oeil technique.⁷



Two works from Schoolwerth's most recent series of paintings (2025-2026).

As the critic Molly Warnock, in conversation with the artist, noted: "The results are certainly confounding, especially insofar as the brushstrokes appear to occupy different planes in a shallow, three-dimensional relief—an illusion enhanced by various shadows." To which Schoolwerth replies: "I think there's something uniquely contemporary about this form of shallow space... it's not a space you can replicate through the direct application of material to a support by hand. *It requires new techniques that allow for the seamless merging of a gestural mark with its own image* [emphasis my own], to pose the key question today: 'Is this real?'"

Collage is exactly this "shallow space" that, though not "replicated," is actually *produced* through the "direct application of material to a support by hand." This is just what collage is after all. For what does collage teach us but that a thing, be it pasted paper or gestural mark, can be that thing and its image at once?⁸

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As one of the foremost theorists of collage wrote nearly 50 years ago: "The collage element obscures the master plane only to represent that plane in the form of a depiction. If the [collage] element is the literalization of figure against field, it is so as a figure of the field it must literally occlude." Also, collage can "talk about space without employing it; it can figure the figure through the constant superimposition of grounds;" and further, "collage's very fullness of form is grounded in this forced impoverishment of the ground—a ground both supplemented and supplanted."² One could be forgiven for thinking these passages were written about Schoolwerth's pictures from *Model as Painting*.

But even Schoolwerth's most recent paintings "reverse collage" by demonstrating how paint itself can become such a figure of its own occlusion, that every stroke of paint applied to a ground is itself just a "superimposition of grounds." The argument that Schoolwerth's most recent work appears to make is that *all* painting is, in fact, collage. And to push the point further: all painting after collage is just a subset of collage's combinatory and additive operations, which are conditioned by a logic of discrete encoding(s) rather than picturing(s).

If cubism is taken as a revolution in the representation of space—the revolution that gave us "abstraction, representational, and so forth"—and the readymade is the logical outcome, because literal extension, of that revolution—logical because what are the elements of cubist collage but mechanically produced objects that are selected from the world outside the frame of representation for inclusion within it; literal because the readymade makes that frame coextensive with the world (which is tantamount to removing it)—then collage is the moment, the operation, that contains both the revolution (in space) and the logic (of literalism).

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After collage, then, all painting becomes an exercise of pastiche—representation now as “quotation”—and/or an exercise of literalism—representation now as signature, a production of the world itself, “expressionist, indexical, and so forth,” one could say. Which describes to a large extent exactly what we see on offer from much contemporary painting and accounts of it, whether it is “provisional,” drawing upon a “hidden reserve,” or is simply “beside itself.”

Given this context, Schoolwerth’s lesson becomes even more salient: to “reverse collage” is to step back through its moves, to “reverse engineer” it so as to better understand the discrete encoding it enacts for *all* painting, and so to approach an answer to that key rhetorical question: “Is this real?”

The point, of course, is not to answer the question, but that it can be asked at all. We need to be careful not to fall into a too facile division between what’s “real” and what’s not, between the “depicted” and the “actual,” so as to come down on one side of the divide or the other. The “truth” in painting is not empirical.

For example, one way to approach Schoolwerth’s CNC-milled “models” of his paintings from the last decade would be to see them as revealing to us something like “real” space, and so as offering us a key to how the image “works” in this new “reverse collage” dispensation. But one need only look at these works in tandem with their counterparts to see how their deployment of planes (both actual and depicted) works *against* any greater contact with something like “real” space.

Schoolwerth does not prise apart the space of collage to give us some greater contact with what is supposedly real, to create greater distance between the depiction and actuality that collage makes identical. His work assumes that there is no such distance: as in collage, depiction and actuality are one, an identity *in* difference.¹⁰

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So reverse engineering collage requires not a step back from the radical compression of space that was collage’s achievement, as if, in extruding collage’s literal space we might find its secrets (like taking apart one’s laptop to understand its software). Reverse engineering collage requires looking at the code that makes collage possible and could be said to drive its operating system. So what is that code?

In 1912, what collage “achieved,” at least according to Rosalind Krauss, was a “metalanguage of the visual”: an encoding of three dimensions within two through the use of identical collage elements to signify surface and depth, opacity and transparency, figure and ground—the oppositions that comprise the very rudiments of visual perception. These indications of space were “written” into the pages of the *papiers collés* as the very condition of their not being “pictured” there. For Krauss, collage’s achievement was to have substituted the system of language for a system of illusion.

But which system of illusion? The one named by Schoolwerth as the “conventional model of perspectival space”? This is certainly the system against which Krauss’s generation of historians had set their sights. Yet the cubist inheritance shows us that there is a different system of illusion which was closer in both time and tendency to it, and that is *trompe l’oeil*.

