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**The Absent Artist:
Muteness and Fiction in Recent Painting**

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Department of Painting and Printmaking at the
School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by
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Thesis Abstract

For the written component of my thesis, I am attempting to make sense of a current strain in contemporary painting which, generally speaking, tends towards reduction, humble materiality, lack of overt, didactic critique, and a scholarly interest in outmoded or overlooked art historical movements and figures. These are tendencies with which, as a painter, I feel both affinities and differences. Rather than rigidly define a “movement,” I will identify prevalent modes but also highlight individual strategies.

I will begin by outlining some of the basic, underlying problems in painting today. I will then examine, as case studies, three young painters—Josephine Halvorson, Richard Aldrich, and Joe Bradley—who I feel exemplify and yet in some ways transcend this trend. I will speak about the work of each in terms of the context in which it is made. However, part of the point of this thesis is to see how individual works by these artists might be talked about apart from their “scene.” I will therefore examine a specific work by each artist in terms of the visual information it supplies. I will go on to examine two critical reactions (and in one case a critical-fictional reaction) to this kind of work—that of Raphael Rubenstein’s “Provisional Painting” and Christopher K. Ho’s “Hirsch E.P. Rothko’s Hirsch E.P. Rothko”—in an attempt to assess how this type of work is being interpreted by the critical community. Lastly, I will provide my own explanations for why this work is being produced now, why (or if) it is relevant, and what problems it proposes for painters in the future.

Although this is not a thesis that addresses my own work directly, it is my intention to use the art-critical process as a means to clarify my own concerns.

Within the last decade, some contemporary painters have turned toward reductive abstraction and the obfuscation of available content. This might be seen by some as a conceptual slackening, or, in some instances, a movement away by painters from the project of institutional and canonical critique. What might it mean that eleven years into the twenty-first century we see an explosion of artists who are delving again into the language of formal abstraction? If it were in fact this simple, this trend would seem to signify a rejection of the rigorous investigation and reappraisal of the role of the artist that has characterized the work of the previous decade. This work appears now as both wrong in terms of any idea of “advancement” (an idea of linear progression and authorship which, though ostensibly rejected in postmodern practice, has in fact been preserved) and also uncomfortably decorative and passive if taken at face value. The off-hand, or casual, look of the work might be read as fashionable *ennui* that shows a lack of any kind of discursive stance, and in fact much of the work may deliberately tempt this reading. The question, then, is why would an artist put him or herself into this dubious territory? In order to make sense of this development, it is necessary to think about what binds together bodies of work by artists such as Richard Aldrich, Joe Bradley, and Josephine Halvorson, (who, upon inspection, are in fact very different from one another) while resisting the temptation to create a coherent movement where there is none.

Not only does this new painting seem wrong in terms of its arrival on the scene at this particular time (*appearing*, as it does, to not set up ambitious new precedents for how meaning can be created through the medium) but also that, taken as a whole, the work exists as something like an index of wrong moments, a detailed searching-through of art history in an attempt to find moments and personalities that upset the grand narratives of both modernist progress and postmodernist critique. This search exists on parallel planes: it is both an insider's game of playing with fashion—cycling through outré moments and at a fast clip inserting them into a context where they become newly relevant—and, at a deeper level, a scholarly reappraisal of the canon and the creation of an alternate narrative. The latter activity poses a question that is vital to the understanding of this new work: if we construct an alternate lineage in painting, what, then is the work that needs to be made now to expand upon *that* lineage. The problem, of course, is that the subjectivity inherent in this activity would seem to preclude participation in a wider dialogue. We want canons because they allow us to make judgments and access value. Any critique of the canon is based on the universal acceptance of a certain lineage's historical prominence. These new painters, however, give themselves permission not only to misuse and reshuffle it as painters have previously done, but also to insert themselves, *unannounced*, into art historical modes. This could either be seen as a vain exercise in magical thinking, or as a creative activity that responds to a new and inexorable paradigm, that of a vast and democratic access to a flow of interchangeable images.

In response, these painters feel a permission to sort through the history of painting to look for new antecedents, finding them in forgotten movements and persons. But they also respond to the reality that their paintings, too, will be sent out as memes into this sea of information by making works that assert a certain objection to this status in their emphasis on materiality and the primacy of the viewer-work interaction. This interaction exists not as a chauvinistic projection of artistic power *from* the work *to* the viewer, nor as a simple declaration of the failure or “impossibility” of the work, but as a series of parallel problems: the momentary reality of the works’ insistence on its material existence versus the background, the constant reality of its role as an exchangeable information unit, the idea that gestures no longer have set meanings (e.g. a painterly, gestural mark does not necessarily equal emotive expression), and the idea of an emptiness, or lacking, in the work that courts incredulity in the viewer that then transfers the artists agency as maker to the viewer. Overshadowing all of this is the problem of side-stepping, of an abdication of the critical apparatus. This work exists at a time when, although the authoritative voice of the artist/critic has been called into question, it still very much persists as the trusted site of meaning-making. Can this new painting supply a different critical model? It is possible that this move towards reduction is one which attempts both a real distillation of visual information as a critique of the overblown, unedited, un-chosen, visual culture at large (reduction as resistance), and, conversely, an acquiescence to multiplicity—in showing a lag, or a lacking, inherent in the work, the artist points to the mental agency of the viewer to complete the work. Might this represent a new communal model of critique that resists a top-down, adversarial model? By accepting and

using the painting's status as a proposition, a unit of information, a meme, *and* resisting that reality with signifiers of the "real" (hand-made, clunky, etc.), and most importantly by showing work that appears almost un-credible, these artists would seem to be either neglecting their role as artist by giving up their agency, or, perhaps, creating the ground for a new, participatory meditation on material facture and painting's historical mobility.

