

See Sickness – a cultural malady.

Notes on a studio visit with Nick Jeffrey

by Katharina Weinstock – Berlin, April 2017

The second, more casual studio visit with Nick had called up a distant childhood memory: the look and smell of that crust of muddy paint residue, which – as if by itself – would accumulate in the little tin box that held my watercolours. Left to myself in the quiet of my grandmother's studio room (an outmoded 1970s interior decorated in a brown and beige colour scheme: curtains bearing rounded-geometrical patterns, oddly rough fabrics), I would – drop by drop – apply watercolour onto large sheets of paper, fold, and open them – always with amazement: The miracle of image creation had taken place in the few seconds in which the paper's surface had been withdrawn from my sight.

There's a similar sense of carefree creativity and joyful immersion in Nick Jeffrey's paintings. But here, playful exploration is mixed with a self-referential quality. The rectangle of the canvas is a reoccurring shape: as a hazy trace of colour on an otherwise empty canvas; as a stencil traced out by spray-paint; or as rectangular patches of cloth in his more graphic textile compositions. Other works are executed on sheer polyester, which allows for the braces of the frame (sometimes themselves brightly painted) to shine through. Questioning one's medium critically has become an appreciated – if not pervasive – gesture in the arts since they turned 'modern'. Often, however, it is little more than a trope. I come to find Nick's paintings more and more engaging, every time I return to his studio. But still I can't help but ask myself: Abstract painting – what to make of it in the 21st century?

Abstract painting

Today, abstract painting – the revolutionary achievement and great legacy of the avant-gardes – seems to hold such a peculiar place amidst all those conceptual, relational, post-medium and Post-Internet art practices that make up for the feed of today's leading art magazines. Art historically, abstraction (you want to write it with a capital A) was a leap of faith towards a pre-significative mode of perception: pure optical phenomena (as in the Impressionists), which held synesthetic potential (Kandinsky), or even a transcendental promise (Malevich, Hilma Af Klint). If we look at the history of 20th century painting in evolutionary terms, abstraction came out on top after the war, while figurative painting's entanglement with political propaganda in Nazi-Germany seemed to be continued by Socialist Realism in the USSR.¹

¹ Pop Art, of course, reintroduced figuration in the 1960s - heralding a new era of figurative painting. However, it was one of a different kind: Images painted after commercial or pop cultural imagery. Peculiarly, just as

In art historical encyclopaedias, the advent of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s marks the second chapter of a century, which has defined our notions of art down to the present day. A decade later Clement Greenberg made his stance for medium-specificity (art having to exhaust the physical qualities of its medium above all else). His ideal of ‘flatness’ in painting still resonates with 21st century works such as Nick’s. And yes, no matter how pleasantly unintellectual Nick Jeffrey’s approach: his dripping paint (liberated from representative functions) is undeniably indebted to Pollock, just as much as his softly glowing colour fields (opening up to our gaze like windows) are to Mark Rothko. And so, too, Nick’s dried hemp leave prints will always stand in some distant kinship to late Matisse’s leave-shaped paper cut-outs.²

Matisse’s leaves have long turned into popular duvet cover designs – and in abstract painting, it seems, there’s an alphabet of gestures and formal languages in place, which has been developed and explored some fifty years ago. Already back in the 1980s, Thomas Lawson took it upon himself to compile an exhaustive catalogue of all the strategies that comprised the scope of painting in his day: “Last Exit: Painting”³ is a savage critique of the many forms of eclecticism in the works of his contemporaries. We have to admit: Within the clearly defined space of the stretcher frame, there’s not much new under the sun, and ‘The death of painting’ has been proclaimed excessively throughout the past hundred years. In the 21st century, we may therefore ask ourselves: Is painting ‘undead’?

There are two sides to every question. At the end of the day, it might be that same continuity, which makes the canvas such a matchless mirror for all those cultural shifts that have made our world a place so different to the one it used to be half a century ago. In this way painting may really be – not a privileged medium (since it is clearly fraught with problems), but: a special case.

Millennials tackling the canvas

In the past few years a young generation of Millennials has taken over the game, replacing the postmodern mantra of ‘endless repetition’ with a refreshingly adolescent ‘Sturm und Drang’ spirit. The cultural scope of digitalization has finally sunk in. But what does that mean for old artistic media – abstract painting in particular?

photography was starting to realize its full potential as a mass medium – and key propaganda tool of consumer capitalism – painting united with it.

² Cf. Henri Matisse, “La Gerbe”, 1953.

