



Michele Abeles, 5641, 2016, ink-jet print, 42 × 29 1/2".

MICHELE ABELES
47 CANAL

What's black and white and red all over? Such a question, of course, is a riddle whose punch line could be "a sunburned zebra" or "a newspaper." Michele Abeles nods to this joke in the announcement for her recent exhibition at 47 Canal: The word zebra, her show's title, runs vertically down an iPhone screenshot of the New York Times's home page. The riddle's obsolescence—obsolete because it suggests that, in this attention-dry digital era, newspapers might be black-and-white or read to completion—is a distillation of the themes that ran through the exhibition.

In the show were nine prints (all works 2016), each titled with a four-digit number that might simply track inventory—appropriate, given the photographs document points of sale at various clothing retailers in New York. Most works center on hands: In 5040, manicured fingers, pinky outstretched just so, gracefully tug loose a receipt, the gesture perfectly framed by a clunky register apparatus: a computer, credit-card readers. A tag is snipped from a purse in 5762—on it is a bar code, which would be an apt update to the

titular riddle. A bangled arm reaches to rip a receipt from an old dust-gray printer in 5641. The depicted hands are gendered, disarticulated from their bodies, and as such they summon the Surrealist fetish. They are sited at the intersection of desire and the technologies that structure social and economic engagement, albeit those that are quickly becoming outdated. The consumer realm is increasingly being moved online; even in physical space—take, for example, Amazon Go's "just walk out technology"—developments ward against any human interaction at all.

The works appear to be methodologically in keeping with Abeles's 2009–11 series "Re:Re:Re:Re:Re:": photographs of in-studio arrangements of props, Plexiglas, and colored gels that together produce the

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flattened visual effect of having been adapted in postproduction. The works in “Zebra” share the same bold, fractured quality. And it is hard to discern, as it was with the 2011 works, that they were produced entirely in camera. But unlike the older works, the new images were not simply captured directly, and they aren’t exactly untouched. The artist downloaded her snaps to a tablet; then smeared paint and hand lotion, spat, or dripped water on the device’s surface; and finally rephotographed the image as it appeared on the screen, now distorted by moiré, glare, and various liquid textures. Each blemish indexes a gesture, serving as a reminder that the body is all over the hard-shell sheen of our technologies. We spread contaminants every time we swipe, pinch, or drag, performing the reduced choreography that makes up so much contemporary labor.

“Zebra” also featured two sculptural works, inexplicably titled Kumamoto (a Japanese city) and Cannonau (a type of wine grape), respectively. These also pit the corrupted against the pure: Recombined and distorted fragments of Abeles’s earlier photos—she describes them as “digital composites”—are reproduced alongside a printed pattern of sterile-white ceramic tiles, which are square, like empty pixels. A blurry black spiral sits atop each print, evoking the vortices of hypnosis or time travel or infinity. It was hard to square these works with the rest of the show. The artist seemingly appropriated the intense spiral graphic for the sake of foreclosure—to keep the viewer out, or to lead her astray. Yet if Abeles means to posit that the spectator is extraneous—an outdated relic of our increasingly automated, seamlessly bar-coded, “just walk out” economy—she does not elide her audience completely. Abeles reminds us of human traces—whether an odd sculptural support or an errant dribble of spit.

—Annie Godfrey Larmon