Josephine Halvorson



Wire Clippings, 2009

There exists a tension in Halvorson's work that is caused by the strange position her painted marks inhabit along the spectrum of mark making. If one end of this spectrum is the self-referential mark which maintains its independence and autonomy, and the other end is the mark as a self-negating, invisible member of a

whole—as exhibited most pointedly in the tradition of trompe l’oeil painting, her marks hang tenuously in the balance. Due to compositional tropes (such as the placing of a depicted flat surface parallel to the picture plane, in direct confrontation with the viewer) that owe a direct debt to such nineteenth-century trompe l’oeil painters as John F. Peto, Halvorson’s painting cannot help but prod the viewer into a tantalizing relationship with the objects depicted on the canvas. The viewer is set up to desire that vertiginous satisfaction that is supplied by trompe l’oeil space, and yet that proposal is never fully realized. The artist refuses to entirely subjugate the mark, leaving it on the edge of complete incorporation into the depicted thing, but always still retaining a remainder of itself.

In *Wire Clippings*, Halvorson frames a painting, of sorts, within a painting. A flat stone block sits in the middle of the canvas, edged by an indeterminate brown plane that we might assume to be a work table. The viewer is left to decide whether, because of the tapering of the left side of the block, he is looking at something slightly in front of him and thus in perspective, or if he is looking straight down, in which case the side of the block is broken at a diagonal. There is a scattering of wire pieces spread out, seemingly placed by chance, over the face of the block. If we understand this framed area of the block as the “painting” space, then each clipping can be seen to represent one abstract mark, as can the shadows, smudges, holes and dents on the block. Halvorson gives us here a kind of menu of the ontological possibilities of mark making, but does so only within a small range, never breaking the tension of the picture by slipping either into complete illusionism or into surface-affirming abstraction.

Halvorson's game in this picture is to assert the parallel between the direct address of trompe l'oeil and the direct address of abstraction. The obvious way to do this would be to make a highly-rendered, but object-less trompe l'oeil that presented gestures as nameable events (think of Tauba Auerbach's *Untitled Fold* paintings). Yet in *Wire Clippings* the artist obstinately refuses to play the game she seems to propose. She resists this appealingly pat critical stance by subtly maintaining the painting's status as a *wrought* object.

What kind of a painting is this, then? In some senses it is a very conventional one. Her touch is reminiscent of past makers of tasteful, small, representational paintings, such as Fairfield Porter, who placed emphasis on how painted things tremble in the area between materiality and illusionism. Furthermore, the parameters of her project are utterly traditional—her paintings are made from life, directly in front of the subject, on easel-sized linen canvases. Halvorson's paintings express a certain conservatism, not just in their reference to “good” representational painting, but in their allusion to a type of antique American-ness, as if every subject she paints were brought down from the attic of a New England farmhouse. Nothing represented in her work is ever new, things are always worn, chipped, and well-used (indeed, we are often left looking at the remainders of activities—bread crumbs on wax paper, a stack of photo albums, a bare, ashen, fireplace). A question arises then of what exactly is Halvorson's intent. Are we to read her paintings as an opportunity to focus on the overlooked, the used-up or broken things of the world, or are we to read them as reassuring depictions of objects unspoiled by the intrusions of commerce and power that produce the rude aesthetic jolts of our time?

Halvorson's work has been read by critics as a critique of the distractions and frenzied speed of contemporary life. Writing in *The Brooklyn Rail*, Litia Perta says that "Halvorson's work upsets this constant motion and opens up stillness as a radical act."¹ She positions this stillness against the dominant culture of action, of capitalist predation. A dominant role for the artist, after Warhol, is to use the rhetorical position of the art object to ape the cheap glamour of the mass-produced product and thus to show a complicity between the aesthetic realm and consumer culture, linking the work's critical content to the speed with which it is consumed. So for Halvorson to reject this model, she either appears as retrograde, willingly ignoring the governing facts and pace of modern life, or as oppositional to those facts. She states herself that: "Like so many others, I'm caught up in the speed set by the technology of daily life. Painting, for me, has become increasingly the inverse of my day-to-day pace. It's a "stilling" of life, a chance to find a prolonged closeness, a thorough, uninterrupted conversation, a stretching of my own thoughts."² This might seem more like retreat than resistance if the aim and effect for both painter and viewer were simply a reprieve from over-stimulation, if what we encountered in this "stillness" was not at all difficult. But Halvorson uses nostalgia as a tool to access difficulty.

There are two nostalgias at work in Halvorson's painting. The first is nostalgia for a certain type of place, temperature, or scent. Using the slightest

¹ Litia Perta, "Josephine Halvorson," *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2008 – January 2009.