³ Thomas Lawson: Last Exit – Painting. Reprinted in: Artforum (No. 20), October 2001.

Recently, art journalists and curators alike have asked themselves the same question. Art market platforms such as Artsy have answered them by feverishly publishing one best-of list after another⁴ (continuously approximating an ever-elusive zeitgeist), while art critic Walter Robinson – seeing things less optimistically – coined the term ‘Zombie Formalism’⁵. In the meantime, museums have started to respond to the buzz that is currently reviving the painting discourse.

In 2015, London’s Whitechapel Gallery opened “Adventures of the Black Square”⁶ – sketching out a genealogy of a hundred years of geometric abstraction from 1915 up to 2015. The contemporary section of the exhibition included artists such as Gabriel Orozco, Andrea Zittel and Hito Styerl. – Not exactly painters, obviously, but rather artists whose conceptual practices relate to a broader ‘aesthetics of abstraction’ (going far beyond the limits of a singular medium). Interestingly, the Whitechapel show didn’t feature up-and-coming Los Angeles-based abstract painter Math Bass, whose solo show at the PS1 opened that same year.⁷ In contrast to ‘Post-Internet’ – a term which we can offhand associate with a list of names – in contemporary painting a canon is yet to be formed.

We all know, though: Once a new generation of painters is on everybody’s lips, it’s only a matter of time until the right hash tag is being coined. The Museum of Modern Art’s opening gambit: “The Forever Now. Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World”. MoMA’s first survey of contemporary painting in thirty years opened in 2014 and featured seventeen artists (the majority of them based in the US and Germany).⁸ The exhibition’s catchword ‘a-temporality’ refers to science fiction writer William Gibson, who initially used the term in order to describe a cultural product that, paradoxically, doesn’t reveal (through its style, content, or medium) the time from which it comes. In the curator’s words: A “profligate mixing of past styles and genres can be identified as a kind of hallmark for our

⁴ Francesca Gavin: “10 New Artists to Watch in Abstract Painting”. Artsy. June 5th, 2014. URL: <https://www.artsy.net/article/francesca-gavin-10-new-artists-to-watch-in-abstract-painting>

⁵ Walter Robinson: “Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism”. Artspace. April 3, 2014. URL: http://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184

⁶ “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015”, Jan – April 2015, Whitechapel Gallery London. Curated by Iwona Blazwick, the show brought together over 100 modern masters and contemporary artists including Carl Andre, David Batchelor, Dan Flavin, Andrea Fraser, Piet Mondrian, Gabriel Orozco, Hélio Oiticica, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Rosemarie Trockel, Theo Van Doesburg and Andrea Zittel. The exhibition was accompanied by “Abstraction” – an issue of Whitechapel’s book series ‘Documents of Contemporary Art’.

⁷ “Math Bass: Off the Clock”, May – September 2015, PS1 New York.

⁸ “The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World”, December 2014 – April 2015, MoMA New York. Curated by Laura Hoptman and Margaret Ewing. Featuring works by: Richard Aldrich, Joe Bradley, Kerstin Brätsch, Matt Connors, Michaela Eichwald, Nicole Eisenman, Mark Grotjahn, Charline von Heyl, Rashid Johnson, Julie Mehretu, Dianna Molzan, Oscar Murillo, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, Josh Smith, Mary Weatherford, and Michael Williams. “The Forever Now” was the first survey exhibition on painting since Kynaston McShine’s “International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture” in 1984 (a show tracking the reemergence of figuration in neo-expressionist painting in the 1980s).

moment in painting, with artists achieving it by reanimating historical styles or recreating a contemporary version of them, sampling motifs from across the timeline of 20th-century art in a single painting or across an oeuvre [...].⁹ It doesn't come as a surprise that reviewers have criticised "The Forever Now" for touting eclecticism as a 'new style'. And even if we were to pass pastiche off as a style in its own right, its claimed newness would still remain a debatable point: Already back in 1991 Fredric Jameson identified the 'cannibalization of Modernist styles' as a hallmark of Postmodernity.¹⁰

However, it certainly holds true that today's painters – with the digital archive at their disposal – are more likely than ever to adopt past styles and manners. De-contextualized, flattened, and compressed into mere clichés, today's pastiches might owe more to the jumbled, miniaturized image output of Google Image Search than we'd like to admit. – And us, the spectators? The past twenty years have changed us, too. Despite of yoga, meditation routines, and other efforts to 'defrag' our mental memory drives, we can hardly look at a singular image any more without imagining a myriad of other images at the same time.¹¹

How to diagnose a cultural malady

While our brains are racing to adapt to the digital age, our 'hard ware' seems painfully slow at adjusting. Computer vision syndrome (CVS), a newly registered disease, is just one way in which our bodies are resisting digitalization, and the fact that we're now spending six to ten hours in front of computer screens every day.¹² After bulimia and obesity, our overconsumption of images is starting to grow into a cultural malady.

