Ordinary Disorder

Jonathan S. Tracy
CUNY Hunter College

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Ordinary Disorder

by

Jonathan Tracy

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

December 21, 2017
Date

Lisa Corinne Davis
Signature

December 21, 2017
Date

Thomas Weaver
Signature of Second Reader
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Abstract

The pictorial spaces in my paintings are found through many drawings, based on memories. In these drawings I use the architectural technique of paraline drawing, in pointed contrast to one or two point perspective. With a fixed point of view unavailable, the viewer or reader becomes the writer too. This is what I intend. The paraline method also engages specific corners of art history to which I relate, including woodblock prints of Japanese interiors, Chinese brush painting landscapes with houses, and the shifting, rotating perspectives found in Baroque painting.

My intensely personal memories/drawings are transfused into highly material finished paintings. Disorder in these works’ broken surfaces also connotes the illusive, fleeting mechanics of my consciousness and metaphysical perceptions, often located in a kind of interior space that is web-like. Because I am acutely aware of the world constantly shifting around me, the synthesis and structure that resides in my younger memory provides a stable locus for the work - which nevertheless still tangles, splashes, and interleaves during visualization. Yet I cannot ever detach from these felt places to explicitly construct images that speak about or critique culture or the world at large. Rather, my work is more close to the transcendental, lived experience painted by the contemporary artist Cynthia Daignault. Daignault’s presentation derides painting as a product and attempts to close in on her memory flow.

I also find relation to the work of Richard Artschwager, based on its four stated elements: the frame, domestic subject matter, coloration, and formal/tactile qualities. As agreed upon by Artschwager and expressed in his work, pictorial memories of things outside of
ourselves can only truthfully consist of so many things. My painted execution, along with its slippages between representation and symbol, produces a clearing in which the content of my paintings roam.
Finding my access point (to one of my paintings) is (for me) like gazing through a keyhole. To accurately transcribe a space seen through a keyhole is impossible. Distortions are rife and the eye is blinded to whole parts of a room.

There are signifiers in my work that orient the viewer and help them understand how the paintings are rifling through mimetic languages to analogize psychological spaces. I combine various painterly applications with iconic signifiers and symbols to address experiences like trauma, grief, and old joy as sorrow. My work originates in the synthesis of past experience and I build a symbolic language out of this process of synthesis. I deploy a wide gamut of signifiers, from brushwork and drawing of all sorts to forms of generalized associations to distinct symbols in order to build what I think of as a metaphysics of perception.

In order to clarify how I see my perception as metaphysical in its distorted and fragmented mode, I’d like to reference as an example Rene Magritte’s 1928 painting titled “The Spy.” This painting can serve as an analogy for the way I seek the content behind my paintings and drawing.
But first, please permit a brief digression to examine some of the drivers behind my search. I was raised in Minnesota. My childhood home was quite large. The place had twelve rooms, three and half bathrooms, three fire places, and an attic. It was atop this house, adjacent the attic, that I played with my toys and Legos. My parents provided me with thousands of Legos; with them I built elaborate neighborhoods and streets and narrated tales of many different families that had houses and domestic settings. I lived in an imagined world that felt both kaleidoscopic and labyrinthine. This spacious house I grew up in imprinted my psyche with an elaborate memory palace. Simultaneously, like “The Spy,” I lived inwardly in a fantastical realm in reality and home. The latter was turbulent. My parents had marital problems and my father was often away working. He’d triumphantly return, almost kidnapping the family to an impressive exotic location that I had no interest in adventuring to. This kind of interruption rebuffed the domesticity that I sought in my Lego world.

Let’s return to the description of “The Spy” and its analogy to my keyhole access point. “The Spy” is divided in half, the man on the right is peering through a keyhole, the dark space on the left side of the painting suggests that it shows what he is seeing – a frontal view of a woman’s head, floating in the darkness. While his view through a keyhole suggests the fragmentary and contingent nature of his view, the image on the left evidences a stereographic point of view, that is, a view that summarizes the woman’s head as an exact presentation without reference to the contingency of an awkward viewpoint. The woman’s frontal head is made two-dimensional, and the stereographic vision of her features suggests that she is appearing to him as a metaphysical object, as a form of presence that corresponds to his emotions. While I look at this painting I feel my interpretation parallels his and seems to inhabit
it. This is a kind of empathy engendered by the keyhole experience, which suggests a parallel between the man’s experience and the viewer’s experience. The woman’s frontal head outside the picture plane and the stereoscopic point of view of the man forms a symbol of how we convert concrete sensory experience into ideas. The symbol is a vestige of a connection to the specificity of gender and a portrait of a specific woman unknown to me.

“The Spy” is a painting that chiefly functions for me as an instruction on the ways I observe my internal metaphysical objects, the content behind my drawings and paintings. While also the keyhole itself identifies a specific point of view, yet the subtext suggests another way of looking into oneself. This subtext is an allusion to the male and female dichotomy. The man inhabits the role of a voyeur or ‘peeper.’ This notion here, along with the keyhole, deploys the same behaviors: creeper-peeper, without emotional boundaries; this figure and his dissociated womanly object of attention (facing us, not him) serve as the object to acquire the content that resides within me. The man in “The Spy” is exhibiting these types of behaviors, and he is seen to be rebuffed by the symbolism of the woman’s head turned frontally and away from him; as her image is shown in an idealized space beyond observation, she is also shown as beyond his importuning gaze. This notion of rebuff places a distance on the observer and creates an asymmetry between the observer (who appears as a supplicant) and the observed, who retreats into a dark, undefined realm. The woman, with her perceived resemblance to an individual, feels unattainable, like she is to the man behind the door. This parallels the state of any artifact examined from within oneself; we need an idea of it to attain it as an object of our contemplation, but the idea itself distances us from the objects of our attention. When I look inward these similar levels of refracting also exist, along with the rebuff at my core, like this
man in “The Spy.” He is dissociated from reality and from her body at large in the darkened space of the picture plane, even as he attempts to acquire a vision of her. This is similar to my attempt in my paintings to grasp the experiences of past pain, only to have them retreat into an ideational, fictional space.

