

# ARTFORUM

## Ward Shelley

PIEROGI

155 Suffolk St

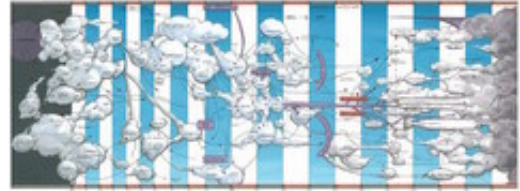
April 3–May 8

Buried in Ward Shelley's *Extended Narrative, v. 1, 2014*—a chronological taxonomy of Western art since the Enlightenment—is a reference to its forebear: Alfred Barr's famous 1936 diagram of the evolution of abstraction. While expressing modernism's penchant for positivist, even teleological narratives, the comically swerving arrows of Barr's history also point toward the absurd oversimplifications and elisions on which they are premised. This same ambivalence informs all the charts here, painted on Mylar and gathered under the exhibition title "The Felicific Calculus."

Named after Jeremy Bentham's proposed algorithm for happiness, the works graph the history of our culture, ranging from art to the automobile, politics to pornography. Though meticulously researched, they suggest that information is not neutral, as their bright colors and allusions to natural forms—including a dissected frog—posit that data is the object of both cultural discourse and subjective judgments, aesthetic and otherwise. Furthermore, each chart is presented as the first of three possible versions, acknowledging that they're merely iterations of a mutable truth.

The same open-endedness informs the other series on view, "The Last Library," 2015–16, which riffs on Borges's fantasy of a library containing all imaginable books. A collaboration with Douglas Paulson, these bookcases of titles that have not yet been written (e.g., *Master a Fearful Rhetoric*, by Newt Gingrich) are organized by whimsical criteria such as "books written at sea level" and are decorated with Carol K. Brown's hand-painted knick-knacks and complemented by purpose-built wainscoting. Whereas the charts open up the past, the bookcases, like science fiction, open up the present by imagining an uncanny future. If the flip side of Bentham's dream of better living through programming is the nightmare of total control (emblemized by his "Panopticon"), understanding that both the future and the past are up for grabs is a precursor of resistance.

— Tina Rivers Ryan



Ward Shelley, *Extended Narrative, v.1, 2014*, oil and toner on Mylar, 24 x 56".

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