The Objects of a Catastrophe

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The objects of a catastrophe

By

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In *The Encyclopaedia of Diderot* Paul-Jacques Malian describes alchemy as "the chemistry of the subtlest kind – one that allows us to observe, at a more rapid pace, extraordinary chemical transformations that in nature take a long time to occur" (Alembert 252). My practice could be described as a process of representing an alternative reality by using color fluids as tools. I always felt that the painting process has something to do with an alchemical process, maybe because painters use special liquids, each reflecting the light differently, aiming to transform this reality into another.

For me painting has something to do with catastrophe, and I tend to underline things that are falling and creating disequilibrium. This sense of catastrophe is deeper that mere representation of a catastrophe, it touches a place of instability, where things are about to fall but you cannot be sure yet. I think of my work as an alien observation of humans as producers of frictions and energy in a space that they cannot control.

**Representational painting**

My paintings are representational, and I am very curious how representational painting can still be perceived as too literal and too academic. As a figurative painter it is important for me to start this essay by thinking about this awkward fact. I am going to use the comments Graham Harman made on Clement Greenberg's critique of illusionistic painting. Then I will unfold the contents of each of my most recent works by describing what is depicted and relate that to my preoccupations.

Graham Harman analyses Clement Greenberg’s position toward representational painting in a lecture titled "Greenberg, Heidegger, McLuhan, and the Arts" given in Portland at PNCA in 2013. Following Greenberg’s definition: "Art is academic when it takes its
medium too much for granted." Harman asks why late 19th century academic painting, which has been dominant in the West since the Renaissance, started becoming irrelevant in the mid-1800 (with Manet as one of the first transgressors). For Harman there is a certain number of possibilities in any given medium, and we can’t pursue a certain way of looking at the world for 400 years, without this starting to loose its power and meaning. More to the point, with the invention of photography, the representational function of painting started to become less important. Greenberg reads the history of modern art as a history of various avant-gardes struggling against academic representational art. Manet, Impressionism, Fauvism, Cezanne, Cubism, Mondrian, Miro and Pollock are his champions, but Harman points out important missing links on this list. One of them is Duchamp (probably the most influential artist in the last 60 years); the others are the Surrealists and Kandinsky. Greenberg calls Surrealism academic art, all too dependent on literally anecdotes, and this critique is most interesting to me in relationship to my practice.

DADA and Surrealism are sometimes treated as similar movements, while they often present opposite experiments. Dadaists work a banal content into a radically innovative medium, while many Surrealists use the old academic painting medium (with its trompe l’oeil illusionism) to reach deeply into the subconscious. Greenberg criticized Kandinsky for missing the lessons of Cubism and failing to emphasize the flatness of the canvas. Kandinsky was leaving too much floating empty spaces creating depth in his abstract painting, which Greenberg called academic reminiscence.

For Greenberg any attempt to structure painting around illusionistic space or literal content ends up in a banal academic anecdote, something that has more to do with literature and has no place in painting. Harman argues in turn that literally contents are actually a very good strategy to reveal what is hidden in each individual depiction in the painting (for
example a riddle). I look for ways to employ the anachronism of three-dimensional illusionistic painting as means to create different realities. We will see why.

**How is Pruitt-Igoe doing?, oil on canvas, 2015 (Image List 1)**

I will talk about three main ideas that are important in all of my recent works. First what I call the *de-coherence* impulse, second the absorption/reflexion nature of light and color (that probably define the action of painting), and third the *heterotopia* realities, or the contingency of isolated objects, depicted in my work.

In a canvas stretching 18 feet wide by 7 feet tall, we are immersed in another world - albeit one that somehow eerily mirrors our own. Long lines of colour are travelling up and down. Starting high above the depicted buildings they travel down to the floor to find their end on the real and tangible ground. In between these lines we begin to identify geometrical forms, and even a sense of perspective, of depth. We notice images of windows attached to these lines of color. They appear partially empty, and radiate a pinkish glow - perhaps the glow of rooms, where families are watching evening television? They all must be watching the same program for that same particular light seems to be emanating from every window. We notice transparent curtains hanging out of the windows. They are transparent to the point that they seem non-existent. Bars protect some windows, maybe to protect inhabitants from robbers getting in, but with a closer look we notice that even the third-floor windows have them. Are these bars here to prevent residents from jumping out of their apartments? Or simply to make sure they stay there?

