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Shift

Gittins George

Virginia Commonwealth University

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Shift
A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Department of Painting and Printmaking at the
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Master of Fine Arts

By

George Gittins

Hilary Wilder, Committee Chair

Richard Roth, Thesis Advisor, Committee Member

Gregory Volk, Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

Using Eduard Manet and Alex Katz as an entry point into my work, I will discuss seven of my paintings in detail. I will examine formal structures within the work such as color and space and how they relate to the content. I will discuss ideas of voyeurism and notions of the gaze while examining film as a presence. Artifice, art history, desire, personal memory, nostalgia and everyday life are starting points for formal explorations within the work.
In comparing Eduard Manet’s *Execution of Emperor Maximillion of Mexico* and Francisco de Goya’s *The Third of May*, we see a great difference. Goya’s depiction of this tragic event is highly sensational. It is nighttime, the steep grassy hill leads us down to the execution taking place. The soldiers’ rifles are pointed straight at the victims who are doused with light emanating from the lantern below. There are blood-covered bodies on the ground and horrified witnesses who are mostly covering their eyes: we only see the faces of the men about to be shot and those who already have been.

In Manet’s version it is a day like any other. The long rifles of the soldiers are shooting the defenders of Madrid and the choppy brushstrokes of the smoke bring our eyes back up to the spectators, who are peering down at the execution and are shown in a narrow variety of brownish hues. The expression on the faces of the defenders isn’t overly dramatic. Perhaps, what is most captivating about this painting is how beautifully the navy blue of the executioners’ uniforms absorbs light and how the white leather of their belts reflects it.

As Manet’s painting is less subjective, we are sooner to notice the paint and how things are communicated through the medium as the paint is brought forward. This lack of dramatization connotes a detachment. There is a detachment in that it presents an ambiguity about how the artist feels; it also doesn’t tell the viewer how to feel. Tragic events don’t always happen in ghoulish light and aren’t always committed by angry looking people. The executioners aren’t depicted in a villainous light because the executioners are indifferent and such events aren’t as theatrical as one might imagine.

Alex Katz’ paintings served as a tonic to the angst and existentialism of Abstract Expressionism. Katz, who is admittedly, a ‘detached person’\(^1\) paints his subjects in such a way

\(^1\) Alex Katz in conversation with Robert Storr, *Alex Katz* (Phaidon Press Limited 2005), 16
too. His paintings are beyond human scale, which takes them out of a straightforward representational read. Through flatness, formal aspects are brought to the surface Alex Katz’ paintings appear at first, to be very simple. He paints the basic appearances of things so that the emphasis shifts from a representational one to an experience of color and light. The sensation is not so much in the picture but in the experience of looking. Iwona Blazwick writes of the painting Sylvia:

“What happens to a face when it is bigger than you are? All the usual triggers of recognition- psychological engagement, the search for biography, iconography, emotion, attraction- momentarily disappear. We find ourselves in the zone between empathy and detachment, between an intuitive, anthropomorphic reading and a phenomenological one animated by optical and physical sensation. We are caught between image and abstraction.”

It is structurally crucial to the work that the narratives aren’t too complicated. If we got caught up in the depiction of an event within the picture, this ‘disappearance’ or oscillation, described by Blazwick would not occur. Everyone in his paintings appears content. Everything is pretty. When I was younger I thought that since I couldn’t find a narrative and that everything was flat, it was a cynical comment about painting. I thought it was so artificial. As I’ve looked at more painting and become more sensitive to seeing, I recognize a romance about color and light in his paintings.

It is this absence of narrative that makes me want to paint figuratively. While I wouldn’t use Manet or Katz as the basis of comparison with which to assess my work, this preoccupation with paint over narrative and the ability to create contradictions is something that drives my work.

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2 Iwona Blazwick, Alex Katz (Phaidon Press Limited 2005), 138
My current body of work began about a year ago when I started working more directly from art historical influences. The studio floor was covered in art history books of mostly French Impressionism and “messy” German painting from Cologne and Berlin. In my painting, I began using the space of the locker room to explore the art historical theme of bathers. The use of the locker room seemed to take away from the intimacy of the tradition. Bathers, in the work of Degas and Bonnard typically depicted nude women in domestic interiors. The locker room is a space with a lot of geometric forms, harsh light- not typically where one goes to relax.

