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THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

In Conversation
Jessica Dickinson with Danielle Mysliviec
June 3, 2015

One week prior to the opening of her solo show *Close/Close* at James Fuentes (May 3 – June 7, 2015), Jessica Dickinson hosted Danielle Mysliwiec at her Gowanus studio for a conversation about her paintings, her practice, and the publication of her new book *Under / Press. / With-This / Hold- / Of-Also / Of/How / Of-More / Of:Know*,published in conjunction with the show by Inventory Press.

Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Danielle Mysliwiec (Rail): When I visited the studio last week to sit with your work alone, I was immediately drawn to this painting, "Knows:" (2013 – 2015). I've never seen a painting of yours like this before! The word aggregate appears in your writings and, to me, "Knows:" feels like an aggregate of all of your different approaches to painting that I've seen to date. I see the echo of the slanted rectangle from the composition of "Here", (2008 – 2009) and this ephemeral light that is in many of your works, which feels like it is being cast from a window outside the painting's edge. The surface simultaneously calls to mind crumbling ruins, polished marble, a weathered slab of stone. Then there are these beautifully wedged marks reading like cuneiform or some illegible lost language carved into a cave wall from the beginnings of time. How do you see it?

Jessica Dickinson: I was thinking about a moment of sharp clarity being materialized, like that black line marking the open rectangle, but then also making visible everything that led up to that moment—as if seeing multiple ways of attempting to understand something at once. To me it's like a strange sensation of understanding time in a very material sense. Sensations can be physical, like the carved out sections, or ethereal, like the light—and then almost linguistic, like the opaque black line. In a way, I thought of all these paintings as having this sort of archaeology, if that's the right word. So, it's interesting that you say that it's all of the paintings I've ever made combined because I feel like it's also the other five paintings for the show combined in it. For this show, I wanted to create an environment where there were multiple and differing spaces and times at once, and this is the centerpiece where it is all collapsed.

Photographs on Dickinson's studio wall. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: Archaeology conjures the act of excavating and I feel that process in looking at this painting. Can you describe how you made it?

Dickinson: With all the paintings, I work with oil on a plaster-like surface, like fresco, and layer a series of events, both additive and subtractive, over long periods of time. Certain things are planned, like a loose script, but I don't know what it will look like—however, I start with the title and have a very specific thing I am

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after. It's actually hard to describe how it was made, since they are so layered, and each painting is different. With "Knows:" I started with a thin white line on a grey surface that was an echo from the painting "Of:Know" (2013). That was like a thin perimeter of a thought. I carved that out and then applied layers of white paint, like curtains continually closing. Once that initial delineation was lost, I carved out these deep decisive gouges with a chisel to create a larger perimeter. Chunks of plaster flaked off, and that was a dramatic, unexpected moment. And then it was red, and then bright blue, and then I painted the slanted rectangular form, which for this painting comes from that motion of opening a curtain, that transition, the appearance of illumination. This takes different forms in different paintings for this show, this idea of being open or closed, different degrees of being closed, or closeness. Then after painting a black layer—like a light being turned off—I slowly scraped out the slanted shape with a small chisel that would dull and be replaced repeatedly. All along, though, I knew I wanted there to be this firm rectangular line. It's based on this window frame here. I woke up from a studio floor nap and it was very strong and staring at me. It evoked this certainty and I wrote down "The feeling of seeing a hard thought." In a sense the excavation is like this migration of a thought, like a foundation being moved and the traces of its former perimeters being visible.

Rail: The new book of your work features the eight paintings made between 2012 and 2013, each followed by its complete set of "remainders" (full-scale graphite rubbings documenting significant shifts in the paintings as they're made). And in your interview with Patricia Treib, included in the book, you said you were imagining the paintings from your show *Before/Beside* (2011), emitting light, then casting shadows, and the next body of work being conceived of as those shadows. I loved the idea of the shadows becoming physical objects. I thought that was a poetic way to connect the two bodies of work and it speaks to your interest in light and time as subject matter. Is the work in your current show a continuation of this kind of conceptual chronology?