Stepping back, we see that we are in front of the entrance of a building. The center of this hanging canvas is installed in the corner of an actual room, and represents an entrance to
the building, but also the point where the perspective lines collide. The building's positive corner, the one supposedly closest to us, is represented in the painting, but, since the canvas is installed in the corner of the room, the sense of space recedes into a negative perspective. It is difficult to tell how these perspectives lines function, knowing that the eye quickly lose track of the perspective rational element. Focusing on this we soon discover that there is something wrong with this representation.

I like the observer to have a tangible element that he can hold on to: a represented object, linear "rational" perspective, known forms. At the same time I like to bring these known forms into an absurd dimension. I want to make these two realities coexist, making sure that the viewer feel secure by having clear sense of what is happening (with the support of "rational" elements and perspective) and then push some details towards an absurd variation, leaving the observer in a sort of limbo. Some could call this uncanny, but I prefer to think about the collapse of the known. I like to think of reality as a constant collapse of measurement, a sort of uncertainty principle (in quantum mechanics, the uncertainty principle, also known as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, is any of a variety of mathematical inequalities asserting a fundamental limit to the precision with which certain pairs of physical properties of a particle, known as complementary variables, such as position x and momentum p, can be known simultaneously).

The more you look closely to some subtle details the more you find yourself loosing sense of what is supposedly rational. This "collapse of measurement" could be seen as a loss of coherence within a previously understood system. I also think about the de-coherence impulse as the relation between information about a space that collapses a soon as you try to connect it to another space also present in the painting. This leads to a loss of coherent understanding of the situation because of the disconnect between these two different spaces.
I do not know if I painted on a curtain or if I painted a curtain, but I tried to emphasize the softness and waviness of a curtain's fabric by painting the waving drape. This mimetic process takes the form of long lines, each composed of many different colors, dropping vertically. The sensation of verticality emphasizes the gravitational force. Indeed, the vertical fall of color lines underline a known sensation - a curtain ruled by gravity.

*Light and Colors: the reflexion/absorption logic*

The first of Einstein's special relativity's 1905 articles, was the very first understanding of what light ontologically is. Light is made out of photons. A photon is an elementary particle, the quantum of light. The photons are considered simultaneously waves and particles, and this is called the "Wave-Particle duality". Every elementary particle (that is to say all matter) exhibits the dual properties of particle and wave. It addresses the inability of the classical concepts "particle" or "wave" to independently describe the behaviour of matter on an atomic scale.

We tend to think of objects as having fixed colors—grass, for example, is green. In reality, an object’s appearance results from the way it reflects the particular light that is falling on it. Under white light, the grass appears green because it tends to reflect light in the green portion of the spectrum and absorb light of other wavelengths.

Light is electromagnetic radiation. Electromagnetic radiation is characterized by its wavelength (or frequency) and its intensity. What we call light usually refers to visible light. Visible light is usually defined as having wavelengths in the range of 400 and 700 nanometres. (see graphic bellow). We see light between the infrared (with longer
wavelengths) and the ultraviolet (with shorter wavelengths). Below or above the aforementioned wavelengths we do not see light we are sort of blind.

The rainbow spectrum – using the Latin word for appearance or apparition by Isaac Newton in 1671 – include all those colors that can be produced by visible light. Although Aristotle and other ancient thinkers had already written on the nature of light and color vision, it was not until Newton that light was identified as the source of the color sensation (Newton, let's insist on that for later, is with Galileo the father of modern science). So with Newton there is this equivalence: Light = color / color = light

When a light strikes an object, a number of things happen. The light wave is partially absorbed by the object, in which case its energy is converted to heat, or the object reflects the light wave. Objects have a tendency to selectively absorb, reflect or transmit light certain frequencies. That is, one object (the grass) might reflect green light while absorbing all other frequencies of visible light (converted into heat). Another object might selectively reflect red
light while absorbing all other frequencies of visible light. The manner in which visible light interacts with an object is dependent upon the frequency of the light and the nature of the atoms of the object. The nature of the atoms of the object... Let's summarize, light and objects share something. There is a sort of dialogue happening while light and matter collide to each other. On one side of the conversation there is light absorption and on the other side light reflection.

