

THE BROOKLYN RAIL



Gina Beavers, *Composition in Tortoise Shell (Watch Bands, Coasters, Nightstand, Tray bowl)*, 2025.
Oil, acrylic, paper pulp & foam on stained panel, 50 x 36 x 4 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Halsey McKay.

ARTSEEN: V-EFFEKT

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In 1936, Bertolt Brecht articulated the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, as a way to interrupt theater's traditional pursuit of catharsis. Classical drama invites spectators to identify with characters, absorb their suffering, and exit cleansed; Brecht rejected this model because he believed emotional resolution pacifies critical thought, concentrating attention on individual plights while obscuring the social conditions that produce them. Against this logic of immersion, Brecht developed techniques of estrangement—direct address, placards summarizing scenes in advance, songs that fracture narrative continuity. These devices suspend identification and redirect attention toward the material, historical, and political forces shaping what appears onstage. The aim was not detachment for its own sake but critical activation. By encountering theater as something made rather than natural, spectators could recognize social reality itself as constructed—and therefore open to intervention. Alienation, Brecht wrote, “underline[s] the historical aspect of a specific social condition,” revealing oppressive systems not as fate but as a contingent arrangement, subject to challenge and change.

V-Effekt at Halsey McKay's Greenpoint location translates Brecht's theatrical framework and vocabulary to the gallery. Ninety years after Brecht formalized his theory, we live in Guy Debord's “society of the spectacle,” where social relations are mediated almost entirely by images and algorithms engineer passive consumption. The seven artists here resist this logic by making illusion itself the subject of inquiry, defamiliarizing the everyday objects, digital interfaces, and decorative patterns through which capital reorganizes our environments and desires. In line with Walter Benjamin's view of art, which took Brecht's theater as his ideal exemplar, the exhibition turns consumers into producers. Each artwork in the show demonstrates how our furniture, our browsing habits, and even our aesthetic pleasures have become contentious sites veering between passivity and agency.



Installation view: V-Effekt, Halsey McKay, Brooklyn, New York, 2026. Courtesy Halsey McKay.

Gina Beavers's *Composition in Tortoise Shell (Watch Bands, Coasters, Nightstand, Tray Bowl)* (2025) is a large relief sculpted from foam and paper pulp, painted to mimic mass-produced tortoiseshell accessories. Part of her broader "Comfortcore Paintings" series, *Composition* continues Beavers's fascination with product images in digital marketplaces. But here, the objects itemized in her title pack so tightly they merge into abstraction. Unlike previous "Comfortcore Paintings" where depicted objects remained recognizable and desirable, *Composition* functions as a counter-catalogue. Beavers, fossilizing the fleeting trend cycle into a lumpy, static mass, disrupts the hypnotic, online shopping scroll. The commodities lose the differentiation that made them alluring, congealing into something closer to waste: indistinct, glutted, faintly repellent.

Davis Arney's *Aeron with Landscapes* (2024) stages a quiet but consequential intrusion into domestic life. The Herman Miller Aeron chair, once confined to offices, appears in the home. Placed off-center, its partial profile edges into the frame as a presence that does not seek attention yet cannot be ignored. Beside it, a window divides into two images of escape: a pastoral landscape above and art nouveau, stained-glass tulips below. The Aeron turns away from both, rejecting these promises of leisure. As a sentinel of flexible capital, the chair reorganizes the room it occupies. It carries the logic of productive labor into the domestic interior, beckoning us to check a couple more emails after hours, in ergonomic comfort.

If Beavers and Arney explore how contemporary patterns and objects mark capital's reconfiguration of our physical and digital environments, Stacy Lynn Waddell's *Untitled (Floral Relief 1640)* (2022) meditates on the history of this entanglement. The piece references Dutch Golden Age flower painting, a seventeenth-century genre celebrating prosperity while encoding memento mori. Waddell burnishes 22-karat gold leaf over a subtle gesso relief of a bouquet. Her technique, however, denies immediate consumption; the floral image emerges only as the viewer moves, revealing and concealing itself depending on angle and light. Gold, a standard and standardizing function of value, becomes an occluding surface, its shine and mystique transformed into obstacles for seeing the fugitive bouquet beneath. Undermining the covetous gaze, Waddell's optical illusion recuperates curiosity and playfulness: a reminder that value is contextual, socially conferred, and subject to contestation.

The exhibition's remaining artworks extend alienation to invisible infrastructures and architectural perception. Kyung-Me's *Sunflower Drawing #1-3* (all 2025), pulled from her ongoing animation project, freeze a bloom's motion into static frames, arresting what algorithms keep fluid. Erika Shiba's *mise en abyme* graphite drawings, {2022/2001} (2022) and *Thenow* (2024), collapse architectural space into recursive patterns that disorient scale and depth. Butt Johnson's *Untitled (Integrated Circuit)* (2025) renders microchip circuitry with meticulous, cross-hatched intensity, surfacing the technological substrate underlying domestic life but rarely entering view. David Kennedy Cutler's sculptures appear as organic bouquets but reveal themselves as inkjet transfers on wood, plaster, and canvas, among other materials—another sleight of hand where natural abundance is exposed as manufactured image.

Ultimately, V-Effekt succeeds by refusing to let the viewer settle into a passive gaze. In an era where algorithms are designed to smooth over flaws and encourage seamless consumption, these artists reintroduce struggle into the visual encounter: images that require us to witness them and not just scroll by.