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## PAINTING HAS ISSUES



It's hard to know what to think of all the paintings being made right now. A curator recently told me that he feels "the conversation" is so diffuse, at this point it's next to impossible to talk about contemporary painting as a coherent subject. Indeed, it's anyone's guess how we're meant to navigate a trip to Chelsea that presents us with concerns and approaches as divergent as Amy Sillman's psychological bodily expressions, Luc Tuymans's brushy whiteout meditations on cultural history, Keltie Ferris's spray-paint pyrotechnics, and Rudolf Stingel's tango with the readymade—especially if we find something to appreciate in each of them. The heterogeneity of current painting production can leave us feeling deep in the potpourri, unable to separate the orange peel from the rose hips.

This is not to suggest that all critical faculties have been neutered by the crush of pluralism. It's simply that, as Isabelle Graw and Andre Rottman write in their rather withering preface to *Texte zur Kunst's* "Not The Painting Issue," "the term 'painting' is an inadequate common denominator for the set of diverse practices that have long clustered under the name." But if the term has become nonsensically imprecise, it's because painting in its various forms continues to flourish. Though its detractors have been arguing over painting's obsolescence for years, they find themselves frustrated again and again by the ever-increasing number of artists who make the choice to engage with the medium.

One response to the polymorphous painting landscape is work that makes painting itself an object of critique. In his well-known October article, "Painting Beside Itself," art historian David Joselit addresses a strain of neo-formalism that takes up the reins of institutional critique,

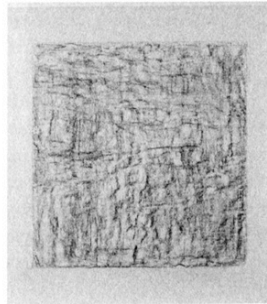
using strategies meant to encourage self-consciousness around the systems operating in art's production, presentation, and reception. He groups the practices of artists such as Jutta Koether, Cheyney Thompson, and R. H. Quaytman under the term "transitive," and examines how they promote an acknowledgement of an artwork's participation in various networks of exchange.

Parodic painting has enjoyed similar critical and curatorial support. Josh Smith-whose "casual anti-art aesthetic intentionally defies the rules of artistic convention in an ironic and informed manner," according to a gallery press release-makes purposely de-skilled paintings of leaves, fish, stop signs, messy abstract compositions, and, most famously, his own name. His unbridled serial production places him in a long lineage of antipainters who paint voraciously. Alex Hubbard's poured resin and fiberglass abstractions are more elegant in their outcome, but they also question any remaining claims for painting's authenticity, and operate in a similarspace between tongue and cheek. The appeal of this school of art making is evidenced by a trip to any art fair or MFA program, where a host of epigones compete to keep painting precariously teetering on its critical precipice.

The airtight logic of transitive painting and the have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too attitude of parodic painting offer different, equally pointed rejoinders to ahistorical pluralism. Their commonality lies in a position of concerted detachment: any attempt at projection on the part of the viewer is bounced right back. The strictures of these popular approaches prompt the following questions: Without falling into the trap of liberal humanism or taking on a faux-naive pose, can painting reconcile a need for rigor with a measured insertion of subjectivity? Can viewers, or for that matter artists, find a way to locate themselves within a work without resorting to outdated notions of absorption or the sublime? Might artists who are well versed in the language of critique test how painting could interpose ontological and phenomenological issues without reverting to conventions of sentimentality?

Jaya Howey's October 2010 exhibition at Taxter and Spengemann seemed to take on some of these questions. Through the glass doors of the gallery, six almost-square, six-foot-tall paintings presented crisp bands of single colors-red, blue, and in one case green-laid over bright white grounds. In two of the paintings these color bands alternated with equal-sized strips of white; in the others, overlapping shapes or stripes in slightly different hues of the same color created sections of deeper opacity. Howey's works first appeared to be riffing on the aesthetic and compositional sensibility of Wade Guyton's well-known Epson paintings: the off-register effect of the imbricated color areas couldn't help but evoke printer misalignment. But with a closer view it became clear that the paintings were, in fact, made by hand. Sections of color had been formed by masking off areas that were then treated with thin, washy paint, in a

manner that at least signified “brush stroke” rather than technical glitch. With this recognition, the work shifted slightly, from cool dispassion into some other register in which the gesture became a suspicious mark, alluding, albeit cautiously, to the object’s maker.