I am most interested in this dialogue between the absorption and the reflexion of light and colors. How is Pruitt-Igoe doing? As an object can be read as a curtain, and the idea of a physical curtain emphasize on the absorption and obliteration of the light. I tried to make a connection between what painting ontologically is, that is to say fluids that reflect light into particular wavelength, and the symbol that a curtain represent. The goal in this piece was to put in contact the curtain as a sign for light obliteration and the painting process as a light reflective intervention. This ambivalent situation made me produce a dialogue between these opposite ideas, a sort of space for negotiation. The interplay among these dualities:
reflection/absorption, apparition/obliteration, is the key point in this piece. I am looking for a dialogue based on friction, a sort of space for translation.

*Heterotopias*, as Michel Foucault puts it, are spaces of otherness, which are neither here nor there. Foucault describes spaces that have more layers of meaning, or relationship to other places than the ones immediately meeting your eyes. It can be a single place that juxtaposes several places. The idea of Russian dolls could be a good example of heterotopias spaces.

**The fork, the lamp and the hammer, oil on canvas, 2015. (Image list 2)**

*The fork, the lamp and the hammer* is a figurative painting composed by two square canvases (6 feet x 6 feet each) setting up a horizontal scene. On the very left side two humans stand next to each other, looking at the same thing that seems to be at their feet. On the very far right an aggregate of geometrical forms seems to be stacked on top of each other. These forms seem to represent a sort of very organized melted shelves. At the bottom of this shelving system laid two human figures covered by what could be some clothes. Or maybe it is the shelve itself that cover them. Are these humans sleeping or are they dead? Below them, indistinct series of forms are blooming. With a closer look these forms remind of beer bottle. But they are too big and not concrete enough to be actual bottle. The center of the painting is mostly empty of any form, a sort of centred void. Only a chair and a window could be distinguished. Looking more closely to these two objects we can notice that they both seems to disappear. They are formally not really there, they seems unfinished, or maybe they are simply swallowed by the general green colour that emanate everywhere from the canvas.

Some other objects are hiding in the painting. A fork, a lamp and a hammer are depicted in a very opaque white, and seem to be spread out randomly on what could be the
floor in this scene. Their clear opacity makes them stand out from the rest of the depicted entities. Or maybe they are simply erased from the painting, just like a rubber eraser will do on a dense charcoal drawing. All these disparate objects, from the furniture to the human figures, from the dense shelving system that stands like a monolith to the shadows of what could be a known object, seem to interact together through their mutual presence, their shared absence and their relative isolation.

The objects transgress their function as furniture by being dissolved and thrown of balance. Their potential utilisation is cancelled, their position uncertain although their material presence remains. Objects are depicted in a space in-between the disappearance and the apparition.

All these elements are placed into what I call a scene, just like in a play. Humans are present too, but seems that they do not play a crucial role in this scene. They feel empty, unable to communicate with the other entities, essentially aphasic.

The idea here is to give the viewer a detective scene, or at least to create a place where riddles are put into play. I am trying to create a negotiation space where the viewer is invited to wander inside what could be seen as a nomadic space, filled with paradoxical objects that are somehow connected to each other.

*The uncanny feeling and the raise of modern science*

In "I shall be with you on your wedding night", published by MIT press in 1991, Mladen Dolar situates the Lacanian interpretation of the uncanny as "the irruption of the real into homely, commonly accepted reality" (Dolar 2). The first question we could ask is what the homely or commonly accepted reality represent and to what extend it structures into our
reality. Then we could ask what the "irruption of the real" means knowing that the reality for us is by definition what we know as real? One could say that the "homely" could represent what we think we know about reality, driven by our common sense and by what we learnt through our shared culture. The real could be for example: if I jump from really high I will die, a bowling ball falls quicker than a pigeon feather, I am the only one living in my body, contradictions do not make sense therefore cannot exist, etc.