Dickinson: Yes, to me it's a way to structure things. I do think in terms of sequences, reoccurrences, and shifts. It's not some meta-narrative that anyone needs to comprehend to enter the work, and each piece can work on its own. The book covers paintings that went from darkness in an intimate space ("Under," "Press.," "With-This") to countering whitish paintings not exhibited ("Hold-," Of-Also") to expansive color and scorching light in the Altman Siegel show ("Of/How," "Of-More," "Of:Know"). For this body of work I made more paintings in order to deal with a larger expanse of time. I thought of three of the paintings as more stone-like (" How-Close," "More:Yet," "Knows:") where light and color is embedded, and the other three ("Close-Now," "Yet:For," ":More") as more luminous and coming forward in space, with their weight slowly emerging.

Rail: Over the years it seems you've moved away from a more pictorial painting space and foregrounded your presence at the surface as the content of the work. When I was reading the stamped definitions of the titles on your exhibition flyer, this one stuck with me: "in what way – to what extent – like what – in whatever way – to mention a fact or event – to introduce a suggestion – in what way or manner – in, or to what degree, amount, number – in what condition – for what reason, why"

Dickinson: That's a composite of definitions of the word "how." One of the paintings is titled "How-Close."

Rail: I like that it ends on "why." It brings to mind existential questions and ideas of being. To act is to be, and in painting, in a way, to make a mark is to be. As an abstract painter today one has to contend with the iconic gesture of expressionism, so this question of "how?" is essential if you're trying to make a mark that is felt. You've referred to your paintings as "radically cared for surfaces" and that care is evident. All of this is to say that when I look over the last several years of your work and think about the title of your first show with Fuentes—*Here* (2009) —I feel a profound sense of gravity, like I'm looking at a geological record of the self, of your here-ness if you will. And it resonates with my individual being as a viewer, causing me to reflect on my here-ness. Do you see the work as a record of you?

Dickinson: No. They are not autobiographical. Nor are they about my presence or the value of my labor or my subjectivity. Ultimately, the paintings are for others, so the fact that it causes you to reflect on your own here-ness makes me feel like something is working. That said, when I saw the book printed, it was really intense to look back at those paintings, because the details are almost to scale, and the reproductions of the "remainders" so clear, that I felt like I was making them again, in this tactile way. I could feel it in my body. And since painting is part of daily life for me, it can't help but conjure everything those mean to me, my associations with them, because there is a deeply personal motivation behind each piece. But I think it's

so important for me to make the paintings assert their ability to make space for others, and I've found that the best way to do this is to be as specific to my own experience as possible, it somehow opens things up for people better. In a sense there is no "mark" in my work to "be," there is so much obfuscation, repetition, obliteration, and layers. There isn't, for me, an assertion of self; rather, perhaps, an acceptance of intention compounded by chance, a sense of being partial and incomplete. I think so far away from the singular, and perhaps that is the existential question. One of my favorite quotes by Clarice Lispector is, "At the moment of painting and writing I am anonymous. My deep anonymity, that no one has ever touched." I think I work the surfaces so much to leave myself, to have something internal evolve into something outside of me. Griselda Pollock also struck a chord with me when she wrote about Agnes Martin's work producing a "generic subjectivity." I think these ideas are different than ideas of "universality," but I think perhaps the geological record you're talking of is something we relate to with our bodies as matter, something more haptic than optic, that perhaps can connect us—and something about the ability of surfaces to register time, obliquely.

Going back to your comment about the earlier work, that transition from the more pictorial to more surface oriented, one thing I realized in the mid-2000s is that the work was getting too representational, which is an issue that ebbs and flows for me, that I have to keep in check. I want something more physical. When I was atMICA in 1996, I did the University of Georgia studies abroad program in Tuscany. My teacher from MICA, Ken Tisa, said, "you have to look at frescoes. Your art is about decay and fragility and you need to look at frescoes."

Rail: So, even early on, it was evident that there was an interest in something physically being worn away over a long period of time.

Dickinson: I think a good teacher can sense the larger thing that's in your work but not entirely visible, and direct you. I was making quasi-abstract process oriented paintings at that time. I saw the Assisi frescoes by Cimabue that have changed through both erosion, accident, and mistakes—everything painted white turned black through slow oxidation. After seeing those I felt like I didn't know how to make a painting. How do you make this thing whose forms and marks are only partially decided? It took a lot of trial and error to figure it out, perhaps a decade of trying things. I learned true fresco, and didn't like it. In grad school I made a big installation, with multiple panels, like a frieze, but then I thought, Maybe it's about the decorative border? I started working on the plaster-like ground with oil paint, but I still thought, Maybe I should make more illustrative, figurative paintings that are more Baroque? [*Laughter*.]

