

Vision Is A Creation

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Jill, because of her love, support and sacrifice

I: Introduction

Abstract (noun)

1. a concept or idea not associated with any specific instance
2. a sketchy summary of the main points of an argument or theory

Abstract (adjective)

1. existing only in the mind; separated from embodiment
2. not representing or imitating external reality or the objects of nature
3. dealing with a summation of subject without practical purpose or intention

"most people only see enough to not bump into things."

- Hughes de Montalembert from the documentary Black Sun

Starting with the world and removing information causes abstraction to become "a kind of optical Puritanism, in which the eye, "abstracted" from all admixture with the other organs of the body, would itself become pure, formal, and so abstract."ⁱ However, for the contemporary painter the eye is no longer the sole organ of vision and has been "abstracted" from the body by technology.

II: Argument

Painted abstraction should, within its fundamental structure, respond both to the current speed of information as dictated and directed by digital technology as well as to the change this technology has wrought on the experiential. I believe that something as antiquated as painting can be a part of a discussion about seeing. However, the default discussion I have encountered still combines propositions like, *start with something from the world, something physical real observable examine its form, simplify it, remove signifiers that individuate. Start with geometry connect areas that signify space, investigate that space without mimesis. Use symbolic language as a metaphor for observed relationships. Start with biography; make marks that are contingent on expression. Start with something from the world, something real physical observable, and remove narrative, literary or "representational" reference.* These ideas, traceable back to Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* confine vision to human anatomy and physiology, closing it into a system of a Western pictorial space and three dimensional "reality" onto a two dimensional surface. Implicit in this is the stale idea of the human eye as loci of perceptual synthesis, which limits the field of play to what the eye gathers and the brain can process. The visual world is never authentically new, as the eye merely repackages the sensate within the framework of familiar attachments to its known visual hierarchy and this will only be done using the agreed upon semantics. An investigation of the world outside of or at least parallel to the artist's personal style, biography or identity isn't recognized as worthwhile.

"This brings us to the realization that formalist art and criticism accepts as a definition of art one that exists solely on morphological grounds. While a vast quantity of similar looking objects or images (or visually related objects or images) may seem to be related (or connected) because of a similarity of visual/experiential "readings," one cannot claim from this an artistic or conceptual relationship." (Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy*) Quoting Kosuth opens the claim that paint on canvas is no longer viable, and makes me feel as if I have lost faith and am about to be excommunicated from the Holy Romantic Empire. But this is not the sixties and painting is and always will be *an idea that becomes a machine that makes art* (LeWitt). The contemporary relevance of Kosuth's quote is located in painting's ability to contain the ideas of the past and paradoxically break with them at the same time. I have never had a serious discussion with anyone about painting's possibilities or where painting could go from here without being made to feel either foolish or pretentious. I feel that painting has a role in addressing issues of information and vision, that many of these ideas and issues are a matter of naming them and then investigating solutions. When this idea gets proposed, the counter argument is that painting can never be new again, can never be unrecognizable, because every new painting has to take into account all of the paintings that have come before it. This doesn't seem like a new concern or a bad situation. The lessons learned from earlier paintings haven't just been learned or accounted for by painters, they have saturated the whole of culture.

Our culture is unarguably a visual one presenting its ideas in images, colors, forms, and text individually, as a shorthand or substitute for more verbal communications. This restless breaking down of communication into constituent parts that are more brief and digestible reveals the veracity of Virilio's proposition about the gaps and glitches between those parts. The greater complexity of a thing, the more difficult it is to get a clear, stable and complete picture of that thing, and the less those parts interact to transmit a succinct truth about the thing. Every additional breakdown slightly changes the information that constitutes any knowledge. This is an incredibly destabilizing idea for a culture, having no large easy identifier with which to define itself, culture has then embarked on a shoring up the definition of its fundamental being, as a way re-establishing a self versus other paradigm. This is a very conservative proposition, one that painting has followed by proposing images that are as Boris Grois puts it, "already acknowledged as being of equal value ... [and] each artist begins to be suspected of producing just one further arbitrary image among many."ⁱⁱ Painting marked its place at the end of a search for its essential parts, now everything is possible, but instead of a fertile becoming painting also embarked on a furtive conservation. At a time when the field was expanding and our understanding of experiential phenomenon was changing essentially, painting discourse was sweeping everything into established categories. The surrounding discourse acknowledges the past, as it should, but education lionizes it and locates the attempt to push it further not in the ideas that "[we] are free to do something new. Rather, it is that it is impossible to do the old