What is particularly interesting for me is the fact that "there is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity" (Dolar 8). For Mladen Dolar Modernity is haunted from the inside by the uncanny, and before the Enlightenment the uncanny was assigned to the symbolic of religion from which the structure of power and hierarchies of value emanated. "To put it simply, in pre-modern society the dimension of the uncanny was largely covered (and veiled) by the area of the sacred and untouchable".

Mladen Dolar punts talks about "…an irruption of the uncanny strictly parallel with bourgeois (and industrial) revolutions and the rise of scientific rationality - and with the Kantian establishment of transcendental subjectivity, of which the uncanny presents the surprising counterpart. Ghosts, vampires, monsters, the un-dead, etc., flourish in an era when you might expect them to be dead and buried, without a place. They are something brought about by modernity itself" (Dolar 8).

Even if the Enlightenment methods and set of values took different paths they shared one common goals like the idea of "progress, tolerance and the removal of the abuses of the Church and state" (Kant 38).

In What is Enlightenment (1784) Immanuel Kant described the freedom to use one's own intelligence. "The main point of Enlightenment is of man's release from his self-caused immaturity, primarily in matters of religion" (Kant 52). The Enlightenment shifted the focus
to the paradigm of the *reason* and the increasing trust in the scientific method. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the scientific method as "procedure consisting in systematic observation, measurement, and experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses." (Oxford English dictionary 682). The pre-requisite for this method is objectivity, scepticism about dogmas, and continuous attempts to invalidate what is thought previously to be absolute truth.

To understand Mladen Dolar’s idea that the modernity was haunted by the uncanny, we need to go back to the creation of modern science by Galileo and Newton. I call it the "Copernicus/Bruno/ Galileo/Kepler/Newton geocentric paradigm murder". The Ptolemaic system (previously instituted by Aristotle) placed the Earth and the human kind in the middle of cosmos. By showing that Earth was not the centre of the solar system, the newly born modern science gave the first lethal shot to the idea of human kind as the centre of God's project. As the French philosopher of science Alexandre Koyre (1892- 1964,) stated "the bet of modern science was that we could explain the real by the impossible" (Koyre 72).

To understand how I imagine and depict the forms and objects in my paintings, it could be interesting to point out that I have a strong link with science epistemology. Discovering Newton, Einstein relativity, quantum physics or string theory made me re-see the world, and how I depict it in my paintings. Seeing the unseen, modern science reveals an absurd, mesmerizing and uncanny reality. When I paint I am also looking for the unseen.

The proper language of Physics is mathematics, and the laws of physics are written in the form of equations. These equations contain the stunning ability to anticipate new physical entities and layers of reality that have never been seen before. The mathematics that underline physics can therefore be seen as what Etienne Klein calls "ontological elevator" (Klein 60) They can predict the existence of objects previously unobserved — such as the planet Uranus
or fundamental particles like photons, neutrinos, and quarks — which reality is then confirmed through experimentation.

The Higgs boson was detected on July 4, 2012; 48 years after the physicists Higgs, Englert and Brout postulated its existence. Thanks to the discovery of the Higgs boson we now understand how elementary particles gained mass in the primordial universe. Contrary to popular belief, mass is not an inherent property of matter. Particles that make up all the matter around us acquire their mass through their interaction with space. This discovery not only changes human understanding of matter, but it also transforms our relationship to all the objects and living creatures around us.

Is this not what artists try to do? To transform the way we think, and imagine reality, and to re-see our world anew. I look at both art and science as fields of production of unexpected realities, always counter intuitive and haunting.

