HORIZONTALITY IN PAINTING AND THE ROLE OF THE HANDYMAN

MASTER’S THESIS

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Abstract

The function of this thesis is to connect the lateral working practice of ‘zine making with my investigations into painting and collage. By applying the notion of the “handyman” to my aesthetic mode of production, I open up an extensive, intuitive skill set foreign to traditional modes of painting. This allows my work to explore possibilities beyond the vertical picture plane, and in doing so, highlights the horizontal working plane of my process.
Dedicated to my mother
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Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
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ORIGINS OF PROCESS

The horizontal plane of the artists’ workspace can be seen as a gravitational endpoint; a final resting place for idea-forms to inhabit. This lateral working plane is where I have determined my most steady handed work is best executed. It follows a renewed interest in the horizontal workspace of ‘zine making and its relationship to a tabletop practice. As a way of organizing the seemingly unconnected interests of my formative years, I have expanded on the use of the ‘zine format as a creative vehicle. The use of the photocopier as a lowbrow technological tool to synthesize information is a renewed point of reference for my present-day engagement with pictorial and material issues. This process exists in two related approaches; one in which the table/studio floor allows for a horizontal organization of composite information. The second approach reveals the dual relationship of the ‘zine to the pictorial plane. There is no longer a background, fore- or middle ground, all pictorial information becomes one. By synthesizing all layers of collaged materials together within the photocopy, the compressed image brings all information to a foreground; flattened out, as occurs in the pictorial plane. This draws a parallel between my relationship to early technological modes of production and the physical act of painting. The connection between the working mode of the studio floor/table and the verticality of the picture plane intersects this technological engagement in various ways that I will discuss in this paper.
As a model for my artistic output, the ‘zine represented an entirely natural and free-flowing vehicle within which I could introduce related ideas and concepts as one. The fact that my mother worked for the school district and had unlimited access to photocopiers served my production capabilities greatly. The tabletop working format has proven to be a highly convenient approach; this method still seems boundless. Without any constraints to adhere to, a process that incorporates these traits has evolved over time. The pragmatic approach of ‘zine making allowed for information to be dropped in to the already extant page layout format, and from that I could work with and denormalize the visual presentation of the information to accommodate my preference. In retrospect the subject matter now seems nostalgic and dated, as the advent of computer technology has repositioned the idea of the handmade. However, as an artistic model this remains exemplary of a disciplined work ethic that I now identify through my working process.
SKILL SET

In my early twenties, I took on an apprenticeship with an independent contractor who operated a business out of his home. It was during this time that I learned to handle tools and apply them to what I considered a creative problem-solving approach with the aid of building materials. This experience occupied the seven-year period between my academics, and created a more complete version of the skill set I work with in the studio. In the creation of a “handyman” approach to art making, I have found a way to construct and develop ideas without the aid of the wall. It has helped to reinforce the notion of the “handmade” in my approach to art making. In order for me to work through both the on-the-job process and the studio process, a working knowledge of how these tools and materials are used is necessary so that they can be tweaked to inform one another. As a maker of objects, I am conscious of every step that goes into that process, while ensuring that intuition plays a prominent role in this process. It is my obligation as an artist to find new ways to incorporate authorship into the creative practice. This form of authorship is located somewhere between the handmade and the “readymade.”

Materials employ meaning through series of actions alternately crafted and already existent. There is an interesting lack of clarity that tools are capable of displaying when they are being used in a subversive way, allowing for new meaning to pop through. Sculpture and painting are treated non-hierarchically in a painting process where
dimensionality is simultaneously referenced and exploited. Collage is synthesized into the painting through the act of sanding down the surface to reveal only the formed outline of its layering history. Traditional painting tools are intentionally altered to create new and individualized marks. Oils, inks, glazes and water-based materials are mixed and mingled to arrive at marks of appropriate degrees of organic complexity. By locating possibilities in the process to include actions borne of the “handmade” as well as the “already made,” I am able to work myself in to a more specific working practice that distinguishes between painting and object, sculpture and representation.
STUDIO PRACTICE

“There is the smell of the studio in her work…”
-Mel Bochner, on Eva Hesse; from Briony Fer’s
*The Infinite Line; Re-making Art After Modernism.*

The notion of the “handyman” is featured most prominently in the studio. It is not the ability to create art through a variety of manners and media that interests me; it is the ability to pull solutions together through intuitive means that may undermine the practical function (as it is perceived) of the tool which is being utilized. In the process of balancing a sense of applied experience to the creation of the autonomous object, formal elements are filtered as a way to present more personal aspects, such as humor and craft. The tools of the artist are the medium of all senses. There is a practical direction involved in the working process that allows me to explore a sense of play within the formal compositional elements. Contradiction is often an aspect of this approach. By working on many pieces simultaneously I can establish the quality that will lead the work to a desired effect. What that end point is remains in constant flux, contradicting the previous pieces.
OBJECT/LANGUAGE

As a visual expression of language, the font becomes a particular way in which an individual references and relates to language. Take for example Josef Albers’ P22 font set. Albers designed the entire alphabet with 10 individual geometric forms. These forms come together in various ways to create the individual alphabet letters and numbers.

