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Humidifier

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Abstract:

A discussion of the painter’s position in relation to visual culture as organized by collage. The role of abstraction is described, the correlative possibilities for gestural and textual reference of which are entailed. Models for the translation of art-historical source material provide the painter with a path forward and justify the non-verbal art experience.
A Humidifier is a device that purports to heal someone with a cold or other respiratory ailment by injecting the air they breath with warm vapor. The effects of this vapor, projected by the device’s fixed point in a room seem fugitive, at best. Given the range of environments a store-bought humidifier is usually deployed in the vapor fails to sufficiently permeate a bedroom or bathroom to have a sure effect. This uncertainty is where a utilitarian domestic object meets painting as a visual and metaphorical figure for the image making activity - the device takes on a recreational use which involves staring at its anthropomorphic grill, and positioning the body in the most suitable relationship to the wisps of vapor it emits. The functional qualities of painting are similar: painted form’s ineptitude in communicating the most basic representational content (affectively in its relation to special effects, and philosophically, in its relationship to the readymade) opens up painting’s possibilities in the present. What I peddle as a painter is an insistence on the indistinctiveness of figuration and abstraction, and the supervenience of the material, formal experience on content creation.

In these basic terms, the image making activity - the turn turn away, step back and to the side, zoom out, etc, and then return to physical alteration of the image - deals with semblance, the interrogation of which promotes a cognitive state that oscillates between doubt and recognition. This working method first found applicability in the works *Love Construct* and *Culture of Diagram*, each based on two categories of source material: in *Love Construct*, the mental image of an eye, and in *Culture of Diagram*, a digital collage constructed from the cover of a book, its title. *Love Construct* is expressively articulated via brushstrokes that build depth conventionally in their
conformance to an orthogonal perspectival matrix. The leap from convention that completed the work was the formation of the gestalt, all over image of an eye’s arch, an image which is central and iconic to Love Construct but which also deconstructs itself in relation to the viewer’s position and attention. Culture of Diagram took on a similar strategy of brushwork in building the pictorial field - however representing the hard edges of the image frame in digital collage resulted in the brusque rupture of the picture plane, signifying the construction of signage or some other provisional structure.

The issues of doubt and recognition came into full focus by the direct address of photographic objectivity in the production of stand-alone collages. In Kittens Grow Up, two disparate video stills are put into a relationship of visual similarity by a horizontal flipping and the placement of a blank grey vertical. That the stretched and sideways
image of a room looks like a bottle, or staring at the bottom of a sink are the kind of interpretations which motivates me to make a decision about the image being made and perceive a need for it to be made - that a meaning can not exist if the object was made any other way. This interpretation is also enabled by the image’s anamorphic nature - in the case of the computer image, magnification and reduction on an orthogonal axis cause the emergence of these disparate semblances. It is worth note that these qualities are preserved, but transmuted to the new dimensions in the scaled, printed image. In Nytimes Collage, 1/23/17, I attempt to complicate the photographic qualities of collage by using illustrative material and creating an image by scanning scratched alterations made into a kind of mannerist seance - in other words making physical alterations at the same scale as found visual incidents in the pixelation of the image was being addressed in digitally constructed collages.
This mode of observation in constructing the image is historically situated by John Bender and Michael Marrinan in their 2010 book *Culture of Diagram*. The authors describe the critical activities of Denis Diderot, who would sit at the highest and farthest remove from the stage with his ears plugged, experiencing theatre as visual spectacle. His decadent and non-textual mode of viewership coincided with the emergence of the fourth wall in theatre, via the removal of banquettes - expensive seating located among the stage proper. Diderot, describing himself in this mode of viewership as “... Caught in a moment of recognition and surprise ...” was critiqued by his contemporary Louis de Jaucourt: “I never go to the theater in order to see and hear what i can see and hear by standing at my window”. Yet the psychological distinction of actor and audience promoted by Diderot that minimized the overt signs of social exchange exemplified by banquettes paradoxically heightens the impact of a play’s gestures, gestures described by Jaucourt as “of a lesser order, reserved for creatures unable to express complex ideas: animals, deaf-mutes, children, or people too impatient to reason fully.”. Via Diderot’s immersion, correlative processes whose associative openness resembles abstraction take on a didactic ambition. Diderot’s theorizing corresponded with a development in the understanding of perception where information received by perceptual organs is stored and transmitted over time (Bender and Marrinan). In this sense the tableau of a play resembles the frozen painted image, and vice-versa. Speculatively, the frozen image might take on a didactic meaning by presenting a model for how knowledge might be constituted against the backdrop of shifting gestural possibility. In this regard I rely on a statement by Susan-Buck Morss concerning the
 avant-garde: “Critical cognition may be produced effectively by an oil painting or a theatre piece, and it may be lacking in a photograph or cinematic representation. … what matters is that the image provides a sensual, cognitive experience that is capable of resisting abusive power’s self-justification” (Buck-Morss, 101).