**Ikea shelves, empty boxes and accumulation of housing apartments. (Image list 3-6)**

*A thought on the structure of a building in relation to the structure of a framed painting:* Shelves sevlehS, It may not be simultaneous for another observer, Untitled, awning, are oil painting on canvas that seems to represent geometrical forms ruled buy the laws of perspective. In all these paintings we see an accumulation of what could be boxes or furniture shelves. Some forms seem soft and light some hard and heavy. Some empty and some full. Are these buildings where people could live or mere cardboard boxes?
What could be the opposite of an Apotheosis?

This painting takes the form of an awning, a metal structure with stretched canvas that can be found everywhere on the streets, above windows and along the sidewalks. It is used as a canopy, it provides shade, breaks strong winds and protects from rain. A building full of small windows is painted inside the awning. I was thinking of dome paintings in churches - illusionistic paintings that use perspective techniques such as di sotto in sù, which means "seen from below" in Italian and was developed in late Quattrocento Renaissance painting, to create the illusion of deep three-dimensional space. They are employed to suggest an open sky, as in the oculus of Andrea Mantegna's Camera degli Sposi, or a fictive architectural space such as in Andrea Pozzo's frescoes in Sant'Ignazio, Rome. These paintings seem to address the connection between the transcendent, the divine, the true, and the empirical and the false. In my work I try to reverse this dynamic by using the same departure point, the dialogue between the unreal and the real. This led me to the question of how we deal with perception and the understanding of realities around us.

By reading of Mehdi Belhaj Kacem book called Algebre de la tragedie, I realize that there is neither pure thing in itself, nor a dichotomy between pure form and simulacra. He demonstrates that for us the techno-mimetic animals (animals that imitate the laws of nature in order to create the techne) the original and the parody are the same thing. Everything starts with the parody, which is the only original and the mimesis is our most native condition. All the technological animal's history is situated by definition under the sign of the parody and the imitation. As soon as a primate started to repeat the friction of two flints we were already situated in an imitation process of nature.

Belhaj Kacem underlines not so much the postmodernist dead-end but the dead end of Platonism. The avant-gardism modernity was a Platonism, always challenging representation,
the mimesis, in order to reach a pure and true reality. Now we start to see the mimesis itself as the fundamental anthropological event, the very first overtaking that will be the mise en abyme archetypical basis for the others. The representation is the thing in itself.

In my most recent work I insist on the power of the mimetic impulse and use it to create other realities. In Euclidian geometry two parallel straight lines never touch each others, but in reality we perceive two parallel lines (the two pavements in a street) meeting at a given point, what in perspective is called vanishing point on the horizon line. Perspective is a lie about reality, an extraordinary lie, which let us witness how matter change form when it actually doesn't.

What is the role that our brain plays in the process of decoding the world? Observing and understanding reality becomes a riddle and painting is a way of dealing with this riddle. What I find mesmerising is that we humans experience a resistance between our perceptions and reality, a sort of recalcitrance, or defiance of the objects. I see my work as a mean of expression, through the interplay between the structure of the framed canvas and the representation of an architectural structure that put in relation us subjects with the recalcitrant objects that compose the world, a possible intermediary space between defiant reality and us.
Bibliography:


Image list

1. How is Pruitt-Igoe doing?, oil on canvas, Steel, 18 feet x 10 feet, 2015
2. The fork, the lamp and the hammer, oil on canvas, 12 feet x 6 feet, 2015
3. Shelves sevlehS, oil on canvas, 40 inch x 20 inch 2015
4. It may not be simultaneous for another observer, oil on canvas, various dimension 2015
5. Untitled, oil on canvas, 20 inch x 13 inch, 2015
6. The prompter, oil on canvas, stainless steel, 24 x 32 x 28 inc
7. Installation view Roman Cochet MFA Hunter college thesis Fall 2015
How is Pruitt-Igoe doing?, oil on canvas, steel, 18’x10’, 2015.
The fork, the lamp and the hammer, oil on canvas, 12’ x 6’, 2015.
Shelves, oil on canvas, 40"x20", 2015.
It may not be simultaneous for another observer, oil on canvas, various dimension, 2015.
Untitled, oil on canvas, 20"x13", 2015.
The prompter, oil on canvas, stainless steel, 24 x 32 x 28, 2015.