Views From the House

Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Alyssa Marie Johnson, B.F.A.
Graduate Program in Art

The Ohio State University
2015

Thesis Committee:
Danielle Leventhal, Advisor
Laura Lisbon
Amanda Gluibizzi
Abstract

I use painting as a critical practice, bringing form to my interests in the intersection of power, race and social relations. My practice is an investment into color theory as a means of investigating power and reveals my interest in the politics and dynamics of color (use). Through my paintings and films I aim to draw attention to hidden oppressive constructs rigorously at work in our society.
Dedication

God, Mom and Dad
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my committee of Danielle Leventhal, Amanda Gluibizzi and Laura Lisbon for all their help, dialogue and support.
Vita

May 2007..................................................Wilde Lake High School
2011.......................................................B.F.A. Art, Tyler School of Art
2012 to present........................................Graduate Teaching Associate, Department
of Art, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: Art
Minor Field: Cinema and Video Production
# Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................................................ii

Dedication..........................................................................................................................................iii

Acknowledgments..............................................................................................................................iv

Vita.......................................................................................................................................................v

List of Figures......................................................................................................................................vii

Introduction.........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter 1: My painting process and practice....................................................................................2

Chapter 2: Interview with Alyssa Johnson and David Ligvenman....................................................3

References...........................................................................................................................................17
List of Figures

Figure 1. *Untitled*, 2012. Mixed media on wood…………………………………………………………4
Figure 2. *This and That*. 2012. Oil and pen on wood……………………………………………………5
Figure 3. Installation shot. 2013………………………………………………………………………………6
Figure 4. Still from *Dreamscapes* ……………………………………………………………………………6
Figure 5. *Yourself in the World*. 2013. Installation shot………………………………………………7
Figure 6. *Arizona State*. 2013. Oil on canvas………………………………………………………………8
Figure 7. *Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene*. 2013. Oil on canvas………………9
Figure 8. *View from the House*. 2014. House paint on canvas………………………………………..10
Figure 9. *Views from the House*. 2015. House paint on canvas……………………………………….11
Figure 10. *After-image*. 2014. Acrylic on canvas…………………………………………………………12
Figure 11. *Untitled*. 2015. Oil on wood……………………………………………………………………15
Introduction

I have been pretty quiet for most of grad school. I prefer to watch and hold my tongue, sometimes out of fear and other times curiosity—probably a plethora of other things. My work and practice, however, do not maintain that same silence.
Chapter 1: My painting process and practice

I began to seriously pursue a career as an artist in 2009, mid-way through my undergraduate program at the Tyler School of Art. From 2009 to 2012 I produced work that recalled the tradition of hard-edge painting. These paintings simultaneously eschewed its own compositions by employing sporadic areas of gestural abstraction. I sought to create a body of work reflective of the complex and vibrant inner life of someone experiencing first love.

At the end of 2012, upon entering graduate school, I began to discard this expressionist, personal mode of creativity after encountering the work of Glenn Ligon and his book, *Yourself in the World*. Studying Ligon precipitated dramatic changes in my work and practice. His writings taught me to not only become aware of myself in the [greater sense of the] world, but also how important it is to be a thorough researcher and investigator of history.

Studying Ligon influenced me to pay homage to artists and writers who have served as my major influences: J.M.W. Turner, Ad Reinhardt, Josef Albers, Alma Thomas, Gordon Parks, Jennie C. Jones, bell hooks, Audre Lorde and Byron Kim. I focused my research towards painters who specialized in color theory. My definition of color theory, however, is used as a double entendre. For example, with a quick shift the title Interaction of Color, could be used to describe theories on color as a part of the visual spectrum as well as a discussion on race relations. Studying Josef Albers seminal text was the inception of my decision to focus on color theory and seek out other “quick shifts”. In the near future I intend to merge my current research to draw attention to oppressive constructs with an expressionist mode of creativity. I would also like to expand upon the ways I see and use color. But foremost however, I hope to continue the tradition of painting.
David Ligvenman: Let’s start by discussing your use of color. The emphasis on color relationships and color theory seem to be a reoccurring theme throughout your practice. Can you talk about those re-occurrences?

