

body poems in suspended space

Practice-Led Reflections on Contemporary Painting

by Liz Trosper

“A composer is a dead man unless he composes for all the media and for his world. ... We must find the ways to say what has to be said in the light of our new means of communicating. For this we will need new rostrums, organizations, criteria, sources of information.”

Dick Higgins, *Statement on Intermedia*

Contemporary painting has emerged from Modernism’s self-obsessed narratives and from Post-Modernism’s focus on appropriation and the death of painting. For nearly a decade, a discussion has come to dominate painting theory -- how to conceptualize painting practice in a way that integrates the totality of visual experience in an age in which vision is dominated by digital media.

My creative practice is concerned with the discourse of painting, though my work is interdisciplinary in nature. My objective in this essay and its corollary exhibition, *body poems in suspended space*, is to write and speak about contemporary painting in a new way, question history and lay down the gauntlet for a painting that transcends specialization and essentialism. I hope to illuminate themes in my research and artmaking that relate to painterly concerns and to its relationship to technology and reproducibility. Those themes will serve as the loose structure for this essay, including *painting as a first love*, *mechanical embrace*, *embodied thinking* and *scanner bed and bodyspace*.

Painting as first love

The very idea of an “interdisciplinary” practice presumes a system of segregated disciplines and media which one might mix, sample and violate. This idea, as it is positioned within the discussions of contemporary art, is founded in the Modernist notion championed by Clement Greenberg in works like *Modernist Painting* (1960), which, above all, elevate the autonomy and purity of medium -- with Painting at its apex. The inviolate flatness of the picture plane. The primacy of gesture. The heresy of illusion or utility. Much of the anxiety surrounding what a painting can be is rooted here. Oddly enough, this questioning opened painting to a conceptual root transcending not only its illusory purposes, which began with the widespread adoption of the camera, but also integrating notions of mechanization (and by extension digitization).

In our time, these preconditions are paired with a digital existence and a specialized information economy privileging the verbal and linguistic over the visual. Images are reduced to code and metadata, and are accessible by networks that function linguistically. This radical change in the routine nature in which we engage with images has forever transformed the nature of painting. This new state of the medium has become the subject of exploration by critics, art historians, curators and, most importantly, painters themselves.

A whole cadre of painters are dealing with this subject, many of whom were seen in recent exhibitions such as *What is Painting?*, *The Painting Factory*, *The Forever Now* and *Painting 2.0*. The artists featured in these exhibitions attempt to give us an experience of the implications of this evolution in terms of painterly practice.

In MoMA's 2015 exhibition, *The Forever Now*, curator Laura Hoptman makes the case that the Internet has brought us into an "atemporal" world, in which "all eras seem to exist at once." This is manifest in "a kind of art-making that is inspired by, refers to, or avails itself of styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies and ideas from an array of periods on the art-historical timeline." The exhibition features 17 artists, of whom I will focus on the works of Charline von Heyl and Laura Owens, as well as Wade Guyton and Jacqueline Humphries, as examples of the adaptation of contemporary painting practice as it pertains to what I'll call *mechanical embrace*.

Charline von Heyl's work is greatly influenced by that of Albert Oehlen, who is featured in the "Gesture and Spectacle" section of the Museum Brandhorst's *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, and acknowledged for his early work in exploring the potential of computer painting. Von Heyl was working in Cologne in the early 1980s, where she matured as a painter, and was influenced by Oehlen. Charline von Heyl's work plays with the notion of "creative destruction," according to Morgan Falconer in Phaidon's *Vitamin P2: New Perspectives in Painting*. The work embraces a variety of media and processes, and is clearly influenced by the new language of graphics, but with something of an uneasy quality. The best example of this is the title of her 2008 artist's book -- *Sabotage* -- honoring the tradition of violent interventions via a name taken from the Sabot, which is a wooden clog (shoe) thrown into machinery to break it during the industrial revolution.

Laura Owens has worked with digital painting software since the early 1990s. Her work challenges "dichotomies between decoration and narrative, the hand-drawn and the printed, and the representation and the abstract," according to Hoptman, in *The Forever Now* catalog. Owens' composition clearly acknowledges the impact of contemporary tools like Photoshop and the ubiquitous marks of digital painting and graphics programs. Not only does her work acknowledge these contemporary realities of composition, but the physical manifestation of

her work synthesizes media like oil paint, Flashe, charcoal, collage, digital reproduction and silkscreens, rendering them “provocatively analogous.”

Wade Guyton’s work has been featured in a number of exhibitions exploring the new state of contemporary painting, including MoMA’s 2007 *What Is Painting?* and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles’s 2012 *The Painting Factory*. Guyton’s early work involved drawings “made from pages torn out of 1960s and 1970s art and design books, overprinted with ‘scribbles’ made on a Word document.” From there, Guyton scaled up his work, focusing on a practice of feeding folded canvas through an Epson Pro 9600 photo printer, “in which tiny mechanisms fired ink onto canvas.” In the most literal sense, spreading a liquid, colored pigment on a substrate is certainly an act of painting, although the utensils and utilities for doing so have changed over time. According to Marina Cashdan in Phaidon’s *Vitamin P2: New Perspectives in Painting*, “Not without considerable debate, it has generally been agreed that it is indeed painting.” My work builds not only from the content and form of Guyton’s work, but also from this firmly established precedent within art making.

