Construction Narratives

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CONSTRUCTION NARRATIVES

By

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INTRODUCTION

“It is a mistake to think that the painter works on a white surface. The figurative belief follows from this mistake. If the painter were before a white surface, he could reproduce on it an external object functioning as a model, but such is not the case. The painter has many things in his head, or around him, in his studio. Now everything he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work. They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it.” ¹

In my studies of oil painting, I learned a ritual of preparation: considering the thickness of the stretcher bars for adequate spacing of the picture from the wall, selecting the texture of the canvas, and once stretched, testing for tightness. Hidden away beneath the top layer of the painting, were hours spent in anticipation, applying layers of gesso over raw canvas to condition the surface. During this process, traditionally divided between production of support, ground, and painting proper, I became interested in the experience and meaning of these layers and tonalities of white. They carry the significance which Deleuze so aptly describes as "all present". I have realized that painting has already began before I actually started.

For Cezanne to leave open spaces of gesso between his strokes or Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis (the list goes on), is to incorporate what seems external to painting within and next to painting proper, to bring the labor of the studio into the gallery. “[The painter] enters into [cliché and probability] because he knows what he wants to do, but what saves him is [not himself] but the fact that he does not know how

¹ Deleuze, Gilles, and Francis Bacon. Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation. London: Continuum, 2003. 86
to get there, he does not know how to do what he wants to do. He will only get there by getting out of the canvas. [.]”

Fig.1 Blinky Palermo, Quiet Speakers II, 1969. Top:Dyed Nessel. Bottom Dyed nessel on wooden frame.

CLOTHED

Blinky Palermo did not use paint in his ‘Cloth Pictures’. Instead of going to an art store he went to fabric shops, and found his way "out of the canvas" by trading it for colored fabrics. In a decisive move he collapsed three conceptual layers, support, ground and painting into one. Palermo picked up on the difference between the physicality of color in the surface versus on the surface and how sensorial memories of this contrast affects our experience of color.

3 The painter Amy Sillman has referred to shopping for oil paint as “a bohemian luxury experience”.
The ‘pictures’ in this series are composed of fabric pairings sewn together in a variety of formats, the size of which was at times determined by industrial textile standards. Their production plays with and against commonplace associations that the same cotton fabric would acquire after being manufactured for mass consumption into household items. The ‘before’ of these connotations circle round like a snake eating its tail when our attention flickers between color field painting and plain fabric.

In late 1960 to early 1970's, Germany was undergoing an economic boom. New colors were in fashion, and people were economically motivated to make color statements in their homes and clothing. Suddenly "bunt" colors were all around, and Palermo was receptive to this change. Joseph Beuys said of Palermo that he was interested in "the way people live…in their space. Human habitation, ( ) was very important to him. The way they inhabit, the way they live, what chairs they sit on, or what they have around them, what they stuff into themselves."  

Through his 'Cloth Pictures' he referenced the pictorial by pointing directly to urban wear. When hung together they display "a systematic running through of all possible appearances and effects." Color is the alternating agent within repetitive formats and compositions. The multiplicity of these ‘pictures' form self-contained cultural environments within the gallery space. Exploiting the idea of a painting practice by having color seams fabricated, handing the job to others to sew by machine.

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One of the works in this series, Quiet Speakers II (Fig.1), juxtaposes a hemmed piece of monochrome fabric tacked to the wall above another piece of the same fabric stretched over a frame (as a canvas would be) inviting us to feel a shift in color through presentation. Demonstrating a physical reception to colors beyond any stasis on the color wheel, these works show how color is bound with the vehicle of its delivery.