Figure 1. Reproduction of Josef Albers’ P22 font letterforms.
In looking at these forms independently, they are indecipherable as anything else but what can be considered the building blocks of language. In these type of works, I incorporate those building blocks into the composition. The orientation of these works is solidified by the manner in which the bottom serves as the architectural groundwork upon which one builds. As the viewer exists on the architectural ground, it relates to the viewer in this way. The two-dimensional plane is given a representation of a base. Here materials also serve as a catalyst for meaning. The use of corrective white out tape alternately builds upon and negates the composition. As the process of application occurs, hard edges are constructed through the use of masked areas that pull off other layers of corrective tape. This further opens up the space to reveal other contrasted elements of the composition, as well as leave a residual history of the process in its place. The inclusion of Albers’ forms into the layering process voids the meaning of literal language at the same time it aids in the construction of visual language.
INDIVIDUAL WORKS ANALYSIS

The creation of the autonomous object is an idea I have bandied back and forth: how do I reconcile the multi-directional focus of my studio practice with the outside world through a time-oriented and labor intensive process; i.e, how do I go about making an autonomous object which can exist on its own beyond the threshold of the studio door? This inquiry serves to investigate different modes of object making in the studio as well as various pictorial procedures. A state of constant flux exists as I negotiate my process to arrive at different responses to autonomy.
“FORTIFICATION STARS”

As my studio practice has continued to develop over the past two years, the question of how to get the objects out the door while retaining the sense of studio “play” has remained a constant. This practice combines an open-ended engagement of the senses with an intimate understanding of the physical properties of materials.

![Image of “Fortification Stars.”](image)

Figure 2. Image of “Fortification Stars.”
The concept of the fortification pattern is born out of brain events processing the act of looking outward through the perceptual screen. By definition, it is a zigzag pattern that usually starts in central vision and expands and spreads to the periphery. This is commonly referred to a visual migraine or migraine aura. What is seen in this instance is the fortification pattern. The visual sensation is akin to pressing your fingers to your eyes and looking at the tunneling patterns that occur on the backs of your eyelids. The recreated forms take on a star-like shape as they emerge outward from a center.

The ongoing series of fortification paintings and drawings are a response to this sensation. In preparation, the paper is primed and taped or glued together to create a larger, organic scale. To create the lines that comprise the fortifications, oil-based enamel paint is used. The color scheme here is limited to silver and black in contrast to the white hue of the primed paper. They are thought of as inorganic in hue and material alike, which helps to further contradict the relationship to the body. They begin in a center and grow outward by alternating silver and black lines. Each of these completely encompass the previous line, following the star-like form and providing a sense of structural support (fortification) as they expand. There is a sense of looseness to this series of drawings, aided by the viscosity of the enamel. Lines follow the general order of shape but arrive gesturally, allowing the drips to penetrate the drawn sensory forms and declare their orientation in the process. The natural hierarchy of archival materials-oil on acrylic on paper-is commonly in place for these drawings but there are moments where that order is reversed to incorporate a collage sensibility. Ghosts of fortifications peek out from behind layers of gesso overlay. Cut primed paper is attached onto the
surface to create interruptions in the star forms. These interruptions inform the
progression of fortification based paintings which are discussed in analysis below.

It is not that the fortifications are incapable of penetrating through the physical
properties; there are numerous instances where I have cut through the paper to reveal its
relationship to the wall. By showing their lightness of material, these drawings remind
you of the need to breathe. Suppression of craft as articulated in the two-dimensional
plane comes out of a calculated urgency to represent structure. The rhizomatic nature of
their process yields more painterly aspects of the fortifications when they are transferred
to the vertical plane. The action of drips as the paint dries provides a sense of structure to
these mentally formed images. It also serves as a point of orientation to the floor that can
then be reoriented once dry through collage. Just as the floor is an active working surface
related to sculpture, these drawings invite distinctions between form and representation
through the experience of being handmade.
“GREEN FORT”

The title of this work is a riff on the Fortification Pattern-by means of turning to the definition of “fortification” to provide the painting with an architectural reference. Here the composition is meticulously constructed: just as architecture requires function and exactitude, this painting too requires that the tools that inform its process inhabit these traits. Hard edges are a consistent quality of forms throughout, even as some elements balance free of outward support.

Figure 3. Image of “Green Fort.”
It is here that the notion of the “handyman” and his tools comes in to play: this is a painting about the physical act of building, at the same time it is showing us what “the physical act of building” looks like.

