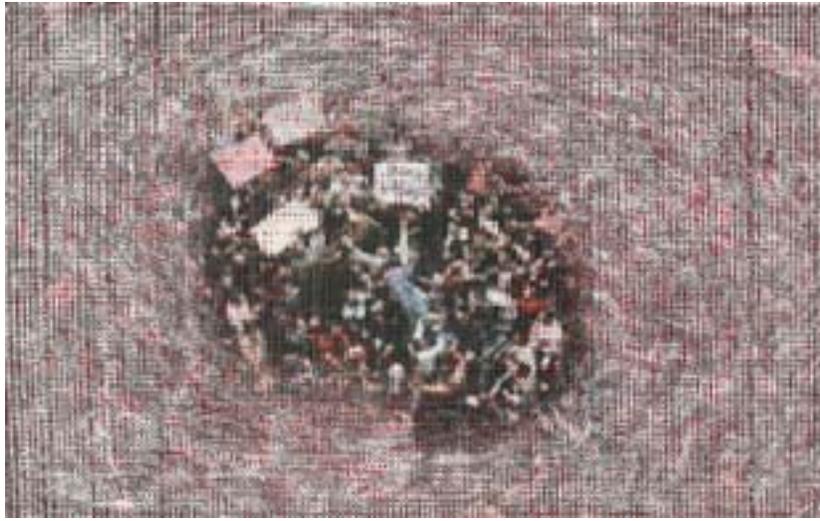


EXHIBITION REVIEW

John Sparagana Reads the News

By Jaclyn Jacunski



Left: John Sparagana, *Crowds & Powder: Tahrir Square* (2013), magazine pages with oil stick, sliced and mixed, on paper, 20 1/2 x 33 inches. Courtesy the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago. Photography by Tom Van Eynde, Chicago. Right: John Sparagana, detail of *Crowds & Powder: Tahrir Square* (2013).

“John Sparagana: Crowds and Powder”
 Corbet vs. Dempsey, Chicago
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News photographs permeate our visual environment—a morning read of the newspaper, a commuter’s view of tiny thumbnails on an iPhone while on the train, a lunch break spent scanning newsfeeds on the computer. Approaching John Sparagana’s exhibition “Crowds and Powder,” I immediately recognized the source material and felt as if it were part of my media routine: Tahrir Square, a terrorist act, John F. Kennedy, a woman crying. It felt like a visual game of Trivial Pursuit. On closer inspection, however, Sparagana’s work complicates the reflexive consumption of news images.

Sparagana selected photographs of charged newsworthy events—political protests, displays of military power, conflicts related to the war on terror. He cut tiny squares from multiple copies of the

same image and used these squares like mosaic tiles to assemble large versions of the original (the biggest is 64 by 98 inches). From a distance, the images look like overblown, pixilated thumbnails, but they have been painstakingly built by hand. This labor-intensive hand production stands in contrast to the digital mass production of the source, and it draws the viewer in, encouraging a slower reading and disrupting familiar responses.

In *Crowds and Powder: The Street (mirror)* (2013), mirror images of a street conflict in which a crowd surrounds an anguished protagonist hang on adjoining corner walls. Though the picture is large, its content is difficult to decipher; the viewer is forced to move closer. In other pieces the artist wore down the surface of reprinted magazine images by folding and carrying them in his pockets. The once clear, colorful, glossy surfaces are fatigued, with a lusterless, flattened affect that obfuscates their meaning.

Crowds and Powder: Same Sex (2013) displays the disembodied heads of two women kissing. Behind them, Sparagana applied red and white oil stick in a jittery checkerboard resembling television static. The fragmentation compels us to reorganize the image by imagining bodies and supplying a background for the floating heads. He inverts this strategy in *Crowds and Powder: The Street I* (2013), silhouetting figures to obscure identities.

Sparagana’s reworking of familiar news images gives them an unexpected physical presence. They encourage us to consider our daily media encounters with deeper attention to the realities behind the entertaining flash of “the news.” ■

Jaclyn Janunski is an artist and a researcher at the Shapiro Center for Research and Collaboration at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.