anymore." (Grois 27) Painting this says, has investigated the ideas and areas it will, they are in the past, and if you seek to challenge that, the folly of the task is placed at your feet. Painting, instead, presents vision as a readymade collection of ideas that are handled uncritically based on their effective employment in relation to the past; if the ideas worked then they will work now and at least the works will be recognizable as art through the redeployment of these familiar prepackaged ideas. Paintings lack of response to the changes in visual culture and the speed of information, the apparent lack of understanding about new knowledge related to vision leads to a delimitation of painting practice that assumes the past and, presumably is part of what gives rise to the alienation embedded in painting discourse.

As Søren Kierkegaard pointed out - especially in his *Philosophiche Brocken* - being new is by no means the same as being different. Kierkegaard even rigorously opposes the notion of the new to the notion of difference, his main point being that a certain difference is recognized as such only because we have the capability to recognize this difference as difference. So no difference can ever be new- because if it were really new it could not be recognized as difference.

In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, Paul Virilio states that "There was less to know in preceding centuries, and you'll notice that, paradoxically, knowledge then aimed at certainty and totality. The more knowledge grew the greater the unknown grew, we might conclude; or rather the more information flashes by the more we are aware of its incomplete fragmentary nature."ⁱⁱⁱ The

speed of culture cannot render information incomplete and fragmentary it is only our inability to apprehend information in its totality that causes this apparent lack. Speed then renders the state of altered consciousness that Virilio has presented as "picnolepsy".^{iv} This inability to apprehend volumes of information and the inventions that bridge these gaps externalizes an unfamiliar and de-centering state. The addition of invented information is antithetical to abstraction by definition, which relies on negation and the obfuscation of reduction. A picnoleptic loss of information is obviously not a negation but a forced aperture in consciousness allowing for the creation of complex and impure mixes of ramifying information. Mixes that exceed phenomenology, by presenting form not as a simplified totality but as a stuttering compulsive outgrowth of the specific and not known just at the edge of visual apprehension.

Contemporary cultures' visual relationship to the digital has changed our relationship to experiential phenomenon. The digital has acted on this relationship not only through the speed of information but has coupled with our blasé abdication of engagement with its processes. The machine ability to capture information allows us to observe phenomenon that were not previously readily available to us. Our reliance on the digital results in a faux- sophistication of knowledge about things we have not actually experienced. A simple example of the manner in which machines have both simplified vision and confounded information can be found in the relation of a film negative to a digital file. Digital cameras produce images that, in their production format, are no longer phenomenon except as interpreted by the machine. For instance, if a human eye

is presented a photo of a tree produced from a film negative, that image encoded on the negative is a document of a thing, a phenomenon in itself comprehensible to the brain. The photo itself may not be a tree but the mind interprets it as representation, an image, of a tree even in its original production format straight from the camera. The same is not true for a digital image, because when presenting the same eye with the digital source file, its original production form straight from the camera (a form the human eye almost never sees) all we can see is binary code, our brains can decipher the phenomenological information in one but not the other. One image can still be interpreted, as a presentational image of what it is, a tree, the other as a series of ones and zeros, phenomenon yet phenomenologically unavailable information. In this way digital information is no longer interpretable by the naked brain as a signifier for what it represents. We blithely rely on 'sight' and the mediation of digital technology to order and explicate our visual world, but our visual world has advanced by our own hand. Two ideas are salient here one is that humans are no longer the only thing that "sees" and the other is painting's absent response.

