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Something Gained: Translation as Process

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BFA Painting Statement
Washington University in St. Louis
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Abstract

This statement examines translation as a way to explore the act of painting. Drawing from theories of literary translation as discussed by Walter Benjamin, this essay looks at the ways in which the process of translating an image from a photograph into a painting echoes many ideas that come from the approach of translating between languages. The theme of translation is discussed first through an examination of the role of the photograph in determining the content of the paintings, using Gerhard Richter as a reference. The role of material and the physicality of paint in the translation of a space is then examined as a key to understanding the transformation between photograph and painting. Finally, the act of translation is discussed as a way to gain knowledge and a new understanding of the subject.

Introduction

We often think of what is lost in translation; of the beautiful poetry of one language suddenly turned sour as it is forced into another tongue, of a printed image never truly doing justice to the original. What about the things that are gained in this leap from one way of thinking to another? What about the beauty of a new poetry accessed only by making drastic changes to the original work? These contradictions arise not only when transferring writing from one language to another but also in the re-imagining of any idea or object through a different lens. In my work, the translation from seeing a space to recreating that space in paint retells the story of objects and spaces generally overlooked in the fast-paced environment of modern existence. This process, often mediated by the lens of a camera, recontextualizes abandoned or overlooked objects and questions a traditional understanding of them as worthless. The act of re-animating the space, placing emphasis on the surface or texture of the subject in order to counter the flattening of the photographic image, brings a renewed sense of care and importance to these otherwise unseen spaces.

The Photograph–Translation of Reality

Photography has become the lens through which we—both literally and figuratively—see the world. Events do not exist, or are not deemed important, unless captured by a camera. Photographs have become the ultimate tool by which to document existence, from newspaper headlines to photos of friends saved for eternity on the Internet. The cultural phenomenon of photography, however, has been removed in many cases from the art of photography. For the most part, the photographs seen in

museums and galleries speak in an entirely different language from those found in photo albums or on the Internet. In a fine art context, photographs sit behind glass or are framed against the white walls of a gallery. These photographs have titles and labels, their placards inscribed with the methods or intentions of the artist. Outside of the art world, photographs are constantly flipped through, glanced at, and scrolled down in a Google search.

In my practice, the act of painting from a photograph merges these two elements of photography—the inherent abstraction and distortion explored by artists who work with photographs and the instantaneous documentary aspect utilized by anyone who has ever held a camera—in order to place the painting in relation to both the original object and the photograph. In discussing the relationship between the photograph and painting in his own work, Gerhard Richter explains that “a photo is already a little tableau, although it is not yet completely that. This character is irritating and pushes you to want to transform it definitively into a painting” (Chevrier, 35). Richter sees the photograph as, in a way, the catalyst to his painting. The photograph asks him to paint it in order to complete this “tableau.” In my work, the photograph acts as an entry point into the understanding of an object, but fails to tell its complete story. Thus the act of painting creates a continuous and re-imagined narrative for the overlooked form.

In her essay “Photography Within the Humanities,” Susan Sontag writes, “photographs give us information, it seems that they give us information that is very packaged and they give us the information that we are already prepared to recognize obviously.” (64) For me, the reinterpretation of a photographed image

begins to unwrap the “packaged” information of the photograph. Richter appropriates the language of photography in a variety of ways throughout his practice. He has compiled a collection of found and taken photographs, painted directly on top of photographs, and used them as references for paintings. Each of these methods displays an interest in both the subject and visual appearance of the photograph. In works such as *Three Siblings*, (FIG. 1) Richter uses the photograph as an entrance into the world of this depicted family. The format of the photograph—as a traditional portrait—and the blur of the lens, register with the viewer as familiar ways of describing a family.



Fig. 1. Gerhard Richter, *Three Siblings*.