² Josephine Halvorson, interview by Firelai Báez for the exhibit, "Americanana," Hunter College, 2010

means, she implies a world (in the Heideggerian sense of the word³), a context. This world is that of frugal effort, practicality, solitary work, and sober clarity. Our physical associations with material, how things feel to the touch, are used to guide us into these ideas. We “feel” the cool of the stone which is pocked with dents from small hand tools and yet smooth and rounded. We “lift” its weight—disproportionally heavy to its size. We notice the rough, weathered wood underneath. We are in an old milk barn (now used as a workshop) in the early hours of the morning, mending a broken clasp. It is cold and a bit damp. And yet, maybe we aren’t the cause of this scattering of material. Perhaps there is a further displacement, or further gap, between the time of the action (the clipping of wire) and the time of the fictional “finding” of the scene. This creates a double loss, or double nostalgia, between ourselves as viewers and the fictional viewer, and from that viewer to the original actor.

All of this would seem like the worst sort of conjecture, a romantic reading of the work, were it not for the fact the Halvorson decidedly goads this sort of thinking with the specificity of the material which she depicts, *and* cuts us off from any satisfyingly determinate identity of subject. She provides an atmospheric specificity instead of a textual specificity.

But Halvorson’s nostalgia is twofold, not only recalling a frank, folksy atmosphere, but also referencing the lineage of modernist abstract painting. A direct corollary can be drawn between the residue of the activity depicted in *Wire Clippings* and the idea of the abstract painting *as* residue, as the leftovers of a

³ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1971), 46.

physical engagement. By inventing depicted fictionalizations of the once-transgressive moves of “advanced” modernist painting (the holes, dents, scratches, adhered objects that characterize the work of certain modernist icons, such as Lucio Fontana), Halvorson is in a sense allegorizing the avant-garde abstract painting. Unlike a Fontana, Halvorson’s canvas is not only the primary site of activity, but also the double of that site. We all know by rote that every representational painting also functions as an arrangement of abstract marks; not every representational painting, however, posits a fictional, historically specific, “painting” so close, so parallel, to the picture plane. If the abstraction, the surface-as-surface, of representational painting is challenged by the nameability and recessive spatial position of the depicted, then in Halvorson’s painting we are caught in an intellectual (non-spatial) plane that sits between the abstract and the representational, or between matter and language, pointing at both but unable to be either. And this act of painting is the act of fictionalizing, an act that emphasizes a need for language, even if that language is always subsumed into material. Ranciere describes a similar double movement in “Painting in the Text”: “The ‘theatrical’ arrangement” (of figures) “establishes the ‘flatness’ of the painting only at the cost of making this surface an interface that transfers the images into the text and the text into the images.”⁴

Strangely, by pinning us so close in between the real and the depicted but denying us both, Halvorson creates a speculative space for the viewer. She is providing the instigation for a fiction that is simultaneously open and closed,

⁴ Jacques Ranciere, *The Future of The Image* (London: Verso, 2007), 89.

unbounded and bounded, a space where we project deeply, forwards and backwards, but are left only with the image of our own projection.

Richard Aldrich



Untitled, 2006-2007

Throughout the history of painting in the West, the prevailing way for painters to deal practically with their visual inheritance has been to utilize interpretative copying, whereby an artist visually disassembles a specific piece by an artist of a prior generation in order to understand what made the work effective. This strategy serves as a tool of self-teaching in the service of the continuation and advancement of a tradition. This has been largely replaced by the strategy of appropriation, of the direct taking and using of a historicized artwork in the service of commenting on its meaning as a sign.

The question of how to deal with painting's past is a difficult one in an age when any sense of art historical progression has broken down, when it no longer seems necessary to develop, or overthrow, the work of previous generations. In his highly complex body of work, Richard Aldrich has attempted to find his own personal strategy for negotiating the history of painting, the effect of which is neither merely the development, or one-upping, of the visual grammar of a specific work, nor an employment of the historical work as only a culturally encoded sign, but rather an enrichment of a given art historical space through the insertion of his own slight invention.

What could it mean that Aldrich, in his non-figurative work, uses pointedly modernist (usually mid-twentieth century) art-historical languages, making paintings that, by turn, emulate Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel, Supports/Surfaces, Spatialism, etc., and that seem close to individual artists like Serge Poliakoff or Joan Mitchell? His use of these styles and characters is further complicated by his refusal to make direct comment on them. His paintings do not critique the works they reference so much as set up shop in their art historical context. There appears to be a disturbing lack of critical voice in the work, a muteness that renders the work vulnerable to accusations of laziness or generality, but which, coupled with convincingly specific, seemingly autonomous images, might in fact supply the viewer enough leeway to create their own historical situations around the work.

“Type” becomes an interesting concept in regard to Aldrich, for he is making works that imply a style, a place, and a time, but that do not overtly reference or appropriate actual works or the *exact* handwriting of a given artist.

This places the viewer in the tricky situation of not knowing whether to read the works as earnest, “authentic” statements or as quotations. If read strictly as either, his work seems to fail. If the work is to be seen as “original” it would appear to rest too comfortably within well-trodden visual tropes. On the other hand, quotation is implied, but never completely accomplished. So Aldridge seems to be operating within a narrow zone between the two—*associating* himself with both approaches. He is allowing his work to be adjacent to known quantities, partaking in their “type” and also remaining just distant enough to imply divergent intent.