Alyssa Johnson: Color has the ability to act as information. When color transcends play and moves into information, in my experience it is polarized, exhumed and ultimately made political. I believe color to be the means by which to explore a range of human and social phenomena. In my later work I started using an X shape— in part as a stand in for representing that range of human and social phenomena.

Ligvenman: Can you talk more about the X paintings?

Johnson: Visually the X is a great starting point, though ironically it’s the last thing I put on the painting. The X can denote a plethora of things: location, an intersection, a flag or buried treasure. It is also a great way to denote the inexpressible.

Ligvenman: The inexpressible?

Johnson: Things you might have trouble articulating with words or language—hence my use of the X. Historically, the X has been used as a signature. In math, it’s used to express an unknown entity.
Ligvenman: The X series are a tangent of your previous work, i.e. experimentation with found objects and the use of black squares and rectangles. Can you explain the evolution of that tangent?

**Johnson:** I started grad school using found objects. I liked using objects that came from a place that was not of my own making. As I painted I found I was drawn to a specific color palette consisting of red, yellow, blue, aqua, pink and black.

Figure 1. *Untitled*, 2012. Mixed media on wood
I began subtracting from this palette, leaving only the black, and reforming that remaining color into squares and rectangles- sometimes incorporating English text around the shapes.

Figure 2. *This and That*. 2012. Oil and pen on wood

I stopped using found objects and began to enlarge the black square on canvas. I carried over the use of text to these large paintings but used my own language of symbols and colors- formatting this new language into the form of a predella on the peripherals of the painting.
Around this time I became interested in video production. I started pursuing my minor in Cinema and Video Production and began to use film as an additional medium in my practice.
I also began to create larger-scale installations in/outside of my studio.

Figure 5. *Yourself in the World*. 2013. Installation shot

Mid-way through grad school, I pressed reset, returned to the studio and re-used the stretchers of the large black paintings. I then made a series of color-field paintings; each painting utilizing only two colors; the color of the background and the color of the X that lay across the background.
I was doing two things; primarily investigating the histories of blackness in America while working within the monochromatic and geometric or “hard-edge” impulses from the 1960’s to the present. I have been forever interested in the fact that the last moment of civil unrest in America occurred while artists were examining the limits of their own mediums in the 1960’s.

Figure 6. Arizona State. 2013. Oil on canvas
For this series, the color combinations were maroon and yellow, black and slightly darker black, neon red and neon pink, and lastly neon red and lemon yellow. Following Frank Stella, I applied highly emotive titles to each painting. The titling helped me move towards the decision to start deconstructing the confederate flag.

I started by removing the stars and the white outline. What remained was a blue X and four red triangles. My decision to use the confederate flag stemmed from its history as an American pop icon. Joan Kee in her essay “The World in Plain View: Form in the Service of the Global” summarizes that kind of move, quite well. “If a particular kind of low-level iconography is indeed all that’s expected, why not meet those expectations with a vengeance.”

Figure 7. Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene. 2013. Oil on canvas
I made other iterations of the confederate flag. Each painting was built to the aspect ratio of the American flag, using my height (5’4”) as an X ratio. I soon returned to the original template and began making identical copies of the flag, the only difference being the alternating use of matte and glossy paint in the red. I began installing these flags in residential and commercial spaces.

Figure 8. View from the House. 2014. House paint on canvas
After the thesis show I returned to the studio again, this time painting on small, wooden panels, with oil and acrylic paint. The flag was gone and I began incorporating the black square again. I think of this body of work as a different kind of after-image of the recent flag paintings.

Figure 9. *Views from the House*. 2015. House paint on canvas
Ligvenman: Where do the after-image paintings fit into this play with color and iconography?

Johnson: Studying *Interaction of Color* introduced me to a visual phenomenon called the after-image. An after-image is a passive consequence of our eye’s fatigue after absorbing a single color for too long, so when one looks over to another surface, the image stays but the color is inverted to its compliment. The painting below is an after-image of the confederate flag.