Through the act of painting, I began to reverse the figure ground relationship. Painting the figure first and a harsh background subsequently is a reversal of how something is typically painted and of course, not how things are in real life. This seemed important as it added a level of distance to the subject, which I felt self-conscious about painting. This sort of shifting is still important to my painting practice. I started thinking about the figures as ‘stand-ins’ for figures rather than ‘actual’ depictions in a naturalistic way. It added another level of artifice to the painting. I see this as a kind of detachment. I also thought about the physicality of the paint becoming illusionistic-how the stocking on her foot was made up of washy transparent paint overlaying the more opaque passage of her foot. There was something dumb and obvious about this but in a way that made sense in terms of layering paint. The stocking came from the paintings of Bonnard in which he paints his wife dressing and undressing.
In painting this subject, thwarting the male gaze became a challenge. Historically, the male paints the object of desire, the female. The painting is a record of this desire for an exclusively male audience. The viewer identifies with the painter and feels a false sense of power as he is seeing but cannot be seen. The painting is seen through the lens of the heterosexual male and the female’s subjectivity is diminished by this act of spectatorship. This derives from Jacque Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage that describes the first time a child recognizes its own appearance in the mirror, which results in an anxiety. This recognition is a realization that he or she is a visible object.

Painting this subject is always going to be about the male gaze. While, the gaze isn’t eradicated through this level of artifice, it does become undermined. There is a constant reminder that what and who is being looked at is artificial and the painting becomes more about keyed up color. Through washy transparent glazes, I slowly accumulated murkiness on which to apply
higher contrast colors. This came out of Degas, who would apply bright color over muddy backgrounds to describe form. Also, the lockers are depicted individually and all in different colors as opposed to uniformly as they would appear in real life. This makes the lockers more like figures who are all looking at the female figure. This implies that there are already spectators with in the picture. This adds another level of distance to the gaze as we are looking at someone who is already being looked at. Mieke Bal writes on Rembrandt’s Danaë:

“Looking at the image from a different angle, we must take our own position into account. The viewer is also supposed to come in and be welcomed- as a voyeur, allowed to see the female body on display. But, at the same time, the viewer is deprived of his identity, when his eyes come into contact with his mirror image in the form of two onlookers”3

In Locker Room III, the painting becomes more about the synthetic light of a locker room. My memories of being in a locker room are associated with the buzzing sound of fluorescent lights. To shift the figure/ground relationships, I reversed the light and shadow on the figures to add a level of artifice to the painting so that it would become more structural. Influenced by Alex Katz, I wanted the figures to read as forms rather than characters. Their poses act more as spatial components rather than activities within a narrative. Rather than animating each locker to present this other kind of seeing in the picture, I wanted to use the shape of the walls to suggest a coliseum-like structure. The figures look as if they’re trying to look relaxed. Their eyes are gently closed and they have slight smirks but there is a harsh unnatural light on their faces. It is not ‘naturalistic’ but is more staged, which implies that they are being looked at. This again undermines the voyeurism by acknowledging it. It is also important that it is narratively dissonant so that it has a frozen quality. I wanted the subject matter to be defeated by

3 Mieke Bal, Looking in The Art of Viewing (Overseas Publishers Association 2001), 81
the radiant light and high contrast colors. This removal of narrative also adds distance from this voyeurism.

Having another seeing presence within the picture also connotes a certain level of surveillance. I play with this surveillance by putting the viewer in imagined or impossible spaces in the cases of *Vent* and *Boat Painting*.
Boat Painting plays with the impressionist tradition of depicting couples in boats. The viewpoint however, is spatially difficult. The viewer is placed above but not quite looking directly down. Perhaps the viewer is on a bridge but the boat has already passed under the bridge. The top of the painting comes forward while the bottom recedes. The woman is mostly nude while the male is clothed, as in impressionist paintings. The male is placed below and upside down while the woman is placed above, in a position of power that offsets the objectification. The idea for this painting came from a de Kooning drawing of a woman in a boat that referenced the enclosed space of early Christian painting.