Within the spectrum of contemporary art practices, works such as Ryan Trecartin's have proven video art to be a chosen medium, in which these new conditions could be addressed most poignantly. Carefully crafted to produce (within only one hour) a reception experience usually created by a day of senseless TV binge-watching, his works challenge us to acknowledge the perceptual violence

⁹ "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World". URL: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1455?locale=en>

¹⁰ "Pastiche is [...] the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language." Fredric Jameson: Postmodernism. The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham 1991, p. 17.

¹¹ The social media phenomenon of 'memes' is just another hint at the fact that we live in a culture in which we love to watch images echo images

¹² These numbers relate to the UK and the US and have been measured in the past three years. Jacqueline Howard: Americans devote more than 10 hours a day to screen time, and growing. July 29, 2016. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/30/health/americans-screen-time-nielsen/>. Jane Wakefield: Children spend six hours or more a day on screens. 27 March 2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-32067158>

practices of immersion may entail. While Trecartin's loud, cacophonous videos seem designed to give us the headache we deserve, Jon Rafman's works bypass our body's immediate protection mechanisms. In Rafman's "Erysichthon" (2015)¹³ we're lulled by a soft female voice while the camera eye – smoothly spiralling towards an ever evasive vantage point— creates an mesmerizing visual vortex. Episodes of colossal CGI creatures forcing other creatures down their throats make for the central motives of the video. Moments later, a high-pitched voice shouts hysterically: "Your fantasies can't ever be quenched". Named after the mythological Greek king cursed with voracious hunger (he ends up eating himself), "Erysichthon" presents phantasies of devouring, as well as the only and ultimate satisfaction of that same compulsion: being devoured.

Nick Jeffrey's practice of painting, as I want to suggest, seems to be driven by the opposite impulse. There is something conspicuous about that massive, unmanageable stack of finished paintings obstructing an entire studio wall. "A common thing to see in a studio", I tell myself. But still... I come to understand that each of these paintings is just one figuration within a continuous, open-ended flow of works. They take shape over unforeseeable periods of time – Nick's creative process never really reaches a full stop (the way he finishes his paintings is by placing them out of reach, at the bottom of the stack). Consequently, this also means that there is no striving for a 'masterpiece' – making me wonder whether that is a curse or a relief.

In Nick's work routine the application of paint is equally important as its erosion. He stains and washes out, stains and washes out – creating visually complex palimpsests. Each painting, thus, is a screen on which multiple images have manifested and vanished. Nick tells me about the strange dreams he used to have after watching Disney cartoons as a child – and I think of those trippy blue and green afterimages blazing at the backsides of our eyelids after staring into a source of light for too long... For a moment I get the strangest idea: Are these canvases actually sites of a 'release' of images? I imagine something like a 'Reverse Rorschach'¹⁴: our minds, oversaturated by digital visual culture, pushing these images back outwards, unrestrainedly spilling over into muddy puddles of colour.

Nick's practice is pleasantly impure. Colours run, mix and dry up freely. Whatever went into them in the process of their spontaneous creation – images absorbed during the day, the colour codes of latest fashion campaigns – is now blended and unrecognizable. In their general formlessness and out-of-focus structure these works are astoundingly pleasant to look at. Something about their

¹³ Jon Rafman's "Erysichthon" (2015) is the final element in a trilogy of videos including "Mainsqueeze" (2014) and "Still Life (Betamale)" (2013).

¹⁴ Drop paintings evoking internal images.

structure evokes the same soothing effect treetops seen from below, cosmic nebulas, or an oily puddle on the pavement have on our eyes and minds.

Regardless of the web feeds we have willingly subscribed to (providing us with an inexhaustible supply of contents, images, feelings, and ideas) there is a limit to our consumption: A bodily defence reaction, a reflex – maybe the same one that convulsed Nick Jeffrey's colours into these uncontrollable spills. Cultural criticism can take many forms. In Jon Rafman's "Erysichthon" there is this haunting gulp sound, which had stayed with me ever since I watched it. Compared against Rafman's fascination for insatiable voyeurism, and compulsive visual force-feeding, Nick Jeffrey's paintings suggest an antidote.