Aldrich’s painting, *Untitled*, from 2007-2008 is a particularly frustrating example of this. The painting carries all of the signifiers of the “earned” improvised abstraction espoused by Abstract Expressionists and Tachists, the kind of painting that comes about through trial and error, through the distillation of complex input into a succinct, yet felt, interplay between figure and ground. The paint is applied in chalky blocks that interlock over all four quadrants of the canvas, engaging the whole. The edges of the green-gray figure and the dirty white ground carry a tension between determinate description and accident. One can see through, at points along this border, to previous layers of paint. The varied hues of these points suggest an under-layer that embodied the same complex, adaptive, attunement as does the final layer. Yet, in spite of all these reinforcing clues, we are left a bit incredulous as to the possibility of any real belief in the importance of these choices on the part of the artist. Because we don’t believe that this type of painting can, or should be, made today, we cannot believe that *he* really believes in these ideas either. We also know that his work as

a whole, although often coming back to this mid-century, expressionist aesthetic, ranges widely and incorporates text, popular imagery, obscure autobiographical references, and self-referential quotations from his own oeuvre. This knowledge leaves us skeptical towards the work. Is this painting language being used only as a look or style? And if this is true, for what purpose does he use it? Aldrich has been quoted as calling his relationship to painting “a foothold between innocence and understanding.”⁵ This implies the troubling notion that the invented component in the work, that which is not already understood (i.e. already a culturally embedded sign that exists as a known quantity to both artist and viewer) is left open as “innocence,” the meaning therein being unexamined. The possibility for articulated meaning must come then from the “between” space, from the narrative implications the viewer can draw out through the idea of a contemporary artist using the known meanings of a historical vocabulary, but being “original” within those parameters. In this case, the historical vocabulary he is using—mid-century gestural abstraction—has been codified as carrying within it the trace of existential struggle, where each decision carries with it a tremendous weight. Yet by allowing himself to use that language, Aldrich transfers the meaning into one that has to do with opportunity instead of weighty restriction, with historical play instead of progress.

This permission to slip into a historical role can be seen as both a symptom of “knowingness” and a solution to the problem of knowingness. Contemporary artists, and one might especially say, painters, have the problem of

⁵ Laura Fried, “On the Work of Richard Aldrich,” Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.
<http://www.camstl.org/exhibitions/main-gallery/richard-aldrich-and-the-19th-century-french-painting-/>

knowing too much. They are in a situation where every visual nuance carries with it an art historical lineage and hence makes comment on that lineage, so how those codes are used is of paramount importance. But in the precisely evasive position Aldrich locates, he is able not just to use those codes, but actually to inhabit, if only momentarily, an art historical space. One could conjecture that the instance of one painting lets him become a fictional-historical figure, a *hypothetical artist*. The interplay of time and cultural value becomes evident as one speculates about this *possible* historical artistic practice, out of which only one painting still exists, in comparison to the “real” contemporary artistic practice of Richard Aldrich, which encompasses a plethora of painting languages and references. One thinks about the *imagined* continuity in the practice of this hypothetical modernist, in relation to a schizoid, if sophisticated, contemporary practice. One also speculates about the possible effects of this work, had it been actually made in the fifties or sixties. Its visual difference from the actual painting of that time is so slight, one wonders if it would have made a difference at all.

In the end, though, we are left with a remarkable displacement from actual to possible, from a place of incredulity to a place of belief. This is accomplished not in the way the painting looks so much as how the way it looks relates to its contemporary context. The viewer is given the agency to re-narrate art history, even if the ending always comes out the same.

Joe Bradley



Mouth and Foot (Ichthus) 2010

Joe Bradley's work seems to combine an acute sense of timing (in terms of Kubler's notion of "entrance"), with a deep commitment to inchoate, unresolved, articulation. To some, this might translate as a combination of fashion and expressionism. Where is the opposition in the work, they might well wonder. What conceptual parameters have been supplied that we might read the work as a critique of the heroic, gestural, painting it apes in style and scale? There appear to be none. No framework or explanatory text is supplied. No text, that is, besides the text of the work itself and of the artists' prior work.

Bradley is a painter who creates distinct bodies of work, making large jumps stylistically from one to the next. He first became known for his monochrome stackings of stretched vinyl, which look to be sculptural, robot-like figures. Next, he made a series of what he called "Schmagoo" paintings, which

consist of simple, iconic, line drawings in grease pencil on dirty, poorly stretched, unprimed canvas. The drawings depict, among other things, semi-realized stick figures, the superman emblem, the number “23”, a horizontal line, and a blocky cross. His latest two groups of work continue his preoccupation with the figure. His 2010 show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, “Mouth and Foot Paintings” was filled with giant-sized gestural paintings made with oil stick on scuffed, stretched drop-cloth canvas. These combined recognizable body parts and symbols with awkward, abstract shapes. His concurrent show “Human Form”, at Canada, consisted of large silkscreened silhouettes of a man imitating what appear to be poses from archaic Greek or ancient Egyptian painting, but were in fact sourced from a break dancing manual. The gaps in-between the bodies of work seem to inform our reading of the decisions inside each group. They act as cool, critical, distancing agents. We are constantly reminded that what we are looking at is an option, a chosen rhetorical voice.