Envisioning the keyhole access point like “The Spy” has many blind-sided views. The foreground is obstructed and the picture plane pushes back. Disorder in the broken surface suggests the illusive, fleeting mechanics of my consciousness and metaphysical perception or a kind of interior space that is web-like and disassociated.

The pictorial space comes out in my drawings as both diagrammed and modeled, and slashed up by these paraline lines. The basis for allusion is the abandonment of strict guidelines that would restrict the point of view to distancing vanishing points. Instead the use of this architectural technique of paraline drawing is a pointed contrast to a one or two point perspective. When point of view is removed the viewer or reader becomes the writer too. The paraline method also engages specific corners of art history, including woodblock prints of Japanese interiors, Chinese brush painting landscapes with houses, and the shifting, rotating perspectives found in Baroque painting.

Since my opinions and perceptions of the world are constantly shifting and changing, the synthesis and structure that resides in me as the memory palace evidenced in my childhood is a needed site of stability. From the fantastical domestic Legoscapes to the spacious vacant townhouse, these sites offer an elusive refuge to my abject, empty, and solipsistic core. I cannot abandon these felt places to explicitly construct drawings and paintings that critique the world at large, like the contemporary painter Emily Mae Smith does with her pop-styled
iconicity. Rather, my work is more close to the transcendental, lived experience painted by the contemporary painter Cindy Daignault. Daignault’s presentation derides painting as a product and attempts to close in on her memory flow.

I also sympathize with the work of Richard Artschwager, based on four different elements he uses: the frame, domestic subject matter, coloration, and certain of his formal/tactile qualities. Memories of things outside of ourselves can only consist of so many things, such as beds and windows, and these are the things that Artschwager chiefly depicts in his paintings.

The limitation of palette, along with memory recall, can be inferred from Anne Neukamp’s recent constructions. In her work, slippage between the representation of symbol and icon begins to enter the clearing my paintings roam.

I will finish by discussing a few of my paintings in detail. In *Tilting at Windmills*, an anthropomorphized auger is centralized, the blue-shaped top tilts forward as de-saturated army green legs flatly suggest movement towards a militaristic right face. The figurative
elements occupy normative positions: top is head, the midsection, with a warm tinted hue of auburn, suggests interconnected flesh, and those bottomed boots complete the allusions. The visual simplicity only alludes to the mess of lines underneath from the original drawing. I aim to present a personality, an indeterminate psychology, appearing centralized amid the deadpan flat color of a space beyond the legible scene. The frame and hues suggest a whimsical nostalgia, a feeling that the broken frame bucks into an upside down container. This container isn’t pouring or falling out, it’s capturing the delicacy of an abstract arachnid-like spider under a jar. Enter this cul-de-sac from underground and you may be stung by the iconicity of the miraculous.

On a panel pushed out from the wall I have painted a domestic setting, Hoarders Holiday, showing a dining room scene with a black and white armature webbing the chairs and table. Sensibilities that feel parasitic, while entirely natural, hinge on the title’s notion of a person’s
shortcoming: hoarding. While the profuse has vanished, the trail remains with residual
blackened dollops suggesting a snail-like figure discouraged by the warm, pale yellow light that
now imprisons the table and chairs. The border is framed coolly with black and bluish-purple
hues like a fresh bruise before oxygen flows back into the broken veins. The domestic scene is
both unkempt and well kept like a pile of dust in the corner of a well-lit room. The maids are
out and the family is home, when the spotlight is out it’s only then that the hearth is alone.
### Installation Views

1. *Ordinary Disorder* by Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Overall Installation View

![Overall Installation View](image1)

2. *Ordinary Disorder* by Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Hallway Installation View

![Hallway Installation View](image2)
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7. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Tilting Toward Windmills, 19x15”, oil on panel with Mahogany frame, 2016

8. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Untitled, 10x8”, graphite on paper, 2016


15. Jonathan Tracy, May 19\textsuperscript{th}-June 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Untitled, 15x19”, oil on panel with Cedar frame, 2016

16. Jonathan Tracy, May 19\textsuperscript{th}-June 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Untitled, 16x12”, watercolor on paper, 2014

17. Jonathan Tracy, May 19\textsuperscript{th}-June 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Untitled, 10x9”, oil on panel, 2016

18. Jonathan Tracy, May 19\textsuperscript{th}-June 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, Last Thought, 14.25x20.5”, oil on cradled panel, 2016
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27. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Untitled, 8x10”, graphite on paper, 2016


32. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Follower Fox, 14.25x20.5”, oil on cradled panel, 2016

33. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Untitled, 18x14” oil on cradled panel, 2016

34. Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, Mouth without a Tougue (Repressed), 13x16”, oil on panel with Walnut frame, 2016
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<td>Jonathan Tracy, May 19th-June 4th, 2016, 20x19”, oil on cradled panel, 2016</td>
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39. Jonathan Tracy,