Only the act of painting this family comes as an oddity. Painting the photograph changes the context of the otherwise overlooked snapshot. In my work, photography presents a different way of seeing an object and acts as a preliminary act of translation. In this way, my photographs condense the original subject into a distinctly framed, flattened, and knowable space which then must be relearned

through the act of painting. In my series *Tiny Imperfections*, small watercolors act as a way to maintain many traditional photographic elements but still read in the language of painting. The sharp borders of the watercolors echo the way a photograph remains constantly in conversation with its cropped edge. In places, the thin paint almost seems immaterial—as tied to the paper as printed ink would be—yet the hint of a dry brush mark or the slight build-up of a surface begins to bring back the texture of the original space.



Fig. 2. *Tiny*

Imperfections, final installation view

In its final installation, the watercolors that comprise *Tiny Imperfections* are put in conversation with two objects taken directly from the site from which the paintings are drawn. The rusted red object and contorted vent contrast the flattened snapshots of the watercolors but also draw comparisons between the realities of the rusted surface of the metal and the painted rust above.

Material and Translation

In her book *Translation, Subjectivity & Culture in France and England, 1600-1800*, Julie Hayes states,

Translation projects are fueled by absence, time, and desire: desire to recreate past writers, to make them speak again in one's own voice, and also to recuperate one's own language, one's own voice. The object of conquest is not the Other but one's own native speech, which must be regained. (117)

Hayes speaks of the process of translation as concerned not only with an understanding of the language of the original text, the "Other", but also, more directly, with the language of the translator. In my paintings, abandoned spaces are captured by the lens of a camera and then transferred, through paint, into a different context. The physicality of the paint itself becomes the vehicle for this translation. Though the language of the original space remains an important aspect of the final painting, much of the translation concerns my personal language, the language of paint.

In his paintings of magnified paints and gels, Ben Weiner explores the material presence of paint and "[poses] a confusion between object, subject, and medium." (Freidman, 1) Paintings such as *TiO₂*, *C₃₄H₂₂Cl₂N₄O₂*, *C₁₈H₃₂O₂*, *C₁₀H₁₆*, *C₂₀H₃₀O₂*, *AgX* display Weiner's interest in simultaneously mimicking paint as a material and the process by which he came to make the painting.



Fig. 3 Ben Weiner, *TiO₂*,

C₃₄H₂₂Cl₂N₄O₂, C₁₈H₃₂O₂, C₁₀H₁₆, C₂₀H₃₀O₂, AgX

The emulsion used in the photographic process becomes evident on the right side of the painting (Freidman, 2) but does not fully disrupt the illusion of paint applied directly on a surface. The title of the work, taken from the chemical names of the pigments used in the creation of the paints, also includes the chemical name of the emulsion. In titling the work, Weiner directly states the importance of material in his working method, and includes the process of photography as an element of those materials.

As in Weiner's paintings, my paintings directly converse with the material of their creation. Paint creates an illusion of the surface quality of the original space or object through juxtaposition between smooth and rough textures. The built up surface of the painting acts as a reanimation of the original source. The paint denies the flatness of the photograph and returns, in a small way, into the world of three dimensions. In this way, the original object is allowed a continuation of its life. In *Vent II*, paint physically constructs the forms of the peeling paint and debris that

obstruct the vent. In contrast, the metal surface behind the vent retains a smooth and flat surface reminiscent of the flatness of the original photograph.



Fig. 4 Amanda

Rothschild, *Vent II*

The photograph of this piece of a dilapidated airplane removes it from its context—abandoned at a junkyard on the side of a street—and creates an unidentifiable scene. Both the photograph and the painting reframe the plane and create alternate ways of viewing its decay. The paint charts the disintegration of this object, highlighting the areas with the largest amount of decay through physical build-up of the surface.

Translating the Object—Re-invisioning reality

In *The Task of the Translator*, Walter Benjamin states that “a translation comes later than the original....translation marks [the original’s] stage of continued life” (Benjamin, 71). Benjamin sees the act of transferring a work from one language into another as a way to revive that original work, to re-imagine it as able to exist in another time and place. In my paintings, the act of transferring the image from my

initial view—within an abandoned house or scrap yard—into a painting revives the object or scene. My paintings put focus on overlooked or mundane objects and spaces through the conversation between the sight of the original object, the photograph, and paint. The photograph acts not only as a catalyst for making the painting, but also as a way of discretely visualizing a specific subject. The act of photographing an easily forgettable object creates the sort of “tableau” discussed by Richter, but frames and flattens the subject in a way that the eye itself cannot manage. The objects in my paintings retain an air of unwantedness due to their subject matter, but are assigned importance through their careful study by both a camera and a brush. In works such as “Pink Sink,” the photograph works as a first framing device, creating an initial glimpse at an anthropomorphized face within the Pepto-Bismol colored sink.