Rail: How do I get to this thing that is resonating with me? Where is it located?

Dickinson: But also, what exactly *is* it? It isn't purely how it looks, it's how it feels, and also what took me longer to figure out was a concept to drive a method, and the right materials. I returned to see the Cimabue frescoes again in September of 2001, and realized how incredibly physical they were, and abstract. After that I started to treat the painting more like a surface going through various events, and I considered the viewer more as encountering the painting as a perceptual field. But it took a while to figure out a method. Then during a residency in France in 2008, I spent more time with crumbling frescoes nobody cared about, and started doing the large mixed-media works on paper, which got me thinking much more about pressure and absorption of time, which affected the pressure exerted on the paintings. I was realizing the need to slow everything down—turn the reductiveness up and turn the contrast and chromatic drama down so that I can create this really physical space that operates more gradually. A friend who visited my studio recently, just after travelling to Pompeii, was describing how the wall paintings he saw had this feeling of being "lived in" and this sense of "frozen time" that he sensed in my work as well, which may be ultimately what I've been trying to figure out.

Rail: I mentioned the surface of "Knows:" having what appears to me as a cuneiform-like marking over a large part of the surface. Were you thinking of cuneiform or text when you made that?

Dickinson: I have a strong attraction to ancient notching in stone. I wasn't thinking as much about it being writing as I was thinking about a surface being pressured through time, and marking time in different speeds. The pressure of trying to remove that surface created the motion of the mark. I'm physically doing it over a long period of time so I have to come up with different strategies. I like to do things in the work that are really slow and I like to use a small tool for a big thing. I don't always feel like a painter—I say I'm painting and then I've got a hammer and a chisel. I'm picking at a painting with a razor for two months. The mark, for me, is not an authoritative mark or a gestural

mark about my presence, it's often these marks that build up in slow increments to become a big thing—or sudden and dramatic removal—that maybe look like they weren't made by hand, perhaps by other processes, forces. This goes back to what I was talking about before—an accretion of parts rather than a singular mark. Someone else mentioned to me that they were reminded of the first markings of counting, or the stone in a monk's cell that's worn down from repeated prayer in one place.

Rail: I liked how you said earlier "turn the reductiveness up." It reminds me that I came across the idea of "baroque minimalism" in your notes. That seems to be one way this idea of accumulation operates in the paintings. It's true that on first glance many of the paintings share a reductive monochromatic language of minimalism, but the immense history of each painting seems to be both hidden behind and pushing through its surface in a mysterious way that beckons incredibly long and slow periods of looking. In this painting, "More:Yet," it reads like a wind blown stone with these two luminous blue lines that have been gouged out and it's hard for me to even comprehend if the final layer was actually applied last or sanded down to and recovered.

Jessica Dickinson, "Knows:" (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 × 53 1/8″. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.

Jessica Dickinson, detail of "Knows:" (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 × 53 1/8″. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.

Dickinson: I think in terms of the Baroque and Deleuze's discussion of Leibniz and *The Fold*, of multiple times and material states existing at once and the potential to unceasingly unfold. In a sense the surfaces are compressed and hopefully expand in the process of viewing, with no fixed viewpoint. This painting has 23 "remainders", which is the most so far. I wanted a series of opposing actions to happen to it but then somehow become assimilated into one field with this bracketing of the blue lines that are almost pushing the surface open. I was thinking of this painting as opaque and transparent at the same time, and I thought of it as a heaviness that's been opened and closed several times, which is literally what happened. A few years ago, I looked at my wall of photographs and realized they're all of passages of light or something really hard, like stone or concrete. To me the light, in a sense, represents something that's fleeting and constantly changing, but slightly predictable. The hard surfaces are slowly eroding, being worn down by different forms of exposure, or resealing. They both mark time and change in these different ways.