![Fig.2](image)

**Fig.2** Diego Velázquez, Mars Resting, 1640. Oil on canvas.

**UNGUARDED**

Mars, the God of war (Fig.2) looks out to the viewer with one hand on his chin and the other stuffed by his thigh under a pink cloth. His left elbow rests on his perched leg, the other leg folds under a low seat, giving him a larger than life appearance. Wearing only a helmet and a discrete blue cloth over his midsection, he sits almost naked with an
expression that is not particularly communicative. The pile of metal on the floor
suggests that he has recently removed his armor, sword, and shield. One could say that
he looks silly, maybe even uncomfortable. The painting allegorically portrays the god in
the repose of a tired man. We are presented here with the mythological figure
demystified and defying expectations. Except perhaps for his armaments, he does not
appear soon to be returning to war but instead seems to represent a more retiring state
of rest. The symbolism of this painting is almost exclusively interpreted through its title.
Here sits a man we are told is the god Mars, and this is confirmed by the military
accessories that surround him. Such an association is a simple trope of iconography.
However, this interpretation veils over the veritable subject matter of the painting. The
man represented here is in fact very lucidly rendered as a model posing for the painter
and the objects around him are props. Before long it becomes clear that the setting is
unmistakably Velasquez's studio. We must decidedly hold both fiction and nonfiction
simultaneously in the mind's eye to gain the full breadth of this image.

I compare the sensation of looking at this painting to the way that we may watch
an actor become their character. In this case, the painting reverses the operative role so
that we feel as though we are watching the actor expose themselves by leaving their
character. The painting nails the mark by demystifying the portrait. The man in place of
Mars sits in a pose from which we gather a timelessness that pertains not to the myth,
(or the history of his pose) but the model. Oil paint flickers with natural light over a
scene as contemporary; I would venture to say as banal, as a nude drawing class. Thus
the painting perpetually recalls the present by exposing the ordinary and the
commonplace. In fact, every time I return to this image I get momentary flashbacks from
art school, of the model settling for a long-term pose. And as it happens all too commonly, with charcoal in hand one waits as the model takes a few moments adjusting their body to accommodate a pose that will secure a gesture that could go for 20 minutes at a time. The model suddenly becomes a still image, a fictive figment for the artist between resting breaks. So that as he sits there with hazy eyes cast in shadow and I gage the contours of his face, I stop to wonder if the helmet is not too big for him or perhaps it doesn't become his character. Suddenly he looks pathetic, and I become arrested with emotion because I become aware of the vulnerability of flesh.

INTERVENING SPACES

Returning to the opening question, both Palermo and Velazquez bring forth transparency, where the work becomes de-mystified, naturalized. Something is both lost in this translation and gained in mythologizing nontraditional tropes. Many times I find that the act of painting is an act of transcription from an established tradition to a kind of misconception, a departure from oil on canvas and image making, to make the object the image of its own making. I find my interest in painting to be located in exposing the materials and construction of the object to insert my narrative in a collaborative effort. Engaging in a multifaceted approach to painting, I have found it necessary to reach for alternative materials (Aqua-Resin, dyes, burlap, rigid foam, fiberglass). With this latest group of paintings, I looked to find a balance between the behavior of these materials and my narrative of painting, in such a way as to engage the musculature of the eye, bringing a sense of touch and volume to the language of painting.
During the summer of 2016, I traveled to Italy by the generosity of the Kossak Grant, looking for answers to the question of format in the fresco paintings of Pompeii and the Convent of San Marco which holds several of Fra Angelico's frescoes throughout its rooms and corridors. I became interested in the separation between art and the living space that surrounds it. Stepping into these rooms with a clean slate, my intention was not to prioritize the masterpiece, but to look beyond the margins of its frame.

Fresco is a kind of painting that is tied to its space, to experience it is to take into account the floor, the ceiling, the windows, and walls because these images are a part of the walls. A painted border becomes a false rendition which meets the very real, wall of the room. The Villa of the Mysteries' Dionysiac Frieze (Fig.3) for example expands the depth of the *triclinium* by a few feet. The red wall that runs parallel to the walls of the room is a mirage. In essence this is a red room, however it is the walls represented in the painting that are red.