Our predominant sense is vision, housed in the blunt instrument of our bodies, it is an imprecise tool, inaccurately gathering incomplete information, and this impotence is mind boggling precisely because we take for granted that what we see is. If this was ever the case it no longer is. "We live in an age less of "mechanical automatism" than of the informational or cognitive abilities and deficiencies."^v And it is this mechanical reproduction that has presented us with the new possibilities of digitally augmented vision. Vision that is rent and

reassembled by the speed of information, then the gaps, glitches and apertures thus opened create a fecund not knowing, one that is unconsciously filled in by our overwhelmed brains. In this reassembly we become a knowing creature without ever having seen, believing however that we have. Yet any discussion of the observable and depictable in painting falls back on the conservative language of being, when the opportunity to open out into a becoming presents itself. "Few modern myths about art have been as persistent or as annoying as the so-called death of painting.... The Modernist insistence on the separation of representation and abstraction robbed painting of essential vitality."^{vi} Language that attempts to reinforce established ideas about painting, by reifying the familiar or recognizable in the ostensibly new closes the painting world down around what we know, devaluing the potential of the not known. A real dialogue about painting and abstraction would allow for ideas that may not already be part of the discourse, and allow for ideas that strive to break from established discussion as a means of expanding the practice. "To recognize means, always, to remember."

(Kierkegaard) Just as paintings field of inquiry was opened through the development of photography, so does the development of digital networks and imagery create fertile gaps in seeing. This rend in the fabric of the known opens a vacancy that I find particularly productive. A thing seen may present more than is known, a thing unrecognized is not automatically abstract.

III: The Eye

"The history of abstraction I learned in school was rooted in the 20th-century meta-narrative of abstraction being invented and then linearly evolving along one path. But we know this narrative is very closed down, that it suppressed many other histories, directions, and possibilities of abstraction. I think artists using abstraction today are coming in through many different side doors. They are conscious of and inspired by the marginal possibilities of abstraction."^{vii}

-Jessica Dickenson

"We find ourselves yet again in the situation of alienating choice. Let's give it a radical, if not exaggerated formulation: *to know without seeing or to see without knowing*. There is a loss in either case. He who chooses only to know will have gained, of course, the unity of the synthesis and the self-evidence of simple reason; but he will lose the real of the object, in the symbolic closure of the discourse that reinvents the object in its own image, or rather in its own representation. By contrast, he who desires to see, or rather to look, will lose the unity of a closed world to find himself in the uncomfortable opening of a universe henceforth suspended, subject to all the winds of meaning; it is here that synthesis will become fragile to the point of collapse; and that the object of sight, eventually touched by a bit of the real, will dismantle the subject of knowledge, dooming simple reason to something like a rend. Rend then, will be the first word, the first approximation with which to renounce the magic words of the history of art. This will be the first way of challenging Panofsky's notion that "the 'naïve' beholder differs from the art historian in that the latter is conscious of the situation." There is indeed the naïveté of the spectator who knows nothing, but facing it there is also the double naïveté of he who folds knowledge completely into truth, and who believes moreover that it makes sense to pronounce a sentence such as: "I am conscious of everything I do when I see an art image, because I know it."^{viii}

The human eye is an imperfect tool; with no interpretive function it can only collect all visible information within its operative field. One imagines that as a product of survival instincts, the brain sorts through this surfeit of information according to some shifting hierarchy of the repetitious, familiar, recognized and meaningful. As a symptom of vision information that is unrecognized or unfamiliar, therefore carries no established meaning within the hierarchy, is ignored. This symptom is not a result of blunt recording of Truth but a repeated although ever changing staging of (roughly) the same information. Vision creates the visible world from what it already knows and interprets that world through how it knows it, actively seeking to recognize patterns in the new that codify it