David Joselit writes in *Painting Time: Jacqueline Humphries*, that digitization has radically altered painting’s time signature and the pace of its consumption, provoking new ways of looking, such as storing up artwork pictures on a cell phone. Joselit writes that painters have responded in five ways -- serial production (RH Quaytman), mark making delegated to technological apparati (Wade Guyton), performative painting (Jutta Koether), appropriated images integrated with abstraction (Thomas Eggerer), painting as slice-of-life (Michael Krebber), and “intelligent touch” as embodied in Jacqueline Humphries work, made to visually represent the vast transcription of data common today.

Mechanical embrace

Technological change has always impacted art practice, be that through modes of paint manufacture resulting from advances in chemistry, through changes in aesthetic resulting from industrial production or through total upheaval in work and leisure through digital fabrication. An honest studio practice has to embrace the totality of visual experience during the artist’s time. In my case, that means integrating the aesthetics of material, mechanics and digital -- everything from wood and canvas to the scanned and inkjetted image.

Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* examines mechanical visual reproduction from copying a master work, Greek founding and stamping, woodcutting, etching, engraving, lithographs, photography and on up to film, making clear the idea that

reproduction is not new, but noting that the differences among modes have unique implications for people and art in its time.

The conditions of the change in artwork production and reproducibility bears a number of similarities -- from block printing to lithographic offset to photography to digital. In each case, the advancement made artwork more promiscuous with the quotidian and more complicit with the marketplace. We equate lithography with the industrial revolution, photography and film with modernity and digital media with contemporary life, which is marked by curated images of lives packed with leisure, a result of the “total upheaval in our labor and leisure” noted in Claire Bishop’s 2012 *Artforum* article, “The Digital Divide.” One can hardly imagine a lithographic selfie.

In the Contemporary world, everything is reproducible, including living organisms. What about something that is reproducible but is not reproduced? For example, many of my digital compositions are created to be made as a unique print. I have the capability to produce an unlimited edition, but I do not. An analogy might be made to a sheep that could be cloned, but isn’t. These types of distinctions, once clear in Benjamin’s time, become muddy in an age of advanced medical science and technology that are converging with the creative fields.

One aspect continues to hold true -- Benjamin’s emphasis on the fact that even the best copy cannot occupy the same space and time as an “original.” This rings true for digital art as much as any other form, but the implications have to do with memory, coding language and ever more quickly obsolete hardware.

“One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.”

This simple, radical statement belies exactly the appeal that digital reproduction has for artists. It is quotidian, and yet it holds the power to divorce something from tradition -- an ever attractive venture for artists.

In “Last Exit: Painting,” the important 1981 *Artforum* article, Thomas Lawson concludes,

“The discursive nature of painting is persuasively useful, due to its characteristic of being a never-ending web of representations. It does often share the irony implicit in any conscious endeavor these days, but it can transcend it, to represent it. Many artists have decided to present work that can be classified as painting, or as related to painting, but must be seen as something other: a desperate gesture, an uneasy attempt to address the many contradictions by focusing on the heart of the problem -- that

continuing debate between the “moderns” and the “post-moderns” that is so often couched in terms of the life and death of painting.”

What’s important in Lawson’s writing is the incredible insight from 1981 as to the challenges painting faces in the post-medium condition. He was spot on that the discursive nature of painting is what makes it a viable, lively and going concern within contemporary art. What is missing -- or perhaps what Lawson is pressing artists to address -- is a broader understanding of painting that does not lean on a black-or-white, life-or-death, ultimately academic understanding of painting as a discipline. Contemporary painting practice demands a broader understanding -- I intentionally avoid the word “definition” -- that integrates the totality of means, aesthetic tools and conceptual framework available to it in a contemporary world.

Here, the controversy revolves around out-dated, market-complicit ideas of object authenticity -- the academic tendency and preference for a historical ideal that began in the academies of antiquity -- and issues dealing with the presence and oversight (hand) of the artist versus technological reproducibility. The tension is not between irony and faith, as Lawson posits, but between our idea of authenticity of a fetish object as distinct from a reproducible object.

Embodied thinking

While the circumstances of the digital revolution are unique, the complete upheaval of the relationship of the human body to art and its making is not a new phenomenon. In *Painting: The Task of Mourning*, Yve-Alain Bois brings our attention to Modernism’s rejection of both painterliness *and* mechanization, pointing out that painting of the time bore the mark of the mass-produced already in its choice of materials. He quotes Thierry de Duve in his discourse on metal-tubed paints, plein air painting and the inability of artists to “compete, technically or economically, with industry.” De Duve goes on to say that the obvious response from painters was to “internalize” their craft by “mechanizing’ their own body at work.”