![Figure 10. After-image. 2014. Acrylic on canvas](image-url)
The after-image demonstrates the chronic fallibility of the viewer’s vision and highlights the passivity inherent in looking. The afterimage demonstrates just how quickly our perception of a color can change. With a quick shift, under a different context the awareness of how quickly our perception of color changes is a phrase used to surmise a conversation about racial identity. I am interested in the quick shift.

Ligvenman: Can you talk more about the quick shift?

Johnson: The quick shift is like the seam in my previous body of work- an allusion to specific content/subject matter outside the painting. I’ve encountered a lot of doubt thoughts while I’ve pursued this line of inquiry.

Ligvenman: How so?

Johnson: Arthur Danto made a comment on identity politics in art. “ ‘Issue related art’, he called it, a work only able to ask large questions without answering them.’ ” (Kee, 99) I feel like some of my work falls into that category of “issue-related art”. However, my practice aims to eliminate the notion I am asking questions and inviting answers. My work is a statement. Studying Glenn Ligon became a saving movement during this time period. Observing the way he uses language and words as a drawing tool forced me to take stock of the visual tools in my practice. Such as my usage of the black square, oil paint, use of red and blue, the invented language and the seam.

Ligvenman: The seam was a mainstay in your work last semester. It remains in the work but now its presence is subverted and in some cases missing altogether. Why? What does the seam mean to you?
Johnson: Ostensibly, the seam, in my previous work, was an allusion to a segregation. In Figure 7, *Arizona State* you can see the seam to the left of the yellow X.

At present, the seam no longer occupies the same stage. Now, it is covered in more paint, not as brightly painted, ambiguously placed and in some cases missing altogether. By placing attention away from the seam I hope to make the mark of segregation indifferent, culling a more mysterious conversation that focuses less on segregation and more on human perception of differences. I think a lot of what haunts my practice is the question of absence and presence and the fine line between them.

Ligvenman: And why use painting to have this conversation?

Johnson: Painting is another way of telling a story. Whilst substituting paint for words another language is accessed, and pictorial “color” language, if you will, can have a deeper resonance and a wider conversation.

Painting is used as a way to cover and reveal in ways that create questions about what is a blemish (a small mark or flaw that spoils the appearance of something) and what is the focus.

I think a big part of the painting language I’m using is an allegory towards the popular treatment of American history. As author Mahmood Mamdani writes, “America was built on two monumental crimes. The genocide of the Native American and the enslavement of the African American. The tendency of official America is to memorize other people’s crime and to forget its own to seek a moral-high ground as a pretext to ignore racial issues.” I’m interested in how to filter that fact through and into painting.
Ligtenman: Your current body of work has brought back the emphasis on the use of black and the black square/rectangle. Can you expand on its return?

Johnson: The black square is a huge presence in my work. I think it’s a split between being a red herring or an abstract self-portrait. It’s also a sort of dimensional homage to my favorite artist’s. Steve McQueen, Glenn Ligon, Alma Thomas, Jennie C. Jones, the list goes on. I love how in their work they acknowledge the black body as an agent, a secret agent of some sort of coded message.

Figure 11. *Untitled*. 2015. Oil on wood
Ligenman: Where do you see the work going?

Johnson: For the most part I am not sure. I find I have made a 360 in terms of my processes. Logically what comes next is a series of subtractions- either through color or form. I think this time I’ll do a bit of both. A lot of my work moves from series to series because of the titling I have chosen. Views from the House is an example of one of those kinds of moves.

Ligenman: How do you choose your titles?

Johnson: I try and choose evocative titles. It’s a tactic inspired by Frank Stella. Stella would apply a highly emotive title to his image- his iconic purpose was that of destabilizing the idea of meaning. Example: *Die Fahne Hoch!* by Frank Stella- *Die Fahne Hoch* was the Nazi national anthem.

Ligenman: What has been your most emotive title?

Johnson: *Institute of Hereditary Biology and Racial Hygiene.* I got it from the television show *The X-Files.*
References