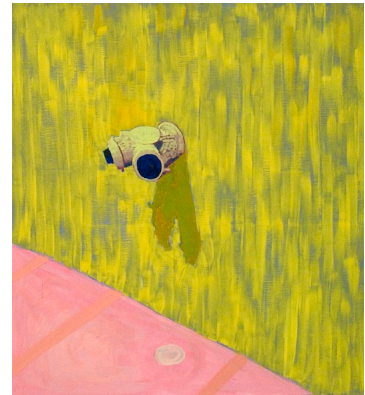
with the familiar. In *Confronting Images* Georges Didi-Huberman states "[The] Symptom [of vision] speaks to us of the infernal scansion, the anadynomene movement of the visual in the visible and presence in representation. It speaks to us of the singular in the regular...And what it tells us is untranslatable but interpretable, and interprets itself endlessly." (Didi-Huberman, p156) Once the certainty and totality of Virilio's construction had been formed and elaborated, it was exposed as not speaking so universally. Painting, in one Modernist construction brought its formal concerns to what appeared to be an endpoint with a result being the interchangeability of the terms abstraction and inscrutable thereby substituting the unrecognizable for the untranslatable. The question then becomes what moments in Modernity are still operative in our present?"^{xix}

Contemporary abstraction as a construct is fraught with the contradiction that comes from being acted upon as if there is some thing in it that is yet radical or avant-garde. That if as it is contextualized that there is some thing in it that is as yet undefined or that brings back to us some new piece of the not-known. If this is the case, *then anything that is anonymous, traffics in the symbolic, or visually obfuscates its subject attempts to refute the notion that it, as abstraction, as art, can no longer encompass anything larger than what is at the end of the brush for each individual artist.* Subjectivity as thematic proposition has been killed dead by a presentation society that serves up the subject as readymade, not as an object chosen for its very banal and unaesthetic properties but as a means of broadcasting individual subjectivity, banal and de-aestheticized yet writ large as blogging, social networking, viral videos and reality TV. All of which are

languages that present perfectly valid realities, and languages that package and present a state of being. Which can then by definition be eliminated as an avant-garde. And yet here we are, the battle over abstraction is finished, formalism and the teleology of Modernism are past, painting over the last 20, 30, 40 years has no history and so we are left to struggle with Minimalism and Pop art. Movements that have calcified around their language in much the same way that painting has. What then does it mean to paint? To ask this question is to ask about the connections made and whether we have lost the language that can do the connecting for us.

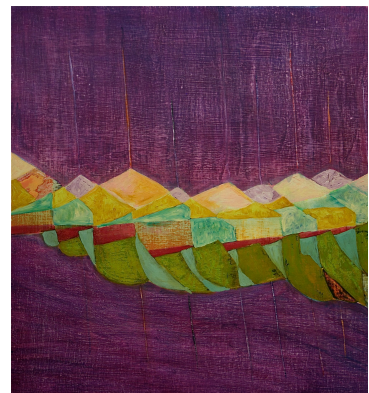
III: Works

My work over these last two years has finally arrived at a point where it begins to challenge these ideas. It's state as a metaphorical transference of paint into other is a failure, based too closely on the strictly pictorial and too easily mistaken for the kind of abstraction I am arguing against. The best example of this kind of failure is *Attachment* a painting that places a central object that is immediately referential. The fire-hose attachment and drop shadow immediately orient the planes in space righting the composition along the lines of standard western composition. They stop the eye and allow the brain to know the hierarchical spot it needs to stop looking and move one. As a painting it is not promiscuous enough, it does not solicit your attention and then turn it aside just as you think you are making a conclusion. The rules of its game are clear and don't have to consider it or them.