Rail: It makes me think of "the gradual instant," which is a phrase I came across a long time ago that has stuck with me. It's a recurring theme in Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* and I looked it up after seeing your work last week. "Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant." And then later in the novel, "at what point does wood become stone, peat become coal, limestone become marble? The gradual instant." It describes one way I've been thinking about meaning in your work and the metaphors conjured by your process. There is that notion of the minor forming the monumental. These feel monumental to me, not in the expressionistic way of, say, Pollock, but in their visual weight. I think

about the sound they would make if they were tipped over and what it would feel like to lift them off the wall.

Dickinson: The need for them to have a sense of gravity is important to me. I do think of all these repeated actions of accumulation and removal as a way to make the minor into something major. I think also about the potential of the monumental while viewing the work, how it shifts from different viewpoints—this could also connect to the "gradual instant," with multiple parts and transitions—from the optical to the material—revealing itself at different speeds and in different ways for different people. Like with "More:Yet"how the blue lines seem to be floating from a distance, but up close they are dug in. That could go unnoticed by some, or be apparent right away. At first they seem atmospheric, and then become heavy. Others can be heavy at first and then become atmospheric. Painting always deals with an "instant," but I really consider the viewing operation, and work to stretch it out, to create something that maybe appears to be nothing, yet holds so much, or holds contradictions. I guess in some ways that goes back to the source of the work. In "More:Yet," I knew I wanted to use these vertical lines—there's this light that comes through the shades in my room, there's photos of them on the wall there, they're almost like incisions. They kind of haunt me at all times; they're there when I wake up in the middle of the night, they're there when I wake up in the morning, they're there as I'm on the other side of the apartment, and they're sort of like a bracket, in my peripheral vision, yet so strong in space, and they're sort of asking a question—they are peripheral but major, somehow.

Rail: Do you make these notebook drawings when you're actually looking at the light coming through?

Dickinson: No, it's not so literally an observational drawing. It's not so much about what it looks like—it's more like marking different sensations produced in my thought process or psychological state. I think of seeing, thinking, and feeling as one thing. The notebook drawings are more like an automatic drawing practice that later turns into stages for the paintings.

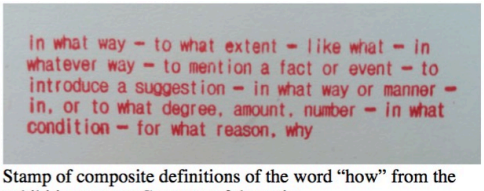
Rail: In your statement, you describe your practice as devotional. I know you grew up Catholic, and earlier you mentioned the stone in a monk's cell being marked by prayer. Do you mean devotional in a religious way?

Dickinson: No, I think it's important for me to not refer to some other power or higher power, so I don't mean that in a religious way. I used the word "devotional" because I think of the surface of the painting as a place where something is worked out philosophically through material, different from producing an icon, but with a fidelity to a process. Perhaps it's a word I use in the wrong way to stake out the more conceptual side of my project, which is weird of me! But I think "painting production" now is so linked to a marketing system of the signature style or intellectual value of the artist, that I needed to frame my project in terms of loyalty to whatever drives it, to serve the painting's question rather than the demands of the outside world or standard ideas of "painting." Another text that has influenced me is "The Blank Page" by Isak Dinesen. It's maybe too much to get into here, but it's a parable about how the secret of every good story is to be "loyal to the story," and to do this we must always "include the blank page." This to me is a structural setup to allow for the unknown, and perhaps in my need to really work the painting through, I have to think of it as devotional and linked to an intention, to make it really work.

Rail: It makes sense to me because of the commitment you have to the daily practice. There are a lot of people who say, "Oh, this painting took me two years to make," but that means the painting sat on the sidelines for 6 months and then they went back to it periodically. You are returning to the surface, over and over and over and over again and, to me, that's what seems devotional about it. You've ventured into this pact with the painting to return to it and that's unique to your practice, that there's no abandonment in this work. You return, until it's done. At least that's how I understand it.

Dickinson: I do want to see something through, no matter what it takes.

Rail: Returning to the role of the minor. You write about the minor, the peripheral and what you term the "antiheroic" gesture. And then in another text of yours I came across this idea of feminism opening up a space in abstraction. I don't know if those two ideas were linked for you. Can you say more?



Stamp of composite definitions of the word "how" from the exhibition poster. Courtesy of the artist.

