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Paiting

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LUCAS PAGE
PAINTING
BFA STATEMENT
PAINTING
COLLEGE OF ART
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN & VISUAL ARTS
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS
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I never read the essays. I just look at the pictures. [Laughs] I read about it and I think it just makes me angry. And then here we are talking about painting. Painters should shut up and paint and when we stop painting we should dance or have sex or get a massage or take a shower and we shouldn't be talking about painting. But here we are talking about painting endlessly, and of course the part about painting that we all love is the part that nobody gets to be talking about it. So, yeah, I got all these books about art and I love art and I love the history of art and I'm always interested in looking at paintings. Any kind of paintings are interesting to me. You show me a painting in a barbershop, a painting by some kid, any painting. I love paintings.

–Chris Martin

ABSTRACT

My work is motivated by the painting “as such” – as an inquiry into and intervention upon what constitutes a painting, how they are constructed, how they function, etc. Through an investigation of painting as a genre, both in its historical canon and contemporary forms, I deconstruct the formal and cultural elements surrounding the field. Four major axes serve as the basis for my inquiry and intervention of painting: Painting, Abstraction, Representation, Control. Taking as a point of departure the comment, “Your work is a representation of abstraction,” I aim to figure out how “the painting” (in all of its many facets – as object, window, representation, color panel, canvas, etc.) operates within my paintings.

BFA STATEMENT

There is no longer room for concern about originality in painting. It is simply assured that good painting will result from synthesis and recombination. And if it doesn't, isn't that just as interesting?

In contemporary painting, certain work has “arisen out of doubt, skepticism, cussedness or even exhaustion.” This attitude traces back to a foundational skepticism that runs through modern art, a history of “strategies of refusal and acts of negation” (Rubinstein). Through this stripping away, I make paintings that aim to uncover the conceptual framework surrounding the canon. An investigation of four major axes in my practice, Painting, Abstraction, Representation, and Control, reveals painting at an interesting state in which representation moves beyond its original source and becomes an extension of gesture and abstraction. My experience of everyday life becomes the filter through which I make paintings, a site on which I can entertain multiple contradictory ideas at once. I intend to show that, through representation, abstraction is information. As described by David Joselit in his essay *Signal Processing*, “The abstract gesture now marks the transfer of information rather than the production of new information itself.”

You're interested in painting as opposed to just art in general?

My work is intended to be a ground for painting both in conversation and in practice. I'm interested in everything surrounding the canon of painting, its embedded mythologies and ambiguities. For example, the way we view and present paintings – that

it's the most collectible type of art, combining prestige with maximum convenience of display (both for private and institutional collectors). Painting belongs to networks of distribution and exhibition, but as Kippenberger claims, "an individual painting should explicitly visualize such networks" (Joselit). In my practice, I use the format of painting as a mode of representation through the selection and re-presenting of the constituent parts of a painting (support, surface, image, paint, etc.). Barry Schwabsky writes in his introduction of *Vitamin P* "that a painting is not only a painting but also a representation of the idea about painting." Tropes and artist characters particular to the history of painting become a space of celebration and subversion in my work. In *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion (Panels Verso)*, I make paintings from a written description of the backsides of Francis Bacon's original triptych.



The optical sensation is linked to the history of painting's conventional formats. In his essay *A Quiet Crisis*, Raphael Rubinstein calls for painters "to get into the ring with great artists of the past, to really grapple with their strong predecessors." So here, I literally turn Bacon's painting to the wall as a way to navigate a space between a reverence and irreverence for painting. The works become a facsimile, an artifact, then turning into minimal abstractions, found objects; they straddle a line between Rauschenberg's found

cardboards, Ryman's painting as object, and Baldessari's deadpan commentary.

Furthermore, in revealing the backside of a painting, a viewpoint that we don't normally get to see, I am attempting to demystify the painting process. Like Kippenberger, I am "using the memory of the medium against itself, to deflate painting's own mythology in order to build it a new" (Gingeras).

