Inside the Aviary

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Inside the Aviary

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures
Introduction
Process
Abstraction / Figuration
The Structuring of Space in Painting and Music
Cubist Space as Complex Reality
Modularity as Structure
Movement of Energy
Metamorphoses: Notes on Humans, Animals and Machine
Conclusion
Works Cited
Exhibition Image List
Individual Works
Installation Images
List of Figures

Description

1. Bob Thompson, *Judgment of Paris*, 1963, oil, 10” x 8”
2. Marsden Hartley, *Portrait Arrangement*, 1914, oil, 40” x 32”
3. Agnes Martin, *Untitled #2*, 1992, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72” x 72”
4. Anni Albers, *Study for Camino Real*, 1967, gouache on blueprint, 16” x 16”
5. Paul Klee, *Temple Gardens*, 1920, gouache and ink on mounted paper, 10” x 12”
7. Rufino Tamayo, *Aviación*, 1934, gouache on paper, 13” x 19”
**INTRODUCTION**

I am compelled to paint as a means of contemplating and constructing a complex reality. My pictures, through tessellated patterns and repeated forms, both depict modularity and are constructed by a modular process. Geometric forms morph into organic ones, and figurative forms morph into abstraction (and vice versa); the movement of energy is both depicted and also performed in the action of composing. Dialectics are everything. Flat space and pictorial space are both juxtaposed and synthesized to contemplate -to build up and to tear down- the complex, constructed screens of reality.

**PROCESS**

I begin a painting with a single form. This form might be a shape I cut out of paper. It might be an animal I saw in a dream. It might be a geometric motif, the shape of a flower I noticed while walking to the studio, the tracing of a piece of detritus, or the silhouette of a human.

The form leads me to other forms. Sometimes this happens conceptually. (The shape of a vulture might prompt me to consider the shape of an animal which a vulture might eat). Other times, this happens formally. (The shape of a bird in flight is similar to the shape of a particular orchid). In other moments, I consider the negative space of a form as positive, which in turn leads me to other forms. This playful, associative form-making allows a unit to inspire another, original unit.

Another method which I use in composing a picture is pattern-making. Sometimes these patterns are drawn freehand on the canvas. Sometimes I trace a paper shape repeatedly on the canvas, or I place a cut-out of the shape on an overhead projector, and then I change the distance or the angle of the projector as I trace versions of the shape.

A more elaborate process of pattern-making involves drawing tessellations digitally. A tessellation is the tiling of a plane. To draw these patterns in Photoshop both expedites the process and allows it to happen intuitively. In an instant, a shape can be duplicated, mirrored, rotated, stretched (etc.). Furthermore, once an entire field of pattern is established, the entire field can be manipulated at
once. Filters can be applied to distort the field, warping sections and stretching others, twirling, applying perspective (etc.). I print versions of these tessellations on transparent film to be projected onto the canvas.

**ABSTRACTION / FIGURATION**

One of the most important properties of my images is the oscillation of the image between abstraction and figuration. In Charles Bernstein’s 2013 essay in *Critical Inquiry* entitled “Disfiguring Abstraction”, Bernstein explores the “claustrophobic historicizing” of abstraction. Bernstein writes of the relationship of figuration to abstraction:

A work is imagined to be on the brink of abstraction, pulls back from it, finally realizes it. But what is achieved is not abstraction, which is metaphysical, but non/figuration, which is stylistic. The radicalism is not the articulation of nonfiguration—no matter how significant—but the process of moving in, about, and around nonfiguration. What’s most radical, in other words, is the series of swerves, the defamiliarization (ostranenie) that opens up a constellation of possibilities. Not a purging of figuration but a transformation of figuration into abstraction, abstraction into image, and image into the figurative. What’s most radical is not the actualization of “pure abstraction” but the oscillation of figure and nonfigure, a fort-da of appearance/disappearance. (Bernstein 496)

Bob Thompson’s painting *Judgment of Paris* exemplifies figurative abstraction. Thompson’s interest in myth, spirituality, and narrative is clear, but his formal decisions in painting transcend figuration. Figures are not only silhouetted to become unusual shapes, but they are also painted in high key, charged colors which shed their human origins. Pictorial elements, such as the tree and the mountains, imply figuration and landscape. On the other hand, it is possible to view the work (or sections of the work) without consideration of the represented image, and instead with the demeanor of an abstract
Marsden Hartley’s 1914 painting *Portrait Arrangement* includes a kind of pictogram, front and center, depicting Hartley’s lover, an officer in Berlin. Although this painting -like other portraits Hartley did of the officer- is highly personal, it operates less like a conventional portrait and more like an abstract composition. Here, too, the figure is schematic.