“Challenged by the mechanical apparatus of photography [now we can add scanning, inkjet printing and digital representation], and by the mass-produced, painting had to redefine its status, to reclaim a specific domain (much in the way this was done during the Renaissance, when painting was posited as one of the ‘liberal arts’ as opposed to the ‘mechanical arts’).”

Bois unpacks the default association of abstract painting as intrinsically tied to modernism, suggesting that “it could not have functioned without an apocalyptic myth.” This apocalyptic myth we can read as the presumed death of painting mentioned earlier.

After attending a colloquium on the exhibition *Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots* at the Dallas Museum of Art with Yve-Alain Bois, and after reading *Painting: The Task of Mourning*, I came to the realization that the apocalyptic myth was not inevitable, but also could not be untethered from the historical fact that the great patriarch of modernism, the embodiment of painting in motion, Jackson Pollock, did in fact *die*. His life’s work cut off in a very finite way, in which we are left to look at his black paintings as the apotheosis of his career. The death of this one man, his *literal* death and expiration of bodily form, is part of painting’s historical narrative. It has become a looming black cloud and is inextricably interwoven with the notion that painting, itself, might die. And so, this association and presence of death tied to painting has literal implications for painters practicing now, who have to grapple with this half-century of looming death.

The large figure of Pollock invades the very notion of making abstract painting. I can’t help but question the particulars of this legacy and the notion that Pollock liberated painting from the artist’s hand and the direct application of paint. This is evidenced by the series of prints he made for a show at Betty Parsons. The works were printed reproductions of paintings. The angst Pollock felt about reproducibility is evidenced in the three copies he made -- one with gouache -- of the same image to resolve a conflict in his own mind as to the legitimacy of this set of reproducible work. Liberation this is not, and there is still a continued controversy about the mechanization of painting as evidenced by the “considerable debate” surrounding Wade Guyton’s work in 2007.

Scanner bed and bodyspace

It’s understood that any contemporary abstract painting practice must deal with the legacy of painting’s last exit and Pollock. I want to come back to notions of reproducibility, changes in relationship to the art object and what Leo Steinberg termed “*The Flatbed Picture Plane*.” Steinberg borrows the term from the flatbed printing press to characterize the “picture plane of the 1960s -- a pictorial surface whose angulation with respect to the human posture is the precondition of its changed content.”

This small kernel, found in a small text, *Encounters with Rauschenberg* by Leo Steinberg, has formed the crux of my aesthetic thinking toward my work and to what I will call Painting 2.0, to borrow from the exhibition title. The aesthetic of the flatbed picture plane began with

Rauschenberg. It takes the upright orientation of painting, with its head-to-foot corollaries observable just simply through an orientation of the picture plane. The most obvious precedent to this is Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955). Rauschenberg has given us clear clues to this radical change in pictorial space. Here the picture space's correlation to body space is quite obvious and draws a direct analogy to painting's relationship to the body -- it is frontal and head-to-foot. Thus, I am enrapt in the notion of our bodies, their frailty and the largeness of the work at hand to capture this, somehow, within painting.

Rauschenberg's later work in 1966 on *Experiments in Art and Technology* set him up as a model for Painting 2.0. His work was concerned with the pictorial space of painting, but embraced technological means of production in a way that Pollock never really did. He also lived a long life, producing much work, which allows for a life metaphor in contrast to the death narratives associated with Pollock. *Bed* anticipated and provided a pathway for us relative to the aesthetic of the scanner bed and Rauschenberg's technological embrace provides a model for contemporary painting practice that embraces digital.

A discussion on the technical capabilities of the scanner bed as medium fails to reveal its essence as a new tool for making fine art. Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* tells us that "the essence of technology is nothing technological. ... Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes." The essence and the question pertains to the way in which technology changes our behaviors, understandings and relationships to ourselves and the world.

The scanner is a portal between the wet and dry studio, between physicality and code. Its space has an estimable relationship to the human body, and the issues of scale at hand create a suspended space that is beautiful and interesting to inhabit in the imagination. The tips of the trail are the ubiquitous hairs and lint that present themselves, betraying the physicality of the space and scale in much of the digital work produced today.

Conclusion

The foregoing are themes in my research and artmaking that relate to painterly concerns and to its relationship to technology and reproducibility. These many paragraphs distill and summarize a labyrinth of research that has guided my studio practice and served as creative inspiration for making. I have discussed new ways to conceptualize painting practice that incorporate the totality of visual and bodily experience during age in which vision is dominated by digital media.

I have discussed recent exhibitions such as *What is Painting?*, *The Painting Factory*, *The Forever Now* and *Painting 2.0*, which have given us an inspiring roster of artists to follow as models for studio practice who are interested in making this new kind of work. We have also looked at art-historical influences, such as Dick Higgins, Benjamin, Claire Bishop, Yve-Alain Bois, Leo Steinberg and of course, the influence of Pollock and Rauschenberg. Each of these serve as an inspiration for this new form of studio-based inquiry that integrates digital forms of making, from their technical adoption to their aesthetic impact.

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