If I am going to challenge the notion of an observable and depictable reality, if I am going to illuminate its obtuseness and implicate picnolepsy in the creation of my paintings, I am going to have to shift the terms of their engagement. To make a successful case for anything other than a summary reading, I am going to have to create work that is post-abstract or that could be argued to be literally realist I am going to have to become very comfortable with my material ethics.

Shoe with no Heel or Toe is a painting that has some successful answers to these questions by presenting a composition that is not readily recognizable. By taking a few



seconds of video and tracing the projected image one frame at a time the duration and representational image was faithfully rendered by combining the painting surface as the projection screen. In selecting, and slowing down a digital video as content, the composition contained more information than could be apprehended by the human eye. Removing the image from its original context however brought it into the realm of the painted known. If it cannot be easily read and contextualized, it is abstract, morphologically remembered and recognized as such. For all its successes as a painting it was not awkward enough and held together as a formal abstraction, largely a failure. What can be taken from the work is a need for an even greater or more awkward separation from the negative space, and a more systematic approach to the colors as a means of signifying the durational permutations of the form. I would use this approach to color as a way of emphasizing the singular nature of the object as it transmits across the surface. The way it is handled on the current painting suggests a single form handled formally. The task if the color is largely cosmetic, arbitrarily applied to the forms versus existing prior to the form as its own system of information.

It all comes down to a matter of naming, our senses and how our idea of what reality is, is the result of information gathered by the relatively blunt instrument of our body and then deciphered and translated by our brains and our brains can certainly not be assumed to be reliable experts on things external. I am trying to get my work on some level to touch on this shifting and sliding in externality that is happening under our noses and which our brains continually organize and

reorganize for us so we don't collapse in terrified confusion. The painting that comes closest to reaching this goal is *At The Join to Kill the Eternals*, which presents an unnamed, and potentially unnamable object in a series of shifting not shifting planes, a complicated space that references both representational, illusionistic space and the non-reality of abstract space. The use of white is meant to counter the saturation of the other colors, and make them colors-in-themselves instead transforming them into cosmetic language where they might be transmogrified into metaphor.

I am looking to bring the work down to the quotidian, and away from a strictly self referential or linear historical dialogue. Earlier in this paper, I talk about visual gaps and failures in vision that cause "a forced aperture in consciousness allowing for the creation of complex and impure



mixes of ramifying information. Mixes that exceed phenomenology, by presenting form not as a simplified totality but as a stuttering compulsive outgrowth of the specific and not-known just at the edge of visual apprehension." These are the stakes for my work, the area my work currently courts but does not reach and the area I am prepared to plumb post graduation.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ Rajchman, John. *Constructions*. Cambridge, MA The MIT Press, 1998. 57. Print.
- ⁱⁱ Grojš, Boris. *Art Power*. The MIT Press, 2008. 15. Print.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Virilio, Paul, and Jonathan Crary. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 2009. 55. Print.
- ^{iv} the epileptic state of consciousness produced by speed, or rather, the consciousness invented by the subject through its very absence: the gaps, glitches and speed bumps lacing through and defining it.- Virillio, Paul, and Jonathan Crary. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 2009. Print
- ^v Rajchman, John. *Terry Winters; Graphic Primitives*. New York: Matthew Marks Gallery, 1999. 8. Print.
- ^{vi} Smith, Roberta. "It's Not Dry Yet." *New York Times* March 26, 2010, Print.
- ^{vii} Saccoccio, Jackie, and Jessica Dickenson. "What:State:Abstraction." *bomblog*. 30 Nov 2009. *Bomb Magazine*, Web. 26 Dec 2009. <<http://bombsite.powweb.com/?p=6397>>.
- ^{viii} Didi-Huberman, Georges. *Confronting Images*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Pr, 2005. 140. Print.
- ^{ix} Modernity comes to refer to what in the past is still operative in our present."- Rajchman, John. "Foucault, or the Ends of Modernism." *October*. 24.spr (1983): 55. Print

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