The “Mouth and Foot Paintings” enter the visual territory of two of the most heavily debunked twentieth century art movements—abstract expressionism and neo expressionism. The paintings call to mind Pollock (if only in his use of a raw support), Guston, Baselitz, and Basquiat, among others. However, Bradley has a knack for making the unfashionable fashionable. The similarity to the above mentioned artists proves to only be superficial, with Bradley’s work never attempting the heroic, but merely using its signifiers to underscore a faulty, awkward fragility (the artist’s actual influences, including Don Van Vliet (Captain Beefheart), Chicago artists Jim Nutt and Roger Brown,

and outsider artist Joseph Yoakum, are far more quirky and obscure).⁶ In any case it is obvious that Bradley is consciously taking on the language of heroic, monumental abstraction. By coupling that language with invented “primitivist” pictograms, he creates a kind of self-negating expressionism that serves, in the end, as a vehicle for an *intimate* exchange with the viewer on the communicative efficacy of painting.

Mouth and Foot (Ichthus) gives us a rumination on the complexities of articulation in painting in the guise of a decodable symbol. At the center of the canvas we see a fish-shaped *ichthys*, an early Christian symbol for Jesus. The tail of the fish has been attached by Bradley to a black fang in a schematically rendered predatory mouth. This hybrid symbol was taken by Bradley from an image in Philip K. Dick’s *Exegesis*, the science fiction author’s multi-volume investigation of his personal spiritual visions.⁷ Bradley is here playing on our human desire to decode and interpret, on the very idea of exegesis itself. Our first impulse as viewers is towards decoding this drawing as *symbol*, forgetting that this is not a symbol but a painting, an *object*. We think about evangelism, consumption, corruption and decay (the black teeth); we read the symbol as a mouth and an eye, and then think about viewership in regards to articulation. All of these are valid readings, but they are only the first layer, literally. There is a whole other painting behind the site of our primary decoding.

Like all of the paintings in its series, *Mouth and Foot (Ichthus)*, was painted on both sides. Working on the floor, the artist periodically flipped the

⁶ Phong Bui, “Joe Bradley with Phong Bui,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, February, 2011.

⁷ *Ibid.*

canvas over to work on the other side, using the ghost image that bleeds through the canvas as an impetus for further ideas. In most of the paintings, it seems as if Bradley worked both sides at length, using similar painting languages on each side and ending up with subtle remainders that hover behind and around the positive forms on the front of the canvas. In this work, however, there is a leap in language from back to front. He is giving us a stark comparison of two kinds of language that can exist in painting: symbolic and abstract. He asks us to move from one kind of thinking, of meaning creation, to another. Behind the “mouth,” and behind the tooth of the canvas, a blocky cloud of blue, yellow and pink shapes hovers. There is no apparent narrative relationship between the forms on either side, so we are left as viewers to either decide that the background painting is simply a sign of carelessness on the part of the artist—that he is using this canvas as a support simply because it's there—or that he is setting up a meditation on the idea of both *reading* and *looking*.

Bradley has stated that he cannot conceive of painting a pure abstraction, as he says: “I hold onto the body because I just can't make an abstract painting. There's just always a story that I have to make happen.”⁸ So, one way to view *Mouth and Foot (Ichthus)* is as a covering-up of abstraction with representation (albeit a rudimentary form of representation). I would argue, however, that there is a more sophisticated dynamic at work here, one that enacts a contradiction at the heart of how painting functions. Bradley is pursuing the matter from two sides, moving inward. Both abstract and representational images are physically seeping towards each other through the weave of the canvas, placing the action of

⁸ Yasha Wallin, “Cave Painter: Joe Bradley,” *Art in America*, January, 2011.

the painting on that weave, that is to say, on the objecthood, the materiality of the canvas itself. This is the physical reality—or, one could say, objective truth—of the dynamic of the painting. However, the *perceptual* reality of the painting, because of its two-sidedness, is the temporary vanishing of that object of the canvas into a transparent pane. This illusion of disappearance is made all the more poignant because of the nastiness of the surface, its simultaneous assertion as beaten-up, earthy, material.

Bradley pulls painting apart here, leaving us finally with the original “window”, the object-negating, transparent, illusory reality of painting. But it is found in a most unlikely place in this seemingly bawdy, assertive, expressive object.

On Raphael Rubinstein’s “Provisional Painting”

There have been few critics who have attempted to make sense of the recent trend in painting towards reduction and self-effacement. One who has tried is Raphael Rubinstein. In his May 2009 *Art in America* article, “Provisional Painting,” Rubinstein casts a wide net in order to identify the terms he needs to describe this strain in painting. Focusing on the lack of “finish” in the painting he addresses as testament to the “impossibility” inherent in all painting, Rubinstein creates an argument that seems to only be able to identify the effects of “provisionality,” but not the reasons for it.⁹ Moreover, he seems to be able to go no further than to accept these effects, this “look,” at face value. In claiming that

⁹ Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America*, May, 2009

the provisional painting is “the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double standing in for a star/masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk,”¹⁰ he correctly identifies the incompleteness of the work as a guise, but does not analyze what the underlying “finished” work might be or might do.