Both of these paintings, in their oscillation between the figurative and the abstract perform a kind of equalizing. They include a figurative presence which is painted in a way that is not anthropocentric; the human is as important as the animal as the tree as the geometric motif, and as the brushstroke. Images (whether figurative or abstract) are symbolic and simplified; they function as modules and are placed contextually within a space. What results is a schematic space.

**THE STRUCTURING OF SPACE IN PAINTING AND MUSIC**

My paintings utilize a collage-space which allows for both the embrace of the flat picture plane as well as the embrace of pictorial illusion.

Flat, diagrammatic space can be seen clearly in the paintings of Agnes Martin. The 2003 documentary *With My Back to the World* includes footage collected between 1998 and 2002 of Agnes Martin being interviewed about her work. In one passage, she explains a spatial phenomenon of her work:

I owe quite a bit to [abstract expressionists] because they gave up defined space -that is the arrangement of things in space, you know, just how far apart they are. They gave up anything that can be measured of space. And they got *infinite space*. That's what I think I have too -infinite space. (Lance)
Martin's *Untitled 2* utilizes flat, diagrammatic space, but paradoxically it implies infinite space. This is not only achieved through the absence of pictorial space-making devices and references—which Martin refers to as “defined space”—but this is also achieved through modularity. The stripes function as modules which are repeated across the picture plane. The repetition that can be seen implies continuation of this repetition beyond the edges of the canvas.

In looking at artists who utilize this kind of flat, diagrammatic space I became especially interested in the drawings and weavings of Anni Albers. An essay by Jenny Anger entitled “Anni Albers's Thank-You to Paul Klee” details two key concepts in Albers's work which were introduced to her at the Bauhaus where she was a student of Klee. These are the design principles of multiplication and polyphony. Multiplication is the idea that any unit can be multiplied by pushing it down or across a page, repeating it with interruption, displacing it, repeating it intermittently, mirroring it, or rotating it. Polyphony is a concept derived from music and can be described as the overlapping of two or more independent voices (as in melody and harmony). The voices operate together but can be distinguished from one another. Multiplicity and polyphony (simple principles) can create infinite complex arrangements. Upon this point it is important to recognize the similarities between music and painting; in the comparison of their construction, both arts involve time and space.
In Theodor Adorno's essay “On Some Relationships Between Music and Painting”, first a distinction is made between Zeitkunst, the temporal art and Raumkunst, the spatial art. Painting is considered as Raumkunst, a spatial art. Even so, Adorno demonstrates that the temporal element in painting is inherent. “In a picture everything is simultaneous” he states. In painting things are brought together to exist next to one another in space. This is a process of tensions. The elements that compose a painting act as the notation of a musical score. When one watches a painting, the score is activated again. Adorno argues,“Painting and music speak by virtue of the way they are constructed, not by the act of representing themselves...” (Adorno 71). Adorno's text ends with this idea:

With the current convergence [of music and painting] ...we also glimpse a condition more advanced than the arts, one that also reaches back before art as a separate sphere of activity. The forms created by some painters, wildly proliferating between patterns and organisms, as their makers play over into three-dimensionality -the illusion that nonperspectivist painting had destroyed- are evidence of this. It is not accidental that the turmoil within them is so musiclike. (78)

Paul Klee's 1920 painting Temple Gardens operates with this kind of complexity. There are pictographic forms of plants, doorways, rooftops, hills, perhaps even a bell-tower. Not only is there a entanglement of the abstract and representational, but there is a multiplicity of space. Pictorial ways of making space are utilized in some areas, such as in scale (some forms get smaller as they recede), and as in using the diagonal to imply perspective. However, in other areas, these ways of making illusory space are refuted by the flatness of planes and by rejecting the principles of perspective. Despite this
inconsistency, there is a musical, rhythmic kind of unity in the entire composition.