The color palette is nearly monochromatic-black, white and grey would dominate were it not for a repetition of billowy green forms cutting diagonally across the composition. The green hue is an acidic one, weathered. Varying degrees of transparency are applied to these voluminous forms, which are intersected with different types and sizes of diagonal and horizontal line. A precise, non-painterly material is introduced in this painting: the white corrective tape. Just as this material is used to create sharp edged lines, it also purports its intended function: to cancel out information. Contrasted against the impenetrable black, the corrective tape also delivers another keen insight on to this composition-what could be considered architecturally exact in this painting is slightly less so against the corrective tape. The black structure that dominates the majority of surface area is not so specific after all; in fact it is gestural. This loose structure is inundated with slightly more specific forms, referencing the building blocks of form/language that Albers used to create his P22 font set. With these forms included, the building of architectural forms becomes compounded in an effort to reconcile visual language with the literal. It is not a completed language. As an incomplete model of language, it is not sound nor is it functional. We are given only the space which language occupies, and presented with a possibility for a different use of language in an architectural state. It is through a physical recognition of this architectural state that we are able to define what that space is actually like.
“Today anyone who paints space must actually go into space to paint, but he must go there without any faking, and neither in an airplane, a parachute, nor a rocket; he must go there by his own means, by an autonomous individual force: in a word, he must be capable of levitating.”

-Yves Klein, from Michael Auping’s *Declaring Space: Rothko, Newman, Fontana, Klein.*

Here Klein is using humor to describe his compositional investigations of space, yet the specified goal is an inspiring one that opens up interesting avenues of thought. The relationship of gravity to the horizontal plane of the workspace contains as close a possibility as we may get to the act of levitation without the aid of an anti-gravitational device. Gravity will always correct and normalize the relationships between objects, allowing only for a temporary lack of true control when we make these tools and materials projectile, and therefore driven towards a chance resolution with the horizontal plane. When this Pollock-esque splatter technique is incorporated into a composition alongside other techniques, it then becomes another type of tool in itself.
“UNTITLED (FORTIFICATION)”

The foremost recognizable element of this painting upon approach is its reflectivity; a sense of movement is imbued in the high gloss surface as one tries and attains a fixed viewing location. The painting is made on paper, roughly 13 inches wide by 19 inches high: it is a portrait. Upon closer examination it can be determined that the painting comprises a sequence of dense, visually impenetrable layers.

Figure 4. Image of “Untitled (Fortification).”
The majority of these layers are black-some have a glossy appearance (such as the aforementioned surface layer) while others are matte and offset with an additional amount of brown sandwiched in between to further offset the black. These layers are ordered in a way that implies movement, but not the type of movement inherent to the materials used: this is a compositional movement within the static borders of the painting. There is the inferred possibility that what is happening in this painting may have an “other” side to it, which is not available to the viewer. Brushy clouds of yellow and varying degrees of grey inhabit the backmost layer, which we will call the background of this “event.” Black and brown layers mask one another, canceling each other’s centers while leaving edges of dense, bulbous form available on the outskirts. Numerous layers have tentacle-like “arms” jutting outward to reach the papers’ edges; all four sides of the paper are broken by these “arms” and the upper right corner is broken by what is by far the loosest black stroke of glossy paint coming out from deep in the layers. There is great variety to each of these protrusions. Some are brown while others are black: all are connected to the event occurring in the center. Several arms are comprised of hard-edged lines that deliver a sense of tautness to the overall composition while others are looser and show the brushiness of application. In several instances we see overlapping arms which get lost in their attempt to reach the papers’ edge. The sense of dynamism these protrusions deliver operates as some kind of ambiguous force; it is difficult to discern whether this force is centrifugal or centripetal. The inclusion of opposing star-like patterns to the central event serves this force additionally. The majority of these patterns are alternately silver and white. One lone point juts out towards the top edge of the
paper; it is black and silver. These line-based forms offset themselves from the meatiness of the black and brown layers, even as they too read as layers: herein lies the struggle between line and form, painting and drawing. The composite elements of *Untitled (Fortification)* come together in a loose manner—there are no structural references to gain a foothold here. Included on the surface are numerous residual marks left over from the process. In the lower right area of the composition is a single lariat of black paint extending outward from the center to the edge of the paper: a single line tethering the event to the page, or possibly a residue in the process of paint being delivered. In the upper left region of the painting there exists a single drip of silver paint. It hovers close to the central event but is clearly in the domain of the background: this floating anomaly second-guesses the idea that there is an “other” side to the event (and a background, for that matter) after all. Near the bottom of the composition are three drips: all three hang downward so as to provide a sense of the paintings’ orientation.

*Untitled (Fortification)* arrives at a sense of visual harmony through a series of disparate approaches to mark making. The pictorial space engages in a struggle between the floor-based horizontality of its process and the illusion of dimensional space in its finite relationship to the wall. It is the depiction of its own genesis that becomes the event, working to keep the composition from exploding outward (or imploding inward) on the page. The object asks the viewers to continually negotiate their own location as it does the same, creating a playful dance between the two.
References