In her essay *The New Casualists*, Sharon Butler describes an emerging attitude in contemporary painting that falls in line with Kippenberger's agenda, "These painters take a meta approach that refers not just to earlier art historical styles, but back to the process of painting itself. These self-amused but not unserious painters have abandoned the rigorously structured propositions and serial strategies of previous generations in favor of playful, unpredictable encounters." This type of self-reflexive thinking is important to the role of abstraction in my practice. I am interested in dealing with the history of abstract painting, particularly that of abstract expressionism. In works such as *Bather with a Turtle*, I use a pressure washer to remove a single layer of house paint, revealing apparently drawn lines of raw canvas that calls to contemporary painters Joe Bradley, Amy Sillman, and Richard Aldrich, as well as Miró's *Painting and Anti-Painting (1927-1937)*.



David Joselit describes an “ingrown mark” typical to late Abstract Expressionism in which “each gesture is encapsulated as though occupying its own space. Marks remain distinct from a unifying network or field: They coagulate like scabs across the canvas.” The removal of paint in the pressure washer paintings occupies a strange space in its apparent scrawling, yet almost lack of history in its making. In *Bather with a Turtle*, a drawing of one of the figures + turtle from Matisse’s early composition (1907-08) is made by taking a single instant glance at a photograph of the painting on a cellphone then immediately painting. I intend for “an ‘expressionist’ mood of transmission in which gesture marks the emotional charge and social consequences of the source picture’s dislocation” (Joselit). Yet the drawing falls apart. Rubinstein describes such a tendency of “deliberately turn[ing] away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk in consequence or collapse.” Here, a charged gestural abstraction results from a loss of information through this process of transmission from the original: I view Matisse painting in the flesh; I take photograph with cellphone; time goes by; I take one quick look at miniature painting on screen; I paint with pressure washer.

The well-known character of the macho heroic abstract expressionist painter, with his work’s familiar trademarks (large scale, paint on canvas, apparent speed of application, etc.), also becomes ground for my paintings. Through a conscious appropriation of these mythologies, my paintings explore a “fundamental dichotomy between the whimsical and the possible seriousness of intention.” In \$\$\$, a large silkscreen of a found glue mark on the side of a Dollar Store plays the part of abstract painting. The glue mark is found in the world, photographed, traced, then screenprinted. The mark feels recognizable, the archetypal “arty” mark – it looks like a brush stroke.



Rubinstein has noted such “Artists who have long made works that look casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling.” But then the apparently abstract work becomes hyper-realistic, uncovering glue residue meant to hold something before it fell off. I’m motivated by this potential of repositioning the language of abstract painting by linking it with humble and practical activity in life. Rubinstein writes, “Rather than turning abstraction into a joke...give it a serious task: to help bridge the gap between the everyday and the ideal.” In \$\$\$ abstraction is a vehicle for transmission, “the intermediate stage of transporting an image from one time or location to another” (Joselit).

Oehlen, like Kippenberger, uses his knowledge of painting’s history to debase his own medium. Both proponents of ‘bad painting’, they “deliberately pillage from a repertoire of established genres, techniques and idioms to demonstrate the failure of both abstraction and figuration” (Gingeras). My work seeks to continue this investigation of the tension between representation and gesture and abstraction in relation to a larger conversation about painting. Schwabsky writes, “That is the reason there is so little contradiction now between abstract and representational painting: in both cases, the painting is there not to represent the image; the image exists in order to represent the painting.” In *Body Shop*, I make a painting of a found wall painting on the side of an

auto body shop. The first layer consisted of painting in the colors of the forms from the wall, guessing the scale of the shapes for the next layer of silkscreen, a photograph of the wall that would overlay the colors, but probably not match up.



I am thinking about vernacular art, outsider art, sign painters, amateur artists. Both in my painting and in the hand of the original Body Shop painter, there is a quality that Schwabsky describes as “sometimes earnest, sometimes slackerish techniques, at times academic, at others approaching the simplicity of the Sunday painter or the extreme stylization of the decorator often seems to recklessly evoke everything that had once become off limits to serious painting.” Here, representation moves beyond its association to its original source, not necessarily only referring explicitly to that thing. Perhaps The Body Shop instead becomes a painting about the female-targeted beauty product shop. The role of the representational image in painting begins to open up as an extension of gesture and abstraction, taking on the potential to talk about a wide range of associations at once.