_Humidifier_, the painted translation of an earlier collage, attempts to use painting’s properties of fluidity in relation to tableau to accomplish this task. By scanning the entire surface with scumbled brushstrokes before more precisely rendering the reference material and architectonic background of the collage, I wanted to explicitly develop what Bender and Marrinan describe as “visible holes and linguistic emptiness … separating a succession of tableaux.”. Taking on the form of a schematized still-life, _Humidifier_’s scumbled layer takes on a correlative equivalence to the rendered image, attempting to create a space where the image’s armature is developed enough for invention and reference to be indistinguishable.

_Humidifier_
Oil on Canvas, 59 ½ x 40 inches, 2017.
Portrait with Head in Hands continued this vein of research, this time alluding to a specific cultural form, the encyclopedia, in the airy whiteness of its backdrop. Again, I wanted the background of correlation to be rich and indistinguishable from its foreground. Continuing to use the strategy of building depth by aligning brushwork to an orthogonal grid, painting’s property of simultaneity caused overlayed strokes to create interstices in the backdrop.

The title is an ambiguous reference to mood by confirming a non-objective painting’s portrait format. It is an allusion to a motif of pictorial severing, too, featured in Portrait with Head in Hands’ antecedent, a 1966 self-portrait by the Pakistani artist Sadequain. This image, described by Susan Buck Morss in her 2015 essay Seeing Global as a conscious mistranslation of Picasso in service of a culturally specific allegory: a self-portrait as the Sufi mystic Sarmand, beheaded for heresy in 1661. Portrait with Head in Hands does not directly attempt the task of a textual translation of Sadequain’s work, who as Buck-Morss describes used Arabic calligraphy in other instances as “vegetative rather than textual” - an instance of what Iftikhar Dadi terms “calligraphic modernism” - the non-lingual use of calligraphy to communicate affect and cross the iconographic borders of a single nation state (Buck-Morss). The painting does directly engage with Sadequain’s motif of severance, however. Taking Buck Morss’ interpretation of Charles Bell’s statement “the countenance is the index of the mind”, who described the violence of modern medical situations as provoking an “excess of sentiment” - that Bell’s response was not of intentional meaning but rather “a sensory mimesis, a response of the nervous system to external stimula which was “excessive”
because what he apprehended resisted comprehension” (Buck-Morss, 103). *Portrait with Head in Hands*’ information heavy surface exemplifies sensory overload while positing countenance as blank and incomprehensible.

![Portrait with Head In Hands](image1)

*Portrait with Head In Hands*

Oil on Canvas, 38.75x41.5, 2017.

![Sadequain - The Artist,1966](image2)

*Sadequain - The Artist,1966*

Much of the preceding work drew from a relatively boundless mining of images from google or academic search engines, arrived at through search terms that expressed preferences and selections for imagery no more specific than the preferences and selections made in the painting activity. That this source imagery was nonetheless circumscripive motivated me to address source material that was more specifically aligned with my preferences and selections for imagery - this has resulted in a series of painting and collage work that deals with the painter Philip Evergood. The genre of social portraiture based on life drawing is important in the context of digital imagery in that its artistic ambition is one of direct translation - I make images elusively, and this gave me something to work against.
In the same vein a painter such as Michael Williams positions himself to the work of Charles Burchfield or J.F. Willumsen to triangulate his work in relationship to Maria Lassnig, Evergood served as a mediating figure between the present and the influence of American regionalism on artists such as Philip Guston (Susan). In the words of Lucy Lippard,

Evergood’s fantasy is not iconographically complicated, and is unburdened by deeper meanings or obscure symbolism. It is rather, as Bauer has pointed out, “a kind of violence of the imagination which sees everything larger than life and responds with a special intensity of feeling.” In this sense it is also a purely American—naive and not particularly lucid, a little crude in its determination to be slick. It is as “unsophisticated” as that of Chagall, but closer to earth, to contemporary life. Evergood is able to inject this note as effectively into a social subject as into a portrait, but his fantasy is nonspecific and its occasional appearances are purely spontaneous (Lippard 37).

