I LIKE AMERICA: Painting in the Expanded Field

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I LIKE AMERICA:
Painting in the Expanded Field

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Masters of Arts
Hunter College of the City University of New York

2016

Thesis sponsor:

December 10, 2016
Date

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December 10, 2016
Date

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Dedicated to Anne.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my first and second readers, Gabriele Evertz and Joachim Pissaro respectively, who have both been pivotal mentors. I would like to express my gratitude Drew Beatie and the Evelyn Kossak Painting Committee for awarding me with the instrumental travel grant, which informed much of this work. I would like to thank the numerous individuals, curators, and museums that lent their support to my research, in particular, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Journey Museum, the Denver Museum, the Joslyn Art Museum, the Red Cloud Collection, and the Center for American Indian and Native Studies. My thesis would not have been possible without Ms. Evelyn C. Kossak and her continuous and generous support for the painting programs at Hunter College. I would like to thank the MFA chairman, Joel Carreiro, and the art department chair, Howard Singerman. I am thankful for all the wonderful professors of history that I have had the pleasure to study under, particularly William C. Agee and Robert Morris.

I would like to extend my thanks to my curatorial mentors, Juan Puntes and Chus Martinez. I am indebted to Jerome A. Cohen and Joan Lebold Cohen for underwriting the Cohen Center for Visual Art, which I have used as a laboratory for the development of an understanding of new institutionalism. My immense thanks also goes to my gallerist, Ethan Cohen, for giving my work an international platform.
Lastly, I would like to thank my grandmother for the inspiration she lent me and my parents, who have always supported my choice to pursue a life as an artist.
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PAINTING IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

“Each man’s life work is also a work in the series extending beyond him in either or both directions, depending on his position in the track he occupies. To the usual coordinates fixing the individual’s position—his temperament and his training—there is also the moment of his entrance, this being the moment in the tradition—early, middle, or late—with which his biological opportunity coincides.”

The rubric of antiquity is what I gauge the success of my work against. I define the rubric of antiquity as work that stands the test of time over millennia. For a work of art to be relevant in the future, it is perhaps best to consider what works from the past are relevant today. For this reason, I am very informed by the concepts of George Kubler. In my attempts to create artworks original in form and content, I consider it imperative to be informed by the concerns of the artist who precede me.

As I attempted to engage painting from a critical perspective, I arrived at a position shared by many in the 1960s. Many members of the artistic community believed that painting had reached a sort of critical mass and the intellectual momentum had swung away from it. Modernist sculpture, too, had to contend with a similar shift. Rosalind Krauss outlined this shift in her seminal essay Sculpture and Expanded Field. Krauss suggests that that which it was not, namely “not landscape and not architecture,” had come to define modernist sculpture. By using Structuralist theory, she created a Klein group

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1 Kubler, The Shape of Time, 6.
2 Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.”
diagram. (Fig 1.) In addition to sculpture, the diagram included site construction, marked sites, and axiomatic structures.

Figure 1. Rosalinda Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field (Klein Group Diagram)*, 1979

Could a painting occupy the same space as an axiomatic structure or a marked-site? If this could be applied to modern a sculpture, I concluded that it should be applicable to modernist painting as well. This resulted in my formation of a body of work entitled *Painting in the Expanded Field*.

Painting has often been defined as pigment on surface, the most common pigment being paint and the most common surface being canvas on stretcher bars. In one experiment, I decided to reconsider that formula. I removed the canvas from the support and used the wall as a support. I concluded that this formula could be reapplied. I set out to create works in which one aspect of the work remains firmly rooted in the traditional expectations of a painting and the other seeks to redefine it.

Additionally, I have tried to bring complexity into my work by reconsidering the distinction between fine art and craft. The distinction between
objects that leads to a categorization of either art or tools is generally based on utilitarian worth or function. However, even functional objects have an aesthetic. This aesthetic is generally discussed in terms of craftsmanship or, in the case of unique objects, folk art. The exhibition *I Like America* (Fig. 2) included three works: *Bead Painting*, *Rodeo Painting*, and *Nietzsche’s Horse (No Regrets for Jasper Johns)*. For this exhibition, I began to create work that considers the possibilities of conflating folk or utilitarian applications with fine art painting in an attempt to expand the field of painting.
BEAD PAINTING

*Bead Painting* is made from glass seed beads, which are sewn onto a linen support in an extremely labor-intensive manner (Fig. 3). The technique used is consistent with the traditional methods used by the Oglala Lakota.