Fig 5. Amanda Rothschild,

Pink Sink

The act of painting the sink highlights the ways that the sink takes on a human form. The rather silly expression of this ordinary household object creates a distinct connection between the viewer and the object. The painting frames the sink as a portrait in a way that simply viewing this sink in the context of an apartment bathroom would not.

Painting becomes a way to expose the beauty of these overlooked surfaces. My process of translation first flattens and frames the image, the reanimates it through the use of paint. In *Runoff I* and *Runoff II*, the variation in surface texture of the painting reveals the mysteries of a drain hidden in a long forgotten corner. This drain, a receptacle for gold pigment, becomes familiar through the repetition of the motif throughout the two paintings.



Fig. 6

Amanda Rothschild, *Runoff I*, *Runoff II*.

My initial exposure to the subject, my photographing of it, and the physical act of painting it each work to familiarize myself with the object. The painter Josephine

Halvorson depicts a variety of found objects or spaces directly from life in a single sitting. She commonly discusses her experience of painting as a way to become familiar with the object that she paints. (Bui, 3-4) She explains, “a lot of what I’m interested in is this correspondence between the object and the paint mediated through me.” (Bui, 4) Halvorson emphasizes her personal connection to the object through the act of painting it on-site. Paintings such as “Vulcan” show the artist’s interest in untended spaces and in the creation of ambiguously suggestive compositions.



Fig. 7 Josephine Halvorson, *Vulcan*.

The small painting, carrying the title of a Greek deity taken from the object’s original label, carries the weight of human interaction with its form while maintaining a jaunty persona expressed through the artist’s brushstrokes. Halvorson’s portrayal

of these objects. In my own practice, a sense of familiarity with the original object remains important but is mediated through the photograph.

Working within a city such as St. Louis, where the language of unseen and abandoned spaces perforates a collective understanding of the reality of urban life, necessitates an examination of one's body within the framework of the city. The forgotten language of discarded objects is modified, through multiple iterations of intense observation, in order to express the overlooked beauty in the natural dilapidation of manmade forms. My work explores photography and painting as a way to understand and re-imagine a cityscape. Painting acts as a way to reframe and add continued meaning to the forgotten spaces that surround me.

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Figures

Figure 1: Gerhard Richter, *Three Siblings*. Oil on Canvas, 1965.

< [\[richter.com/art/paintings/photo_paintings/detail.php?paintid=5592&catID=11&p=\]\(http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/photo_paintings/detail.php?paintid=5592&catID=11&p=\)](http://www.gerhard-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

[1&sp=32](http://www.gerhard-richter.com/art/paintings/photo_paintings/detail.php?paintid=5592&catID=11&p=1&sp=32)>

Figure 2: Amanda Rothschild, *Tiny Imperfections*. Installation with Watercolors and Objects. 2014

Figure 3: Ben Weiner, *TiO₂, C₃₄H₂₂Cl₂N₄O₂, C₁₈H₃₂O₂, C₁₀H₁₆, C₂₀H₃₀O₂, Agx.* Oil on Canvas, 2010

< <http://www.benweiner.com/paintcycle.html>>

Figure 4: Amanda Rothschild, *Vent II*. Oil on Canvas, 2013

Figure 5: Amanda Rothschild, *Pink Sink*. Oil on Canvas, 2014

Figure 6: Amanda Rothschild, *Runoff I, Runoff II* (from left to right). Oil on Canvas, 2013

Figure 7: Josephine Halvorson, *Vulcan*. Oil on Canvas, 2012

< <http://www.josephinehalvorson.com/index.php?/work/side-by-side/>>