The frescoes at San Marco contrast starkly with Pompeii while playing similar games with perception and space. Uncanny moments interrupt the simple plaster walls of the monk's cells. Rendered frames separate the space of the room from dreamy tableaus depicting meditative biblical scenes. The simplicity of the forms, down to the undulations of fabric carry renditions of colors that invite reverie. The intensity of this
series of frescoes is measured to achieve contemplation without distraction from climactic moments or embellishments.

Palermo’s architectural works mirror traditional frescos, continuing the discussion between dependency on the environment and being apart from it.

From the left:
**Fig.4** Pablo Diaz, Shadowbox #2. 36" x 34.5". Gesso, Aqua-Resin, fiberglass and rigid foam board. 2018
**Fig.5** Andrea Mantegna. St. Sebastian. Tempera on Canvas 82.5’ x 35.8”. 1490-1506

**SHADOWBOX #2**

Shadow Box #2 (**Fig.4**) presents a three-dimensional space generated by a series of bending planes, contained within a projecting frame. When viewed from the sides the outer walls of the frame generate a profile which corresponds to the internal
structure of the ‘picture’ plane; irregularly spaced from the wall and flat at the fore edge. Ruptures of alignment in the frame can be seen on the top middle and bottom left front. A third rupture occurs internally, on the bottom left where a projecting angle has been inverted, opening a gap best viewed when standing to the right of the work. The interior of the piece is painted with gesso, while the frame retains the tan, off-white color of Aqua-Resin. On the surface, their white tonalities expose a record of their application in crude brushwork. A microcosm in the larger field of highlights and shadows.

The whiteness of this work proposes a state of preparation for the painting to begin. However, it is the lighting of the room that completes it, adding a wider range of tones. The white wall of the gallery is also incorporated into the work by the opening slit. Additionally, the slit becomes a contrapposto pose, showing the space between bent knees as found in paintings of Saint Sebastian (Fig.5). This is an important pose in painting because by twisting the body, we are allowed to see through it. Particular to Saint Sebastian, the foreshortened arrows device a play on perspective, that work as location coordinates. The wounds propose apertures in the complete surface of the painting. Within Shadow Box 2 to have an opening is to introduce a pause. Nothing, produces the pause in viewing. The painting can stand solidly opaque and void. For all of its illusionistic space painting is an opaque medium. Saint Sebastian's body becomes palpable within the picture plane, and at times the arrows fletching flirt with the frame. For me, these questions of space are colorless. For the painting to flirt with space, the
conditions can only be prepared.

Fig.6 From the left: Spectrum Orange 2018, Cool Greens 2018, Olive 2018

From the left: Fig.7 Spectrum: Orange (Detail), Fig.8 Olive (Detail)

BURLAP

Spectrum: Orange, Cool Greens and Olive (Fig.6) are made on loose pieces of burlap a roll measuring 36 inches in width and cut to lengths of approximately 7.5 feet. Presenting reflective surfaces in a limited range of colors. Each was made by casting the surface of vinyl, using Aqua Resin and a mixture of dyes. In their process, sheets of vinyl are laid flat on a table; the burlap is placed on top and batches of colored resin a brushed on, soaking the burlap fibers to secure contact with the vinyl thus casting its
reflective surface. The burlap shifts and slides, the resin pools and drips. As the colors can only be mixed in batches, the application process is divided into stages. The resin has an accelerated drying process during which time it hardens to a rock-like consistency. Thus the burlap transforms with each application.

For these paintings I limited my pigments to synthetic dyes as my only source of color. These colors are commonly found in everyday life, at home and on the streets, and carry associations to contemporary printing. As I look back at the famous frescoes I visited through photographs on my computer and on books, I realize that the original colors based on traditional pigments have already been translated to another medium. This communal medium is synthetic. Just as I traded the traditional canvas for burlap, it became necessary to change my delivery of pigmentation.