![Figure 3. Isaac Aden, *Bead Painting*, 2014, glass beads on linen 12 x 9 in.](image)

This painting was conceived, in part, from my own personal collection. I am originally from Nebraska and I collect objects from that region, particularly Native American objects. The most ideal object for me would come from the Lakota people and be an object of ceremonial or shamanistic significance. There
is a particular type of beading embellishment that I was drawn to; it is pejoratively referred to as salt-and-pepper or sometimes as a scatter technique. The Lakota people would frequently embellish sacred objects with this technique. (Fig. 4)

Figure 4. *Lakota Beaded War Club*, circa 1890, glass beads, cloth wood and stone. 18 x 4 x 1.5 in. collection of the author

This technique inspired me to create an object that emulated a painting. I say “emulated” because there is no paint on the surface. The work is made from glass beads and linen, yet at first glance it appears within the construct of painting because of its support. This is significant to me because I am attempting to create objects of cultural and formalist hybridity.\(^4\) I consider this work post-analog pointillism.\(^5\)

\(^4\) The technique of beading itself is a hybridization of their quilling techniques with European glass beads introduced in the post-colonial period.

\(^5\) I consider the term to be work that engages the tradition of pointillism in the post-analog period.
RODEO PAINTING

In the summer of 2015, I sponsored a rodeo in Ponca, Nebraska. I convinced the organizers of the rodeo to let me paint a 20-foot square on the dirt of the rodeo arena (Fig. 5).

![Image of Rodeo Painting](image)

Figure 5. Isaac Aden, Rodeo Painting, 2015, Ponca Nebraska

The horses and bulls would than leave reductive marks in the painted white square as they moved through it. The event was recorded and later presented in the form of video and a print on canvas, which was applied directly to the wall.

Like many of my other works, *Rodeo Painting* alludes to specific points in art history and this allusion is one aspect of the work’s content. The dirt was painted white as an homage to Malevich’s *White Square* (Fig. 6), as well as to address the formalist issue of contrast.
The work itself existed as a performative experience. The outcome is not privileged over any one moment of its duration. Additionally, it can be seen as a marked-site and as having an overt relationship to land art\(^6\) because the work is site-specific, non-nomadic, and literally uses land as its substrate. Not only does the work use the principles of *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, it also bears a striking formalist resemblance to one of the most important works of land art, *Spiral Jetty* (Fig. 7).

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\(^6\) Land Art is a term that would be considered a marked-site in the Krauss Klein group.

\(^7\) Defining “plastic” as referring to a substance that is easily bendable, such as a rope.
NIETZSCHE’S HORSE

Figure 9. Isaac Aden, *Nietzsche’s Horse (No Regrets for Jasper Johns)*, 2015, canvas, aluminum, and neon, 96 x 144 x 132 in.

*Nietzsche’s Horse (No Regrets for Jasper Johns)* is the most complex work in this exhibition in terms of material (Fig. 9). Hanging on the wall is a hinged triptych made from industrial colored canvas. Both the central panel and the right panel are solid gray. The other flanking panel is covered with a sewn orange and grey geometric pattern known as an Irish Chain in Amish quilting. This panel is folded out from the wall revealing its verso (Fig.10), as well as an aluminum support. Standing in front of the canvas is a life-size sandcast aluminum horse. The seams between the casting sections that make up the horse are covered with automotive filler, optically revealing the method of its construction. The horse has been painted with orange hand and fingerprints. Connecting the canvas and the horse is a 12-foot piece of neon glass. The glass has been bent
to hold a position that reflects a "plastic" quality, however it is completely rigid and extremely fragile. The physical elements of the work are complemented by a performance by the actor Rob Shapiro, who portrays Frederick Nietzsche in a durational performance (Fig. 11). During the performance, Shapiro enacts the final cognitive moments of Nietzsche as he interacts with the horse in Turin.

“Nietzsche suffered a mental collapse. Two policemen approached him after he caused a public disturbance in the streets of Turin. What happened remains unknown, but an often-repeated tale from shortly after his death states that Nietzsche witnessed the flogging of a horse at the other end of the Piazza Carlo Alberto, ran to the horse, threw his arms up around its neck to protect it, and then collapsed to the ground.”

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7 Defining “plastic” as referring to a substance that is easily bendable, such as a rope.
8 Verrecchia, “Nietzsche’s Breakdown in Turin,” 105-12.
Nothing is spoken during the performance, yet it is evident that Shapiro moves skillfully between various extremes of mourning, anger, loss, and disappointment. Because there is no dialogue, the viewer is able to more personally relate to the emotions, which are communicated through affect, body language, and actual touch in lieu of words. These emotions also seem to animate the horse while simultaneously appearing as a form of objectophilia.⁹

⁹ Referring to people whom literally fall in love in a romantic sense with inanimate objects.
The form of the canvas alludes to hinged triptychs, such as *The Isenheim Altarpiece Piece* by Matthias Grünewald (Fig. 12) and Jasper Johns’ work *Catenary* (Fig. 13). I used John’s composition as a sort of ready-made, situating it as a type contemporary history painting. Johns’ most recent body of work was entitled *Regrets* and focused on a tattered and paint-stained photograph of Lucian Freud, which was commissioned by the painter Francis Bacon (Fig. 14).