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Dickinson: Yes, they are linked. It's a way to rethink how to paint for me. When I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* so long ago, I was struck by this simple notion of her call to try to make your experience most accurately into art, and how this can make art richer and better. It's not necessarily about a gendered life, or gendered view, and not about asserting an identity, but thinking about what constitutes a valid subject—that the fleeting intervals of daily life not constituted as "major" can hold profound possibilities. This affects the concepts that drive each piece, and also the approach to making in which a kind of invisibility is layered so much it becomes something with weight—so the result of small moves rather then a heroic gesture. And in the parameters of modernist abstract painting, we have the authoritative gesture and declarative statements, and also this idea of a linear canonical march of abstract painting with a beginning and an end. Growing up as a feminist I just always felt outside of that, I couldn't relate. Rothko is often brought up with my work, and I understand the association, but I've never felt so moved by his work. It feels too adhered to a notion of the transcendental for me. He talks about how once the viewer is in a fixed position in front of his work the painting performs. I always think about a moving viewer, an unending possibility, not about filling a lack, and abstraction being a possibility for this. The process of working, letting go of a space of authority, or an assertion of the ego, through painting—and then the process of viewing it being a space of sharing and belonging through multiple encounters and exchanges—I think this is a feminist notion.

Rail: I took some pictures of your bookcase last week and in one there's this stack of books: George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* on top of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves,* on top of Helen Cixous's *The Third Body*, on top of Herman Melville's*Moby Dick,* on top of Rosalind Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths,* on top of Robert Etienne's *Pompeii: The Day a City Died*.And I just laughed and thought, "Well, she's pretty much summed that up!"

Dickinson: I'm so attached to that copy of Moby Dick, which I've been thinking of again lately. When I finally got to page through the new publication with the "remainders" I had this odd revelation where I was like, "Wait a second, I had this idea a long time ago. How could a painting be like a book? How could it unfold through time, be this compact thing that somehow holds so much?" Around 1999, I wanted to create a painting that somehow produced epic time. I was reading epic literature, like *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *The Iliad*. And then I had this sense when I got the new publication that the actual "remainders" are like a book form of the paintings. Also all the paintings' titles are thought of in sequence, however poetic and oblique, so the paintings are strangely structured as a book. Not so literary or narrative, but in a kind of sequential experience. Maybe I'm not a devotional painter—maybe I'm a novelist! [Laughter.]

Rail: Yes! That's what I was thinking when I paged through the "remainders" in the book. In fact I wrote in my notes "This reads as a really understated suspense thriller." I was kind of taken aback by how invested I became in seeing what came next, because honestly when I originally sat down with the book, I was expecting to flip through them and stop at a few that caught my attention. Then I ended up going very slowly, page by page. When did you start making the"remainders"?

Dickinson: I did the first "remainders" in 2009, which were rubbings of the final state of each painting. I thought, what if I just made a really direct drawing where I didn't touch it at all after, just transcribed the surface? Because the paintings always have a specific material state that is not always visible. I liked that this could account for some other less visible reality of the painting. One thing that opened up my practice at large was Jay DeFeo's idea of *The Rose* going through a "lifespan," and the performative element of the documentation she made of that piece. With the next group of paintings, I started an experiment, making a rubbing every time I completed something significant on the surface. Sometimes that shift in the surface isn't so clear in the "remainder," but that's part of it, it has to be in the sequence, because I think sometimes things occur that aren't always so dramatic and that's part of it, that time can be uneventful, or there is a discrepancy between the physical reality of the painting and the visual. And then I liked the way the "remainders" embody time in this more lateral way than the paintings.

Rail: Do you ever look back to them as a map of what to uncover or reveal later?

Dickinson: Honestly, I don't look at them that much while I'm painting. I kind of know what's there. What they do help me with is making a recording of an event and then letting it go. I think the"remainders" have been good for the paintings, because I can be more disciplined and obliterate or cover something if that's what needs to happen.

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Rail: Right. They seem to allow you to maintain that loyalty to the painting you spoke of earlier, in this case, to acknowledge the inevitable loss that comes with time passing.

Dickinson: Yes, and also give credit to the not entirely visible, because all the actions and obliterations aren't lost, and time is not lost—these events are always necessary to get to what comes next.

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