Vent places the viewer in the space of a classroom seen through grates of a vent. The view is obscured through the grates, which contradicts the depth of field. The idea to depict a school came about after the Connecticut school shootings. I found myself thinking about my early experiences of seeing excessive violence in film, specifically memories of seeing the film Die Hard at a very young age. I remember Bruce Willis crawling through the vents to find the bad guys. The vent is a space few of us have ever inhabited and is mostly known to us through

Willem deKooning, Woman in a Rowboat, 1964
Charcoal on vellum, 58x35.5 in.

Giovanni Del Biondo, The Virgin of the Apocalypse with Saints and Angels c.1391
Tempera and gold on wood, 29.5x17 in.
film. Film can predetermine and shape our experiences in real life. The vent is an unconscious space that exists in a collective memory through film, which I will touch on shortly.

While I was deeply affected by the tragic events in Connecticut, I also thought about the distance I felt from them. I found out about the shootings on my computer, where I also find out about my friends' status updates on Facebook and receive e-mails about closeout sales on paintbrushes. I think about this aggregate of information and the distancing effect it has on us.

While film and advertising are often a projection of our desires, they also have the ability to shape our desires. The imagination was never truly pure in that it always came from something else but our imaginations aren’t necessarily ours. Since many of us experience the same films, our imaginations and memories have become more collective and less individualized.
as they’ve been shaped by mediated experiences. When we hear about events that we can’t see, memories of film provide our imaginations with what it was like.

There is that bizarre self-reflexive moment in films where there is a flashback and it is in black and white. Obviously, our memories aren’t in black and white but because of film, it is synonymous with nostalgia.

The painting *Projection* deals with this theme of filmic unconscious and detachment in a more narrative way. The idea for this painting came about over the summer when I was working at the door of a local bar. There was a dance party going on and the film *Vertigo* was being projected behind the dancers. I wanted to use the basic composition of one of the shots in the film. To reinforce the filmic and thwart specific associations with *Vertigo*, which is in color, I decided to depict it in black and white.
A crowd of figures who are all together, yet separate, occupies the nightclub. They are partying together, but seem alone and all have different motives. There is another separation that happens through the depiction of space. The light of the projector hits the figures but shines keyed-up neon orange light, which could not have been generated from a black and white film. The 'film' creates an image within an image that is communicated in a different way from the figures in the foreground. It is more like a drawing within a painting because it its descriptive elements are comprised of line, in grey tones reminiscent of graphite. The painting also plays with the tradition of depicting Parisian nightlife in French Impressionist painting.
These paintings also arise from everyday life and personal memory. Building on the tradition of the still life, *Fair Trade* came about last spring when I switched from hot to iced coffee. Soon, my painting table was littered with little green straws that matched my Emerald Green tubes of paint. I thought for a long time about how to paint such a subject. Through dabs, dashes, washes and subtraction I would convey the coffee. Through reversal of figure ground I communicated the forms. The only thing that one needed to understand the coffee was from Starbucks was the bright green line for the straw. Alex Katz once said, “Everyone thinks that old master paintings are realistic. They’re not. They’re too brown. It’s all style.”4 I thought about how brown is a color associated with realism, the way we associate Emerald Green with Starbucks.

As a child, I remember my friends’ parents had decorative olive jars in their kitchens. I grew up in an Italian neighborhood and I saw them in restaurant windows too. They were big and

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4 Inside New York’s Art World (1977), at (http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/dsvea/
had layers of various olives stuffed into them. They looked so strange to me and I could never figure out what they were for. Olives grossed me out as a child because they’re fleshy and look like eyeballs. Painting this subject attracted me because it is something decorative that contains real food. This is my most recent painting and it is starting to get the electric glow that I have been trying to achieve in previous paintings. I gave it a bright orange under-painting, which I use to describe highlights through subsequent transparencies. Also, the slightly purple white used to paint the bottle contrasts with the orange. The dark green of the olives sets off the bright red of the pimentos. It is a thing that should be stupid or cliché but I try to give it density through color.

By playing with space in painting, I try to examine what and who is being seen and from where. In a variety of different temperatures and approaches to painting, I explore the act of painting and its relationship to subject matter. Through references to art history and film I play with notions of desire, nostalgia, personal memory and everyday life. The subject matter is a point of departure for play with color. Like Manet and Katz, I am interested in how a picture can be transformed through bringing the paint forward.