**CUBIST SPACE AS COMPLEX REALITY**

All contemporary painting is indebted to Cubism. In his essay “The Moment of Cubism”, Berger argues that Cubism “recreated the syntax of art so that it could accommodate modern experience” (Berger 91). By their treatment of space and of form, Cubists expressed man's new relationship to nature: as part of nature. Methods of established three-dimensional space are used in Cubist paintings. However, the pictures do not follow any single spatial rule. The scenes are fragmented. The picture plane is the constant that functions as the mediator in this kind of complex space. Berger states, “Before and after every sortie of our imagination into the problematic spaces and through the interconnections of a Cubist painting, we find our gaze resettled on the picture surface, aware once more of two-dimensional shapes on a two-dimensional board or canvas” (85). He describes that the viewer, when looking at a Cubist painting, is continually reminded by the discontinuity of space that her view of the scene is only partial.

Cubists reduced forms to cubes, cones, cylinders, and flat facets or planes. Berger mentions that it is often misunderstood that there was a simplification of form for the sake of simplification. This is untrue. A simplification of form, rather, functioned to allow elements of any one form to be interchangeable with another. “Thus, as against the Cubist discontinuity of space, they created a
continuity of structure” (86). It is important to note that in a cubist picture, negative space becomes form, too.

All of these principles have a relationship to modularity as structure, and the movement of energy; energy moves through “negative” space invisibly, and “negative” space is made up of positive matter. Cubism was prophetic in the sense that it “coincided with the new scientific view of nature which rejected simple causality and the single, all-seeing viewpoint” (87). This is precisely why Berger describes Cubism as a beginning.

Today -a century after Cubism- as an effect of the speed at which information is produced and travels, the complexity and fragmentation of the screen of reality is arguably more dramatic than ever. However, inter-connectivity (oneness) is also perceived more dramatically, as we use the internet constantly to network and exchange ideas. We all have seen graphics which represent this connectivity by a skin-like web of infinite points and lines wrapping around the sphere of the globe.

**MODULARITY AS STRUCTURE**

Modularity is present in all levels of existence, in the macrocosm and the microcosm. I’ve come to understand modularity through empirical experiences (such as seeing a field of grass and then noticing the individual blades) and through scientific narratives (such as learning about bacteria colonies in the human body).

Phillip Morrison, in his 1966 essay “The Modularity of Knowing” writes “The world is both richly strange and deeply simple. That is the truth spelled out in the graininess of reality; that is the consequence of

(Figure 6). Nikki Mehle, Photograph of Perito Moreno Glacier, 2016
modularity. Neither gods nor men mold clay freely: rather they form bricks. If it were not so, order and diversity would be no allies, but eternally at war” (Morrison 19). Observing and investigating modular structure was my main intention in traveling to Perito Moreno Glacier in Argentina with the assistance of the Kossak Travel Grant at Hunter College. Snowflakes -hexagonal crystals of frozen water-compress to create larger, rounded crystals. These crystals then form sheets of ice, which compress to build larger ice formations, eventually forming the “glacier” in its wondrous entirety. Every natural phenomena is a phenomena of modularity.

**MOVEMENT OF ENERGY**

Considering modularity prompts a question about how a module (unit) is defined as separate from other units. One of the most resonant texts on this subject is chapter three of R. Buckminster Fuller's book *Synergetics* entitled “Universe”. In the chapter, Fuller describes the paradox of unit and whole:

> Universe is the comprehensive, historically synchronous, integral-aggregate system embracing all the separate integral-aggregate systems of all men's consciously apprehended and communicated (to self or others) non-simultaneous, nonidentical, but always complementary and only partially overlapping, macro-micro, always-and-everywhere, omnitransforming, physical and metaphysical, weighable and unweighable event sequences. Universe is a dynamically synchronous scenario that is unitarily nonconceptual as of any one moment, yet as an aggregate of finites is sum-totally finite. (Fuller 81)

This passage poetically attempts to define Universe, and upon reading it we contemplate the unit and the whole in terms of both time and space. Later in the essay Fuller states, “There may be no absolute division of energetic Universe into isolated or noncommunicable parts. There is no absolutely enclosed surface, and there is no absolutely enclosed volume. Universe means “toward oneness” and implies a minimum of twoness” (83). Universe, then, is energy as well as non-energy. Included in the text is an illustration of an egg and a chick, a caterpillar and a butterfly, a tree without leaves and a tree with leaves, an ice cube and a puddle of water. A caption reads: *The behavior of “Universe” can only*
be shown with a minimum of two pictures. Two “pictures” are necessary to illustrate change. Change is movement of energy.