While Lippard’s statement checks out descriptively, I disagree with her promotion of the “purely american”, and see in what Lippard reads to be an “unburdened” mental state a critical and speculative opportunity for the inclusion of “obscure symbolism” and therefore the challenging task of translation.

Left: Philip Evergood - Family, 1965, lithograph (on zinc) printed in black ink on blue, 21 x 15 ¼ and Woman in a Chekhov Mood, 1965, three-color lithograph (on zinc), 20 ½ x 17

Right: Evergood contact sheet, 2017.
To start, I created sampled tapestries of Evergood’s marks which emphasized the arabesque lines inherent to the media of his drawing practice. These tapestries capture something of his style of social portraiture as well as use of biblical nature imagery, yet in their fabric-like, calligraphic form also become in and of themselves signifiers of the textual mutability of gestures. In *Done Signing*, this imagery is placed within an architectonic structure, rendered amorphously in white. The large scale of this work brings anamorphosis into the equation - rendering architecture at a plausible life-size allows the viewer the speculative possibility of picturing what it would be like to enter this architecture, and whether or not the verticals which span the painting from top to bottom might be peered around. In this way, rendering *Done Signing* became a process of re-animating the scanned traces of Evergood’s drawings, a process which I saw as akin to Ken Jacob’s re-photography of historic photographs in films such as *Capitalism Child Labor*. As described by Sianne Ngai, animatedness itself serves as a visual description of the marks made in the painting - a kind of movement or agitation that precedes articulation, a need to make the expressive impulse tentative, and therefore invoke the negative affective states it is produced by and produces (Ngai).
A contemporary practitioner I’ve looked to in regard to this notion of re-animation is Luther Price. Prices’ still images are meant to be displayed either as photographic prints or projected - however they come from found reels of film which are highly manipulated and pushed to their material limit - buried for weeks at a time in Price’s backyard in Massachusetts. These manipulated reels are used by Price to produce films too, and I’m interested in how the manipulated image informs the movie’s durational aspects as well as how glut and compression affect narrative. Price’s editing of his footage sources ruptures filmic naturalism by isolating gestures from any sort of relational continuity. As a result, Price’s characters are brought to life through a
stuttered animation that insouciantly emphasizes the pathetic qualities of medical and educational narratives.

Luther Price - Sorry Series
Photographic Print, 6.5 x 9.5 inches, 2013.

Luther Price - Light Fractures
2013, handmade 16 mm film slide

The saturated intensity of Price’s films and filmic notions of animation has influenced recent collage work that continues the use of Evergood drawings. Placed in relation to photographic backdrops, the Evergood material takes on a more explicitly animated, hallucinatory quality.

Players
Digital print, 13x11 inches, 2017.

Field
Digital Print, 14.5 x11 inches, 2017.
The use of collage and its fugitive position in artistic practice undermines the formality of the painting medium. The painter emerges as a tinkerer, whose conventional product is in no privileged position to its source material and the mental activities of translation (Salle). At best, painting’s promotion of certain cognitive faculties functions critically within visual culture more broadly, opening otherwise unforeseen possibilities of correlation.
Works Cited


Figures and Illustrations

1. Culture of Diagram, 47 ¾ x 48 inches, 2016

2. Love Construct, Oil on Canvas, 19 ½ x 21 inches, 2016


5. Humidifier, Oil on Canvas, 59 ½ x 40 inches, 2017.

6. Portrait with Head In Hands, Oil on Canvas, 38.75x41.5, 2017.

7. Sadequain - The Artist, 1966

8. Philip Evergood - Family, 1965, lithograph (on zinc) printed in black ink on blue, 21 x 15 ¾ and Woman in a Chekhov Mood, 1965, three-color lithograph (on zinc), 20 ½ x 17


10. Luther Price - Sorry Series, Photographic Print, 6.5 x 9.5 inches, 2013

11. Luther Price - Light Fractures, 2013, handmade 16 mm film slide