As hinted at above, as Cézanne’s legacy and the rise of photography tightened their grip on the renewal of perception in the new century, the cubists turned to *trompe l’oeil* at the hinge of their analytic phase to regain the depth that was then being pressed out of it. But in their hands, *trompe l’oeil* had already become a token, or a quotation of depth—an image of it—at the same time that it served the pictorial production of that same (albeit shallow) depth. Within the operating system of cubism, *trompe l’oeil* itself becomes thing and image at once: a grounding of depth and a figure for it.

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And it's not difficult to see why, because the legacy of trompe l'oeil makes the operations of collage explicit, and prefigures, if not anticipates, collage's "revolution" in revealing how a thing can be both itself and its image at once.



Jefferson D. Chalfant, *Which is Which?* 1890. Oil and cut-and-pasted printed paper on wood panel. Brandywine River Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard M. Scaife and the Allegheny Foundation, 1997.

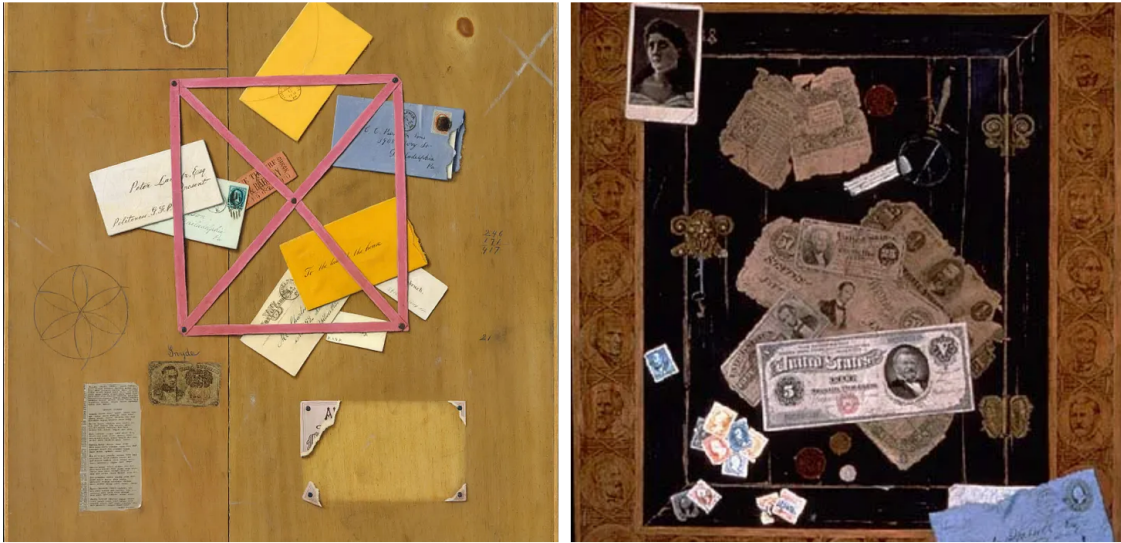
One could point to Jefferson Chalfant's *Which is Which?* as perhaps the most rote example of trompe l'oeil trickery, here made the very subject matter of the work. In 1890, Chalfant painted an Abraham Lincoln one-cent stamp directly next to an actual instance of that same stamp, and then signed and titled the work by painting a newsprint clipping of a self-referential "story" about this same work: three pieces of paper, but only one actual one. The work is a self-conscious challenge to the viewer, one that obviously delights in the self-regard of the artist's skill. But in staging this challenge, Chalfant also poses the conceptual equivalence of image and object, of something presented with that same thing represented. The proposed indistinguishability of what is pasted-on and what is painted-on is very much the point of the exercise.¹¹

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That what Chalfant produced is a foundational condition of collage avant la lettre should not be dismissed. My point here is not to make the case for trompe l'oeil, in Chalfant's hands or in those of any of the form's other late-19th-century practitioners, *as* collage (it is that literally, but not actually, one might say); it is however to take seriously how trompe l'oeil prepares the way for the "pasted paper revolution" of cubist collage, in which the negation, or rather, the sublation, of the distinction between the actual and the depicted is self-consciously staged. To put it somewhat differently, like Schoolwerth's question "Is this real?", the whole point of asking "Which is which?" is rhetorical.

In her study of late-nineteenth-century American trompe l'oeil artists, Johanna Drucker broadens this point, noting of the well-known "rack" pictures (which feature letters and calling cards and playing cards and other bits and pieces of paper and pocket items often associated with a painting's owner) and the more infamous "money" pictures (for which artists such as John Haberle found themselves confronted with claims of counterfeiting), "*trompe l'oeil* paintings keep the literal surface trapped within the illusion, while making the modern gesture of acknowledging its fundamental presence." In an assessment that mirrors Krauss's on collage, Drucker goes so far as to say that "the surface on which the image is painted [the ground] is one with the image, *inseparable materially, optically, and conceptually* [emphasis my own]. The material support becomes both image and surface."

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William Harnett's "The Artist's Letter Rack" (1879). Metropolitan Museum of Art; John Haberle's "The Changes of Time" (1888). Grand Rapids Art Museum, Manoogian Collection.