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10 History painting is a genre in painting defined by its subject matter rather than artistic style. History paintings usually depict a moment in a narrative story, rather than a specific and static subject, as in a portrait.
Johns made several canvases in which he reworked the composition of the painting. I found it fascinating that the one thing he did not seem to focus on was the Irish Chain pattern on the bed. I decided to focus on this because I had previously been interested in Amish quilts and sewing as substitution for physical painting. Through sewing, I could create a geometric pattern using ready-made material rather than render it optically with painting. This is significant because, by doing so, the pigment and the surface collapse as one: a colored canvas rather than pigment on canvas. Ironically, I later realized that appropriating a pattern on a bed from a work of art was also a strategy Johns himself had used before. His Dutch works, specifically *Between the Clock and the Bed* (Fig. 15), take their pattern from the bedspread in Edvard Munch’s painting, *Between the Clock and the Bed* (Fig. 16).

![Figure 15. Jasper Johns. Between the Clock and The Bed, Encaustic on canvas, three 1943 panels 72 x 126 in., MoMA, New York](image)

![Figure 16. Edvard Munch, Self Portrait, Between the Clock and the Bed, 1940 – 59 x 47 in., Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway](image)

In Johns’ *Catenary* composition, there is also a patterned section on the right, which I have displaced to the left and replaced with an Irish Chain quilt pattern. There is also a string that swoops across the canvas in the shape of a
I have replaced flexible catenary with a solid piece of fragile neon glass. The shape suggests to the viewer on first view that it is bendable, however the fragility of such a length of glass is realized upon closer inspection. I have frequently made use of fragility as well as light in my works. The neon attaches to the aluminum horse that is painted with hand and finger prints.

Lakota horse painting techniques influenced the marks I made on the horse. A form of painting in which a living being was the surface interested me. This as an example of my aforementioned objective to create works where one aspect of a painting remains true to the tradition of painting while another challenges the traditional paradigm. Here, the paint is within the tradition and the surface is unique.

\[11\] A catenary is a curve formed by a wire, rope, or chain hanging freely from two points and forming a U shape.
THE RUBRIC OF ANTIQUITY

Figure 17. and Figure 18. Isaac Aden, David Red Cloud painting Eagle Boy, 2015, Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota,

My interest in Lakota horse painting and their linguistic symbolism led me to conduct field research that was facilitated by a research grant (Fig. 17 and Fig. 18). It was during this trip that I researched Lakota beading techniques and realized Rodeo Painting. Over the course of working on the Rodeo Painting, I lived at my grandmother’s house.

She was in a nursing home and I realized that it might be the last time I would see her. She had been a poet and asked me if I would read poems to her because her eyesight no longer allowed her to read them with ease. I knew the visit would be powerful, but I was overwhelmed when she read me a biographical poem about her late husband. In it, he confronts the realization of his eminent death with the banal tasks he would do for the last time.
...He called the plumber to check the furnace, purchased a new one just in case. He phoned the carpenter to brace the deck, checked the smoke alarms and the locks on the doors, He had both cars serviced completely, adding new wiper blades and a set of tires. He called his attorney, “Is everything in order?” He visited his pastor and the funeral director He didn’t often say I love you but I knew when he was thinking.

He wasn’t packing only for his flight, but for mine. We only had one ticket, and he doesn’t know it, but a part of me flew with him.12

When I read the poem to her we both began to cry. As I drove away for the last time, I contemplated the profoundness of the moment. I was so taken aback that a work of art could cause me to cry. I considered how my own work has frequently been highly formal or analytical.

Reconsidering painting felt essential to creating new work however perhaps this work would be to self-referential and would not resonate with audiences in the future. I considered my rubric and I recalled looking at objects in the Metropolitan Museum, objects of unknown makers, devoid of their sociological context. These objects stood out to me as masterpieces. As I considered why that was, it was clear to me it was because they engaged with the human condition. Most frequently I observed that objects that held up to the rubric of antiquity frequently engaged the human condition by including human emotion.

12 Ruth Anne Vogel, “There’s a Part of Me in Heaven,” As Time Goes By, 2009.
The emotions I experienced after I drove away that day coupled, with forementioned revelation caused me to include the mourning performance by Shapiro. Among many things, the performance can be seen as a type of post-colonial monument, reflecting remorse between the horse (a figurative stand-in for the condition of native peoples) and the collective western post-colonial consciousness (ironically portrayed by the anti-humanist, Nietzsche). However, without dialogue, the viewers find themselves considering the performance as less a portrayal of Nietzsche, but rather a grown man weeping, with whom they find themselves emotionally identifying. Each viewer has encountered the powerful emotions that are provoked by Shapiro and, because the context of the performance is not framed, the viewer then recalls their own unique experience. I believe this unique experience evoked a personal emotion, and emotion is a universal key to the human condition. Revealing the human condition is what frequently marks success in the rubric of antiquity.
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