The term, “provisional” is used by Rubinstein to talk about a lack of any permanent resolution or final statement in a painting. He asks the question, “Why would an artist demur at the prospect of a finished work, court self-sabotaging strategies, sign his or her name to a painting that looks, from some perspectives, like an utter failure?”¹¹ But, as Rubinstein himself acknowledges, the appearance of casualness, incompleteness, or erasure is nothing new in painting. The author traces a “foundational skepticism” in modernism back to the perceptual second-guessing of Cezanne and Giacometti, as well as the “denunciations of Dada” up through (confusingly) to Polke and Punk rock.¹² In this sense, Rubinstein seems to think that the gesture of erasure or nullification means the same thing now as it did in 1900, 1954, 1920, 1965, or 1978. The reality is that at any given point in time it meant something different. To claim the contemporary “unfinished” work as radical assumes accepted notions of “finish” that no longer exist. The painter working today who chooses to leave a canvas mostly empty or rubbed-out does not do so in the face of an academy or audience which requires a high level of pictorial resolution or an earnest battle with the medium. He or she is not risking failure based on the look of the canvas. Rather, the affront is in the lack of ownership over a personalized critical

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

statement—it lies in the meta-text rather than in the text. But Rubinstein stays doggedly in the realm of the visual when speculating on issues of abjection and negation, thus possibly ignoring the real sites of both.

Rubinstein goes on to speculate that the impetus for making provisional works now lies in a rebellion against slickness and marketability: “As employed by younger artists, provisionality may also be an attempt to spurn the blandishments of the art market—what seemed, until only yesterday, an insatiable appetite for smart, stylish, immaculately executed canvases, paintings that left no doubt as to the artist’s technical competence, refined sensibility and solid work ethic.”¹³ What this argument fails to take into account is that there is more than one style of painting which whets the appetites of collectors. A piece of frayed, wrinkled, cloth stuck to a canvas can be fetishized as easily as a slick, clean, painting can. Indeed, the dandyism implied by the nonchalant, one-off, gesture is itself a marketable commodity. Some collectors may want to be in on the combination of disregard and sophistication that such a work might evoke. Rubinstein himself appears to have an underlying admiration for a certain attitude in the works he discusses, an admiration that one could easily see translating to the market. If there is a visual language that can truly run counter to the forces of the market, it is not to be found in the gestures of erasure and nullification that Rubinstein talks about. This is not to say that there isn’t a concerted effort on the part of many of the artists discussed in this article to withhold an immediately generous and attractive first layer from the viewer. This strategy exists. But it seems implausible to ascribe to these artists the intention

¹³ Ibid.

of resistance to market forces where there really is none. The works by the “younger artists” (such as Stefan Sandner, Richard Aldrich, Cheryl Donegan, Jacqueline Humphries, Wendy White, and Joe Bradley) mentioned in the article function very well within the market. This statement by Rubinstein is probably an attempt to give the work some kind of anti-capitalist credibility. In reality, if there can be seen to be any such critique in this work, it comes from the work’s *participation* in the economy of the art world. That such anti-work is consumed readily might be itself very telling about what the actual purchased thing is—the artist instead of the artwork.

The bulk of Rubinstein’s article is given over to description of the five mid and late career artists he chooses to typify the idea of “provisional painting.” For each, the author focuses on the ways in which the given artist is operating in an anti-heroic, minor manner. One is left to guess how this might function as a positive. In writing about Raoul de Keyser, Rubinstein uses such words as “amateur” and “novice” to describe the appearance of the work of the eighty-one year old painter. Albert Oehlen’s paintings are described in their “abject awkwardness” (you are told that this gives the work “great pictorial force,” but you are not told how). Mary Heilmann’s work is “self contained and unassuming” and “doesn’t seem to invite any transcendent reading.”¹⁴ Michael Krebber even fails, in Rubinstein’s eyes, to do enough to be provisional painter, he is “an artist failing to achieve *nonfinito* vitality out of sheer impatience.” Rubenstein comes closest to questioning his own admiration for negation in his examination of Christopher Wool’s work, about which he asks the question: “has

¹⁴ Ibid.

anything actually been covered up? Is there something under Wool's erasures?" This is the central question which any work that forefronts negation asks—is there anything there to be negated? Is there a real content, a hidden presence, underneath the obfuscations, erasures, and failures?¹⁵

The crux of the article rests on the idea of “impossibility,” the notion that certain constrictions conspire to prohibit the production of paintings. He sees his anti-heroic, provisional painting as being made against this dramatic background. He puts it this way: “Impossibility can also be the result of the artist making excessive demands on the work, demands to which current practice has no reply. At a certain moment, in a certain studio, it appears that great painting may be impossible, that painting of any kind may be impossible. Nonetheless, for whatever reasons pertaining to a particular painter at a particular time, painting must be done, must go on.” So, near the end of his article—which up until then had taken pains to avoid associating any kind of valor or effort with the artists he describes—Rubinstein suddenly frames his argument in existentialist terms. He sounds somewhat like Philip Guston, who said of New York School painting: “...you felt as if you were driven into a corner, against a wall with no place to stand...it was as if you had to prove to yourself that truly the act of creation was still possible...I felt as if I was talking to myself, having a dialectical argument with myself to see if I could create.”¹⁶ Yet, again, Rubinstein fails to take history into account. Just as the relationship of a contemporary painter to ideas of negation and erasure cannot possibly be the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Philip Guston and Joseph Ablow, “A Conversation Between Philip Guston and Joseph Ablow” in *Philip Guston 1975 – 1980: Private and Public Battles* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1994), 30.