Other signs of fissure presented themselves as well. One painting contained a number of silhouettes of keys and keyholes embedded within a pattern of red rectangles. These amounted to the only nonabstract imagery present, iconographically suggesting the possibility of access to what otherwise might have been a closed formal system. Two other paintings contained text—one had the artist’s handwritten initials in the lower left corner, and the other had the words “No one’s judging you” scrawled across the center of the canvas. In conjunction with this motto, the initials didn’t so much present themselves as an ironic stab at authorship, but rather as serving a more ambiguous semiotic function. The “judging” text seemed to call out the inherent self-exposure involved in displaying artwork for public consumption. Was this perhaps something the artist needed to tell himself in order to keep working in the studio? Or maybe it was a message to the viewer, pointing out an imbalance in the relationship between the artist and the person looking at his work: “I’m not judging you, so don’t judge me,” he might be suggesting, or hoping. In this context, the initials could be seen as Howey’s acknowledgment of the diminishing role of the artist in the passage from the making of the work to its reception.

For Howey, poking the membrane of self-reflexive formalism requires a fleet aesthetic; his paintings work against any appearance of labor, and there is nothing below their surfaces. Where Howey conjures speed, Jessica Dickinson conducts a parallel investigation of the subjective potential of formalism by slowing the viewing process down to a glacial pace. Time is embedded in her pictures, which she assiduously constructs

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over many months, applying and then removing paint through sanding and scraping, in some cases even carving out holes in a painting's ground and then partially filling them in with subsequent passes of the brush. The vestiges of the many paintings she makes in the process of coming to the conclusion of a single picture are felt, if not always seen. They give rise to a field of optical and temporal awareness and evoke the affective space between the viewer and the picture.

Dickinson's work is visually demanding without being in anyway aggressive. Given the evident labor of her paintings construction, process and craft can't help but be part of what is being addressed, but consciousness and visual experience are front and center. Just as the paintings take considerable time to complete, a protracted viewing is required in order to appreciate what is visually at stake. Dickinson also smartly addresses the work's production through her "Reminders," a series of works on paper that accompany each painting. She produces these frottage pieces by laying paper over the paintings at various stages of their creation and making a rubbing of the surface with a stick of graphite. The resulting impressions manifest elements that might never have been visible, consciously attempting to mark out the impossibility of grasping a painting as a whole. In tandem, the paintings and drawings neatly account for an awareness of some of painting's current problematics without discarding the possibilities of personal visual experience.



Halsey Rodman's work also suggests an interest in perception, but it takes quite a different form. Primarily a sculptor, after many years of making work in which paint served the merely supplemental function of giving color and cover to objects, he has recently taken painting on more directly in order to probe visual memory. In a large-scale work entitled *The Construct*, Rodman built a freestanding tripartite structure composed of eight-foot-tall panels hinged at a center point. Seen from above, the

piece might resemble the shape formed by the blades of a windmill. When you are standing in front of any of the three identical spaces produced by the wedge of panels, your view of the other two is blocked. Each panel is painted with an aggressive fluorescent palette in a brushy, gestural, abstract manner; as you walk around this three-dimensional painting, a certain repetition begins to unfold. It becomes evident that each section is a version of the other two, but because the view is obstructed, it is difficult to compare one to another and the inevitable desire to jump back and forth to find differences is frustrated. Though you can make some distinctions over time, with a long enough viewing your mind also starts to scramble the individual paintings together, and a synthetic whole takes form.

As it turns out, Rodman made this work by making a gesture with a specific color in one space and then trying to replicate it in the next two without being able to see what he had done before. When he moved on to the next color and stroke, he started in the space where he had painted the last mark, therefore ensuring that no section was the “original” painting. This procedure can of course be read as an attempt to undermine notions of originality and question the value of spontaneous gesture. More interesting, though, is the way in which Rodman’s repetition avoids becoming straightforward reiteration. A productive conflation takes place: the memory of the viewer is collapsed with that of the artist. Looking at the piece, we are not alienated by our inability to remember the exact makeup of the previous panel. Rather than attempting to outwit us, Rodman conjures a certain amount of generosity in shared experience we are performing mental moves very similar to those he made himself while making the work. On the one hand, he avoids reverting to a model of expression that attempts to share a feeling with the viewer, and on the other, he resists the trap of irony. Instead, Rodman manages to produce a visual event that is philosophical without becoming rarefied or hermetic.

Howey, Dickinson, and Rodman are by no means the only artists working in this terrain, and anyone well versed in contemporary painting will be able to come up with a list of others probing related issues. Furthermore, it would be overstating the case to suggest that their work (which is in many ways as divergent as it is related) constitutes a “movement,” or that it might serve as a road map for negotiating the quagmire that is painting today. Rather, they are highlighted here to serve as examples of an intelligent trajectory in the field, and to demonstrate how, despite the odds, painting continues to be capable of regeneration and self-perpetuation. Their work can simply be seen as asking further questions in one part of the ever-evolving “conversation.”

*December, 2010*