But of course it's not just that the ground that is produced in trompe l'oeil is both thing and image, as with *Which is Which?*, it's everything that appears in and as the picture by dint of being congruent at one-to-one scale. This is an oft-made point about trompe l'oeil, that its spatial structure depends on the things being pictured appearing as the size they are. Perspective, in contrast—rationalist, mathematical, but even atmospheric, or ambiguous perspective—is a tool for rendering things in relative scale. The space between things matters as much as the things themselves.¹²

With trompe l'oeil, space is not indicated through three-dimensional extension (at least not primarily), but through layers, the layerings of “two-dimensional” things. Particularly in its late-19th-century manifestation, trompe l'oeil artists pictured money, letters, envelopes, stamps, newspaper clippings, photographs, small prints, pamphlets, postcards, etc.—all placed on, over, across, or underneath one another—to show us what is foreground and what is background, but with those roles easily switching as one scans a picture. In certain early trompe l'oeil paintings and prints, such as the “quodlibet” or “medley” pictures of the early 18th century, the layering is so extensive as to dispatch the very idea that there is a “ground” at all.¹³

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“The Bubbles Medley, or a Sketch of the Times: Being Europe’s Memorial for the Year 1720” (1723). Etching and Engraving. From the print shop of Carington Bowles. [Link](#)

Harnett’s *The Artist’s Letter Rack* is rather explicit about this contrast between space as a function of layering and space as a product of perspectival “construction.” After all, the “rack” of the picture’s title presents the viewer with a diagram of single-point perspective—replete with frame, vanishing point, and orthogonals—positioned almost, but not quite, at the center of the picture. That the rack is responsible for the most significant (drop) shadows present in the picture, and so is the thing that gives the viewer the “deepest” indication of space in it, just pushes the point home.

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The more that space is indicated by layering, the more the legibility of the items—the stories they reveal, the names they carry, the events they depict; all fragmentary by design—becomes essential to their content (structured allegorically) and their form (defined spatially). For text to be text, it must be legible, otherwise it is a mere picture of text (Harnett would play with this distinction in a number of canvases). Likewise money and stamps and photographs: to register as both thing and image, to be taken to be money and stamps or photographs, what is represented must also be representation; or, as Walter Benn Michaels put it from the other direction in his canonical essay on the "logic of naturalism": "trompe l'oeil paintings of money and photographs work precisely by staging the triumphant failure of even those objects that are nearest to being nothing but surface [which is to say, nothing but image] ever actually to be nothing but surface [or image]." Pictures of money fail to be money, or pictures of photographs fail to be photographs, or pictures of stamps fail to be stamps, or pictures of brushstrokes fail to be brushstrokes—unless, of course, as Chalfant and Schoolwerth teach us, they don't.

Where trompe l'oeil stages this failure—the failure of something to be only its image by implicating the space it must otherwise occupy—collage overcomes it by making space a condition of the things that are pictured, not their container. Trompe l'oeil could picture this condition, hence why the cubists turned to its tricks when the space of their paintings became too compressed to bear. The absence of space that trompe l'oeil pictures then becomes the production of a space that collage encodes.

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For over forty years, since the debut of Apple's Graphical User Interface in 1983 and Microsoft's Windows OS in 1985, the "shallow space of the computer screen," as Schoolwerth identifies it, has been a trompe l'oeil space, not a perspectival one, and one of encodings, not picturings, which also makes it the space of collage. ¹⁴



Pieter Schoolwerth, *Thinking Through 2014 (13 Years)*, 2025. Oil, acrylic, and inkjet on canvas.

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To look at a picture such as Schoolwerth’s *Thinking Through 2014 (13 Years)*, 2025, with these terms in mind is to take seriously the idea that what is being dealt with, self-consciously, is the space of picturing as it has become overdetermined by the space of computing. It is also to recognize that the tactic of *trompe l’oeil* is not simply a pictorial device that artists might use to gratify spectators’ desire for deceit (and so an analogue for some politics of cynical reason), or a demonstration of artistic virtuosity after a period in which “deskilling” became a strategy of aesthetic refusal, but a kind of code that indicates an artist’s implicit engagement with painting’s contemporary condition of “being, imaged.” ¹⁵

In closing, it is important to note what Schoolwerth has to say about what one might mistakenly call the “actual” painting that appears in the works of the past decade—the brushstrokes of paint that Schoolwerth applies at the end of his working process.

The matter of paint functions as a final layer or enhancement that simply reiterates the digitally printed material support—kind of like decorative ornament in architecture, adorning the building as a last-minute excess, or *the filters you see in digital cameras or on social media platforms*, in which the push of a button instantly intensifies or enriches the surface. [My emphasis.]

In the age of the world image, if to “reverse collage” means that all painting today must be regarded as collage, then it follows that paint itself, “actual” paint, must function as a filter—but that is a different lesson altogether.

https://jonathantdneil.substack.com/p/schoolwerths-lesson-collage-and-filter?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=web