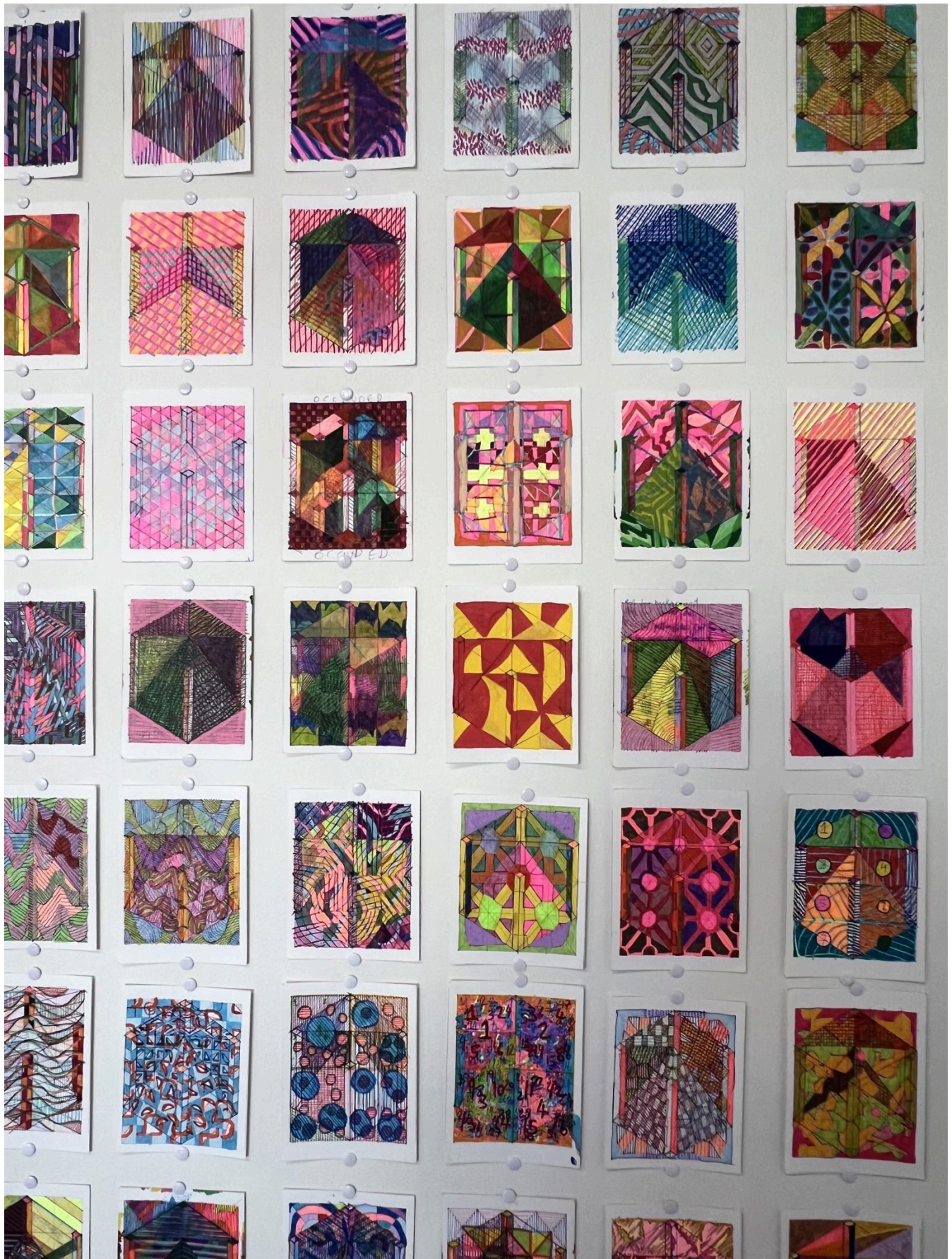




# Playful Systems: A Review of “Variety Show” by Tom Burtonwood at Material

BY REGAN DOCKERY | APRIL 23, 2024





Tom Burtonwood, detail of "A Cube is a Rectangle / Ein Würfel ist ein Rechteck (numbers 001-208)"/Photo: Regan Dockery



Coming directly from a busy Expo Chicago weekend, I entered Tom Burtonwood's exhibition "Variety Show" at Material slightly fatigued and unsure of what to expect. What I found was a delightful, imaginative and playful respite. While occupying a relatively small space and consisting of only a few works, "Variety Show" manages to pack an exciting colorful punch.

The central theme for "Variety Show" stems back to 1999 when Burtonwood first invented a folding box sculpture that opens to reveal a pyramid inside. During its time of invention, the internet was just beginning to change the way we experience gathering and distributing of information. Through the lens of his own experiences with the internet, Burtonwood created the sculptural form to visually represent the way information is "opened," accessed, shared and linked. The sculpture is able to be repeatedly opened and refolded into a cube allowing for a work that is transportable and able to be easily installed, in the artist's words similar to the way "one might pitch a tent." This results in a sculpture that is not static, but instead filled with movement and contains a multitude of possibilities of viewing depending on its current state.



*Tom Burtonwood, "Double Dutch (White Cube)"/Photo: Regan Dockery*

Movement is an important motif throughout the show and is brilliantly illustrated in the hand-painted animation "Double Dutch." Featuring a loop of two of the folding box structures mirrored, synchronized in movement with one another and continuously opening and closing, the video not only perfectly ties together the themes of the exhibition but serves as a thoughtful starting place for an informed viewing of the remaining works. The theme of the unfolding box is explored through four different mediums: drawing, painting, sculpture and animation. A full-size version of the folding box sculpture is on display and visitors are welcome to interact with the work allowing for the potential of its movement to be enacted. However, even in static form, the unfolded sculpture rests directly on top of a mirror, mimicking the mirrored image from the animation and allowing a fuller, almost spaceship-like shape to form. The implication of movement is always present even without action.





*Tom Burtonwood, installation view of "Variety Show," 2024, at Material, including "Double Dutch" and "A Cube is a Rectangle/Ein Würfel ist ein Rechteck (B002)"/Photo: Regan Dockery*

The star of the show is the central gallery wall covered with 165 small (3.7 inch-by-4.58 inch) acrylic and ink works neatly arranged in one large rectangular shape to form "A Cube is a Rectangle/Ein Würfel ist ein Rechteck (numbers 001-208)." Though each work features the same image of the framework of a cube with a pyramid inside, no two are the same, rather each one is vastly and impressively different from the next. They all appear to follow a unique systematic set of rules, resulting in a highly individualized appearance with some patterns appearing more rigid while others more fluid; however, every one is brightly colored and filled with captivating detail. Viewed individually the works are fun and

interesting, but when viewed together they powerfully envelop you in a masterful blanket of imagination.

“Variety Show” is as playful and fun as it is steeped in compelling consideration of systematic thinking.

*“Tom Burtonwood: Variety Show” is on view at Material, 2025 West Belmont, through May 10.*

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