In other works such as *Work*, the presence of a human body serves as “a stabilizing figure, albeit one in which limbs and organs are submitted to a slow-motion

collapse or fade-out” (Joselit). Here, representational imagery and abstraction are smashed together – the screenprint of the graphic wooden moving pallet (found then photographed painted on the side of a moving truck) and the gesture of the man holding a box sit within and on top of each other, sharing the same space, but coming from distinctly different sources. The figure serves as a strategy to perhaps more directly address the role of the machismo painter. The subject becomes an athletic mover lifting a cardboard box in a circumstance without time and a 9-to-5 schedule. He is a blue-collar worker, literally made of blue paint, subjected to endless lifting, simultaneously starting to talk about the Myth of Sisyphus as well as the very making of the painting itself.



Moving between gesture and abstraction, between a crafted representation and a group of gestural marks, allows this range of immediate connotation while also informing narrative. Calling to artists like Guston and Polke, there takes place a viewing process in which the representation of the specific thing transforms into paint objects of shapes, color, and texture. Before there is the man holding the box, we recognize the activity

itself that occurred on the surface at the moment of his making, which provides a different kind of information.

I am “looking for unexpected outcomes rather than handsome results. Dashing our expectations of ‘good painting’” (Butler). The role of control in my process becomes a way to negotiate the extent to which my hand is directly in the work. I am interested in the tension that arises between a given and then how I might intervene; a charge occurs in my own reaction to a found source that already has so much information embedded in it. This use of found imagery allows a kind of first-thought/best-thought process. My practice is driven by this immediacy in which we can access a wide range of imagery over a variety of media. In *Picasso’s Sketchbook with Philodendron*, a found image of Picasso’s scribbles and notations on the cover of a sketchbook is screenprinted on a store bought canvas and becomes the ground for spontaneous intervention.



The painting becomes a site for quite a literal conversation between myself and the original maker, whose intention may or may not be related directly to art making. The selected, repeated, self-referential image plus intervention is a dynamic akin to painting

processes in those artists like Oehlen, Wool, Schnabel, and Josh Smith. The provisional is born due to the immediacy in this relationship at “the moment when the painter hesitates between painting and not-painting-and then begins to paint nonetheless” (Rubinstein). Rubinstein continues to describe such work as being in “a struggle with a medium that can seem too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the fine arts ‘fine.’”

In *Talisman*, six older paintings are attached to each other slapdash with whatever strips of wood were available at the time of making. A labored painting of a female reclining nude was first painted on the canvas side, then the male figure quickly painted on the backside in reaction to the structure that arose after the paintings were attached.



The work has a quality that Rubinstein describes as a “weird combination of deliberation and indecision.” In allowing the process to come out of solving a problem (i.e. attaching six frames together with only available materials), the composition arises in a simultaneously authentic and contrived manner. Rubinstein asks, “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?” In an interview, Chris Martin sums up this kind of provisional process fairly nicely:

You reach for orange and you run out of orange and you use pink instead. Maybe you reached for orange because it was going to be a Halloween painting, but now it's gonna be about... pink! The point I'm trying to make here is that of course I have all kinds of ideas in my head and then I'm always making mistakes. I'm always getting it wrong. I'm always conflating things. I thought I was going to do this and I ended up doing that. I thought I was going to paint a skull in it and that it would be a profound painting about death, but it turned out that the skull looked sort of stupid and goofy and it became a painting about Mr. Magoo.

Painting is now dedicated to the process of an image from one site moving to another, enacting the “transfer of population of images” (Joselit). In my practice, I seek a certain ambiguity in a reality that is always already image. Through a loss of information that occurs as a result of this procedure of transmission, abstraction can arise out of representation. My work then becomes a selective compression of these fragments of various images and moments found in everyday life. In this act of relocation, new meaning is built through the accumulated layers of the same image in different places and times. Just as Bois once put it, “Painting as model,” contemporary abstract painting is a model of the travel of information, visual and social, between iterations of the same picture. Painting is still “an arena in which to act,” as Greenberg said of Abstract Expressionism, appropriately an apt reflection of my own work in which I seek both the painting as “broadcast medium” and the painting “as such.”

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