same as an artist working thirty, forty, or fifty years ago, so, too, the relationship of that artist to the notion of impossibility must also be fundamentally different. For Guston, impossibility was something that had to be discovered through painting and then overcome in painting. Although one could say that these existentialist attitudes were something that was also absorbed culturally, it was important for him to think of his “battle” with impossibility as uniquely his own and something that was found, discovered. Underneath all the anti-heroic rhetoric, Rubinstein is trying to posit some kind of return to this struggle. But for a painter working today, there is an *a priori* impossibility. It is a given that painting has no special right to exist and should have no privileged position vis à vis other things in the world. This does not need to be enacted, worked out on the canvas. It would not make sense to create a kind of double negative—a painting which announces its impossibility within a context where its impossibility is accepted. Yet the use of erasure as an emptied-out gesture (think Christopher Wool), is also a given strategy. So young painters taking on this territory today work within a language where defacement/erasure and positive marking carry no inherently negative or positive values. This points to an emptiness, a silence, which is greater than the mere *look* of the painting. It is the silence of the artist’s voice. This is the truly troubling phenomenon which Rubinstein points to, but does not fully identify.

We should not forget, however, that viewer has agency in this dynamic. It is up to the viewer to read these paintings as empty. But, given our historical position, might we not read them as full, as possibly overloaded with

information? Might the work be pointing towards this? Might it be the viewer's ability to switch between the two readings which animates the work?

On Christopher K. Ho's *Hirsch E.P. Rothko's Hirsch E.P. Rothko*

Christopher K. Ho has posited a different and more complex way of addressing this new current in painting through a fiction he has developed surrounding an alter-ego, "Hirsch E.P. Rothko." The form this has taken is a novella entitled *Hirsch E.P. Rothko's Hirsch E.P. Rothko*. In it, Ho seeks to position new abstract painting within a larger framework, or rather, he seeks to talk about what he sees as its non-criticality within a critical model. The fiction he creates serves to allow him to make this kind of work himself, as the novella is only one of three components of his 2010 solo exhibition at Winkleman gallery, entitled "Regional Painting." The other two were *License Plate Shed*, described by Ho as "Part endurance art, part polemic, part experiment"¹⁷ and which consisted of him living and working in a shed in a remote location for one year, and *Untitled Paintings by Hirsch E.P. Rothko 2001 / Christopher K. Ho*, which is comprised of the paintings he made over the course of that year. The central question of this entire project is how an "uncritical" stance might be used as part of a critique. In asking this question, Ho takes it as a given that painting, and more pointedly, small, hand-made, invented, abstract painting, is created in rejection of critical

¹⁷ Christopher K. Ho, www.christopherho.com/projects.php

discourse. The meta-text Ho creates is a way of redeeming this painting from itself, while using it as a kind of proposal, or option.

Even as Ho centers this project around the activity of painting, he takes great pains to keep one foot outside of this activity. He wants to make sure that we know that a painting is not enough on its own, even as his fictional character, Rothko, moves from a worn-out conceptualist practice towards a new engagement with the autonomous painted surface. Ho uses painting as a caricature, a stand-in for a kind of anti-conceptualism, and yet he (possibly as a reflection of his sentiments about his own work) also characterizes (if not caricatures) conceptual practice as a kind of trap. Ho writes, in the voice of Rothko, that “the anguished branching logic of my conceptual practice, a logic in which every decision revealed another set of decisions to be made, each bearing its own set of possible consequences (critical, art historical, aesthetic, commercial, social), all of which had to be considered and reconsidered before the next could be addressed. Needless to say, nothing got done. My studio days would end as all of this suddenly collapsed into an empty core that seemed ultimately to underpin simple choices of materials, fabricators, configurations of elements in exhibition spaces.”¹⁸

Rothko comes to painting, then, as an antidote to hyper-intellectualization. His first impulse to use paint comes from seeing excrement on the walls of a restroom, which makes him “think of paint.” Ho thus links the impulse to paint to some sort of infantile, scatological fascination with material. Other figures of anti-intellectualism come in to play as the story progresses, and

¹⁸ Christopher K. Ho, *Hirsch E.P. Rothko's Hirsch E.P. Rothko* (New York: Winkelman Gallery) 18.

the trajectory of Rothko's journey is towards an anti-intellectual space. After Rothko abandons the New York art world (having been fired from his teaching job at RISD and having told an important gallerist "I did that," in regards to the aforementioned excrement) he winds up driving through Colorado, where he crashes his car. The damage is minor, but the hyperbolic New Yorker thinks of himself as being saved by a bunch of locals. Ho humorously references Joseph Beuys, hippie culture, ski culture, Native Americans, and pop spirituality in his description of his rescue: "The crushed corpse of my plane. The snow. Parched, cold, buried, certain death, hunger. A double rainbow. Ute Indians. A wooden man, burning. War paint, Kjus suits. The smell of pot. Being dragged, the sound of unfamiliar tongues disorienting as I was wrapped in felt blankets. Warmth. I was saved."¹⁹ This sets up an atmosphere of (easily consumed) myth, rather than analysis and critique. It is this local milieu becomes the antithesis of his New York environment. The locals quickly identify Rothko's problems as being of a spiritual nature. Rothko's first reaction, meanwhile, is to pass judgment on these people. Ho uses their lifestyle as an allegory for an unspoken "painter" straw man he sets up. They "approached their lives without any critical apparatus, without self-awareness, without rigor. They perceived themselves as free, their courses self-determined, living outside of the constraints of "society." Of course, in my view they were society's pure products, their form of put-on resistance precisely that expected of them by a culture that commodified dissent."²⁰ (As a sidebar to this characterization and critique of the "free-spirit", Ho makes sure to

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 33.

drop hints that his new friends are in fact indirectly subsidized, through the stock portfolio of one of their members, by such dubious entities as Raytheon and Halliburton, thereby alluding to painting's dependency on the market and corporate money.) This all points to Ho setting up the idea of naïve intuition that needs to be redeemed by a conceptual *model*. As Rothko moves unwittingly towards direct, "intuitive" painting, Ho slyly pulls the rug out from under that way of making in the subtext of the fiction.