Working with burlap has come about from a twofold necessity to touch a fabric of my childhood and to engage with the openness and flexibility of its weave. The aperture of this screen allows me to approach the medium of painting multilaterally, to introduce my narrative in the process. Meeting the process, intellectually integrating it with my narrative. The paintings can more or less be presented as sculptures in their relationship between the front and the back. Directing the narrative while the materials interact with themselves is almost out of my hands. It's the nature of the material to react the way it's going to react, but I am creating that narrative and in the process is endowing out of one template, so wide and so long where materials respond by my application.

While growing up in Cuba, I was accustomed to seeing burlap in stores and around the house. This is fabric that I understand through its touch and smell giving me
access to a visual language that connects me to the body. In Olive (Fig.8), much of the burlap is left unaltered while the marks leave a trace from the operation of flattening the burlap to the vinyl. As I worked in the reverse, these traces are sensorial residue for the spectator to come into physical contact with each color state. The surrealists made use of automatic techniques to allow access to the irrational. Jean Arp's "Collage with squares arranged according to the laws of chance" (1917) lets the falling hand-ripped pieces of paper fall to the sheet of paper, creating an anti composition. When referring to the artists of Dada and Surrealism, he wrote "These artists do not wish to copy nature. They do not wish to reproduce but to produce. They wish to produce as a plant which produces a fruit and is unable to reproduce a still life, a landscape, or a nude."7 I use similar chance techniques in my paintings, letting materials speak for themselves, and I engage in the process of creating a personal mythology, mixing my childhood experiences with my current studio practice.

My aim was not to paint an image but to simply create a flat surface, using brush strokes to push against the contours of the fabric one color at a time, using the spectrum as a marker of time in this labor. Letting the process speak for itself, I found myself less painting than covering, glazing in the sense of casting a vitreous surface. Having experience with glazing in oil painting, where thin layers of translucent paint combine for a deep visual effect, I found myself engaged in an opaque sort of glazing (Fig.7). After an area would harden, depending on its viscosity, another layer of resin could be applied subsequently to seep through openings in the weave that had not been thoroughly covered. Each new resin application shows dotted color interacting with the previous color. When installed in the gallery, the glass-like surface picks up glare from

7 Chipp. Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics. 390
the spotlights which the viewer activates by walking from one piece to the other. Adding to the movement of the viewer, the paintings are installed high, and at slight angles, that play with the irregularity of the edges. They float on the whiteness of the walls suggesting a motion activated by the changing highlights of the surface.

Working from the backside of the painting I could only see the results to gauge for the following color only after peeling away the vinyl and turning the painting over. One side opaque, the other glassy. In the synthesis of fixing the burlap to the vinyl, I painted by approximation. The effects of the front don't entirely coincide with the labor application.

My enthusiasm for these works on burlap begins with discovering a surface that you can see through, and continues with exploring further this system of tiny apertures. While regular canvas brings a sense of opacity, the open-weave fabric of the burlap carries a possibility for an active porosity. This fabric is going to come in contact with a painting narrative, but what you see through it is a narrative that is always changing. A painting that is see-through challenges the delineation that keeps art in one place and life in another. The object of art, especially the painting is an object of rumination. It's not about separating art from life but more about opening up the screen. Opening up the plane. Having solid and void together. A net that captures and releases. Giving pause and setting in motion the act of looking.


Pablo Diaz, Untitled. 35” x 34.5”. Aqua-Resin, dye and oil paint on burlap. 2018

Pablo Diaz, Untitled. 23” x 18”. Oil paint, Aqua-Resin, fiberglass and rigid foam board. 2018
Pablo Diaz, Untitled. 3" x 7.5'. Aqua-Resin and oil paint on burlap and fiberglass. 2018
Pablo Diaz, Spectrum Orange. 3” x 7.5’. Aqua-Resin and dye on burlap. 2018
Pablo Diaz, Cool Greens. 3” x 7.5’. Aqua-Resin and dye on burlap. 2018
Pablo Diaz, Olive. 3” x 7.5’. Aqua-Resin and dye on burlap. 2018