**METAMORPHOSES: NOTES ON HUMANS, ANIMALS AND MACHINES**

In my painting, both modular structure and movement are paramount. Human figures, animal figures, and geometric patterns drawn using mechanical methods all operate as modular rhythms within the picture. Sometimes the picture contains a climax, but this does not assume any hierarchy of figures.


The first subject matter for painting was animal. Probably the first paint was animal blood. Prior to that, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal … because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric. Within that relation what the two terms -man and animal- shared in common differentiated them. And vice versa. (Berger 261).

Anthropomorphism is a concept which continually interests me. Both ancient and contemporary cultures and religions include parables and creation stories regarding animals: as gods or evil spirits, as partially human, humans in disguise, humans reborn, or simply as characters which exhibit human traits.

Berger argues that contemporary uneasiness towards anthropomorphism (as a concept which limits our understanding of “nature”) is rooted in the ideology of Descartes and blossomed with 19th century inventions and methods of production. “Descartes internalized, *within man*, the dualism implicit in the human relation to animals. In dividing absolutely body from soul, he bequeathed the body to the laws of physics and mechanics, and, since animals were soulless, the animal was reduced to the model of a machine” (Berger 264). In this ideology, nature becomes a value concept; nature becomes everything which was not created by man, and is opposed to the “artificiality” of human structures and
civilization (267-268). As technology advanced through the industrial revolution, the animal became marginalized, manufactured as a product (as in industrial farming) and consumed as a product (as in zoos, Disney movies, coffee table books). The uneasiness about anthropomorphism, therefore, comes from a recognition of this marginalization as well as an existence far removed from animal presence.

It is possible for symbolic images of animals to operate in painting as modular vessels through which energy moves. To reiterate, this is the energy of the Universe proper-to which Fuller refers. The energy modulates itself through humans, animals, plants, minerals, all forms of matter. This symbolic representation of the animal as a unit does not disregard the tragedy of animal as capital. (It is not unrealized that human is capital, too.) This kind of representation, rather, is a depiction of both the unity and disparity between all forms. It is the same archaic metaphor that Berger describes as existing in the first painting.

This summer while traveling in Mexico City I was captivated by a painting at the Museo Soumaya- Rufino Tamayo's Aviación (1934). The image presents the backs of three figures on a kind of balcony from which they are looking out at an airplane. Two of the three figures have their arms outstretched, mimicking the form of the airplane, looking like birds. The third figure is sitting on a rock, perched like an owl. The airplane is surrounded by what appears to be clouds or wind, swirling around the plane. In these clouds are three women figures -spirits perhaps- whose bodies turn seamlessly into the clouds.
This image is spectacular in that conceptually a unity of energy is depicted. The men mimic the airplane (or perhaps the airplane mimics the men), and all mimic birds. Man, machine and animal are connected. The women are the clouds; the clouds are the women.

Paul Klee's painting *The Twittering Machine*, I believe, is also representative of this unity of energy. Arthur Danto in his essay on Klee interprets the image: “Klee is making some kind of point about the futility of machines, almost humanizing machines as things from which nothing great is to be hoped or feared, and the futility in this case is underscored by the silly project of bringing forth by mechanical means what nature in any case provides in abundance” (Danto 84). It is important to realize that in Klee's paintings (whether they include geometries and the architectural, humans, plantlife, or animals) every image is reduced to a kind of pictogram. The pictogram operates as a symbolic unit. Seeing that the machine is made of the same pictorial language as the birds themselves, it is possible that the birds are part of the machine, or even *mechanical* birds. There exists not only the metaphorical connection between human and animal, but also the same connection between human(animal) and machine - a connection which only deepens as we enter an age of artificial intelligence and mechanic consciousness.
CONCLUSION

Painting is an act of both processing and creating reality – the duality of reflection and invention. *Painting* is the *construction* of a painting. Construction of a painting is not dissimilar to the construction of a glacier, the construction of a honeycomb, a bower bird's nest, an opera, a skyscraper, a machine, computer intelligence, or reality itself. To paint is to observe, to think, to feel, and to labor.


Exhibition Image List

1. *Hunger*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 72” x 72”.

2. *Lovers' Quarrel*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 72” x 72”.

3. *Daybreak*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 72” x 72”.

4. *The Nine*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 72” x 72”.
Installation Images