But Ho's intention in this fiction does not seem to be to just make a veiled criticism of intuitive painting. Rather, he is suggesting the idea of "Regional Painting" as a "temporary suspension"²¹ of criticality which allows one to escape circular logic and ideas of historical progression. Ho calls this a "side-guard"²² position in which the artist is freed from both the claims of history, of "newness," and the stigma of conservatism. For Ho to accept the intuitive as a strategy, it must exist in a dualistic relationship with criticality. But this separation leaves his actual appraisal of what constitutes the process of painting terribly impoverished and simple-minded. In taking critical awareness out of the actual process, Ho leaves us with a stereotype. When Rothko finally begins painting in the shed, his narrative voice spews the most inane aphorisms about painting, such as, "The painting speaks to you; you listen and react. It wants to be *found*, not *made*. Painting is a forum for accidents; these must never be faked. Honesty is paramount. Planning is inherently dishonest," and, "When you are truly painting, you will be discovering what you already know without knowing that

²¹ Ibid., 53.

²² Ibid., 61.

you know it.” This description is problematic for several reasons. It assumes, first of all, that abstract painters today employ what are essentially Abstract Expressionist methods, albeit a highly simplistic version of those methods. This may be true for some truly “regionalist” painters. But the kind of painting Ho is responding to in taking on this project is far more deceptive than he wants to give it credit for. Ho writes as if surface “look” were reliable, as if the younger generation of painters whose work he is attracted to and yet suspicious of don’t understand the cultural signifiers they are employing in making these paintings. The difference between Ho and these painters (some of whom I’ve written about in this paper) is the difference between overt and implied fiction. Rothko, for Ho, is an explicitly fictional character that allows him to act out his imagined opposite (“Scratch a conceptual artist, find a painter.”)²³ The kind of painting I’ve been discussing, on the other hand, employs an embedded fiction, and allows the artist to play more subtly with cultural and historical meaning instead of using stereotype and caricature. The separation between an over-arching critical argument and the work itself is a handy one that allows Ho to have it both ways. In doing so he declares painting’s impotency to carry embedded critique, to function fully as a discursive site. Thus, even as Ho proposes “regionalism” as an option, we know that his project is in fact a criticism of the implicit, the unsaid. In the architecture of his project, what he in fact proposes is the primacy of an overt authoritative voice. For Ho, even if that voice exists behind the foil of a character, it is never in question.

²³ Ibid., 69.

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The real problem in this new painting is its critical silence. Its possible inscrutability comes from a lack of credible clues that could give us as viewers enough traction to read the intention and discursive stance of the artist. The relationship of the physical work to language is unclear, as we are in many cases not provided with a “project” whose terms are well-defined and which provides a lens through which we view the work. This painting is not, I would say, being made *despite* the lack of an overt conceptual model, but rather is being made *about* and *with* that lack. This absence looms very large, it hovers over the work and prods the viewer, chafing against the commonly held notion of art as a rhetorical device, a tool of communication.

By way of minimalism and post-minimalism, we are accustomed (as viewers of painting) to working with blankness, to squeezing out the most meaning from the least input, creating more for ourselves to see where there is less. What allowed us to do this in the past was an idea of progression, a notion of how the work we were viewing added to the lineage and vocabulary of painting. We are faced now with a new kind of emptiness, one that doubles physical reduction with an absence of any conventional sense of progress. Locating a no-man’s land between historical reference and invention, these artists mine the past but do so peripherally. They do not so much reassert past solutions, acting out some kind of historical cycle, as they create fictional artworks that move freely back and forth between a present context and a historical language. In the past,

the framework given by historical prescription and the artist's own agenda informed the reading of the physical object. This is still the case, of course. But there is now this added, historically fictive, dimension in painting. These works opt for movement, for perambulation, instead of progress. Art historical spaces are shifted, filled-out, and enriched by fictional additions. The historical imagination of the viewer becomes one site of the work, as the viewer attempts to create a framework for the work based on the given physical material.

The relationship between material presence and an absent framework is especially complex and interesting in the age of high speed internet, powerful search engines, and open-source software. In an age of light speed accessibility to layer upon layer of reference, why would artist opt to put forward work that asserts itself as un-critically self-referential? Why this muteness now? The apparent lack of a single authoritative agenda in the works addressed here might reflect an open-source approach to art making and critique. Each artist adds a slight variation to a text, changing a word or sentence here or there instead of writing a manifesto. This conclusion, although interesting, leads nowhere and enables countless pointless variations on the abject, negated, painting. But those artists that can goad this active viewership while supplying a complex, emotionally fertile ground for the viewer's creative activity *and effectively embed* the parameters of a critical fiction in the material will set themselves apart. In the end, the artist' voice is not absent, but it is necessarily tested by absence.

