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Peter Rostovsky: *Epiphany Model /*
The Meteor Shower, 2004

Painting's Elastic Context

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Painting has been continued by constantly being tested against that which stands outside painting-as-art: the photograph, the written word, decoration, literalness or objecthood. In other words, painting has been continued by being continuously corrupted.

David Batchelor¹

We have now learned a great deal about the earliest of these corruptions—especially photography and objecthood.² But art historians and critics have tended to treat these as though they represented final dissolutions of the enterprise of painting rather than phases within ongoing attempts to locate and explore areas exterior to painting. And this is what makes Batchelor's passage a useful place to begin—with two provisos, however: first, we need to proliferate his exterior categories to include not only the obvious missing ones (drawing, doodling, comic or scientific illustration, the diagram, architectural rendering, digital animation) but also the distant history of *painting itself*. For it too should be understood as a generative corruption when—removed from the status of the recent past and appearing instead as a kind of non-synchronous, displaced relation to the medium's history—we see the language of Caspar David Friedrich, François Boucher, Chinese scroll painting or 19th century Scandinavian folk art underlying paintings by Peter Rostovsky, Karen Kilimnik, Jun-Fei Ji or Jockum Nordström, to name but a few examples. Second, we need to inquire into how it is that these various corruptions relate to one another. Is each strictly gratuitous—utterly contingent and outside of time except inasmuch as they must come after the fall of modernist painting in the late 1960s—or do these various exterior resources carry with them their own latent positions and arguments, their own imagined pasts and futures?

Most curators and critics are quick to celebrate what they understand as the pluralistic climate in which painting has operated for the last several decades. One need only look at the range of compelling work, this argument goes, to understand that the field is infinitely capacious: in its plundering of its own and other pasts, in its expansion into popular culture and outside medium-specificity, painting takes on a vertiginous array of graphic conventions and cultural source materials, each of which can in turn be rendered intimate or grandiose, obsessive or affectless, naïve or slick, retro or futuristic. But if all can agree that the field is now this heterogeneous, there remains fundamental disagreement about how this condition emerged, how it has been sustained (by critics, institutions and painters themselves), and how valuations or even simple contextualizations work within this ongoing condition. Here I will address only this last question, identifying three emergent modes of corrup-

tion (the high tech digital, the low end illustrative, and the remote history of painting itself) and trying to suggest how work within these lines builds a context for itself.

When such meta-historical questions are addressed at all, contemporary painting and art more generally are seen as undermining late modernist models of discipline specificity like those developed by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. For almost four decades now the Fried of the 1960s, in particular, has been the modernist ogre that critics must slay, in infinite repetition, to enter into the postmodern paradise of post-discipline-specific art and art history.³ Most of what recent critics have found objectionable is on glaring display in his articulation of his model of the 'recent past' in his 1965 book *Three American Painters*:

"Once a painter who accepts the basic premises of modernism becomes aware of a particular problem thrown up by the art of the recent past, his action is no longer gratuitous but imposed. He may be mistaken in his assessment of the situation. But as long as he believes such a problem exists and is important, he is confronted by a situation he cannot pass by, but must, in some way or other, pass through, and the result of that forced passage will be his art."⁴

We have, for instance, shared "the basic premises of modernism" that frame art history, with painting center stage, making its "forced passage" through imposed problems.⁵ But for all Fried's dated assumptions, his passage is still useful in suggesting how painting contextualizes itself, then and now, by *appropriating* rather than simply discovering its past.⁶ Obviously now this past is not just painting's; nor is it necessarily recent. The 'situation' painters now survey may contain almost infinite possible narratives, but signing onto one—and imagining for it a surprising and compelling future—is still the de facto way in which work gets contextualized.

Addressing painters' relation to this expanded context in the 2002 survey, *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, Barry Schwabsky argues that "aesthetic positions are now themselves received aesthetically more than in terms of some kind of truth claim."⁷ It is, once again, Fried who can call this contrast into being: in *Three American Painters* he had argued, as Schwabsky reminds us, that art is gratuitous when it is "not essentially the answer to a question or the solution to a presented problem." Schwabsky then goes on to claim that though contemporary art "retains from its modernist and conceptualist background the belief that every painting is not only a painting but also the representation of an idea about painting," that every painting represents also a polemical stance on painting, the very fact that one position does not declare another invalid leads to the conclusion that "contemporary art is knowingly gratuitous."⁸ This word does capture half of painting's situation—its groundlessness, its lack of a binding and absolute context. But if painting only performed or underlined its gratuitousness, its "aesthetic position" could not, in fact, be received "aesthetically": what is aesthetic about a stance, I want to suggest, is the motivation of its gratuitousness or contingency into seeming logic, into coherent history. Painting's polemic quality is precisely this effect. This is painting's (never complete) performance.⁹

Take, for instance, painting's corruption at the hands of the digital. Here, in works by artists such as Inka Essenhigh, Haluk Akkce, and Julie Mehretu, the claim is not to keep painting alive by, say, courting the realist representational strategies of photography, the first medium to pressure painting's integrity, but rather to reinvent it as a medium for imagining hybrid bodies and architectures that emerge in the domain of the digital. Sculpture and

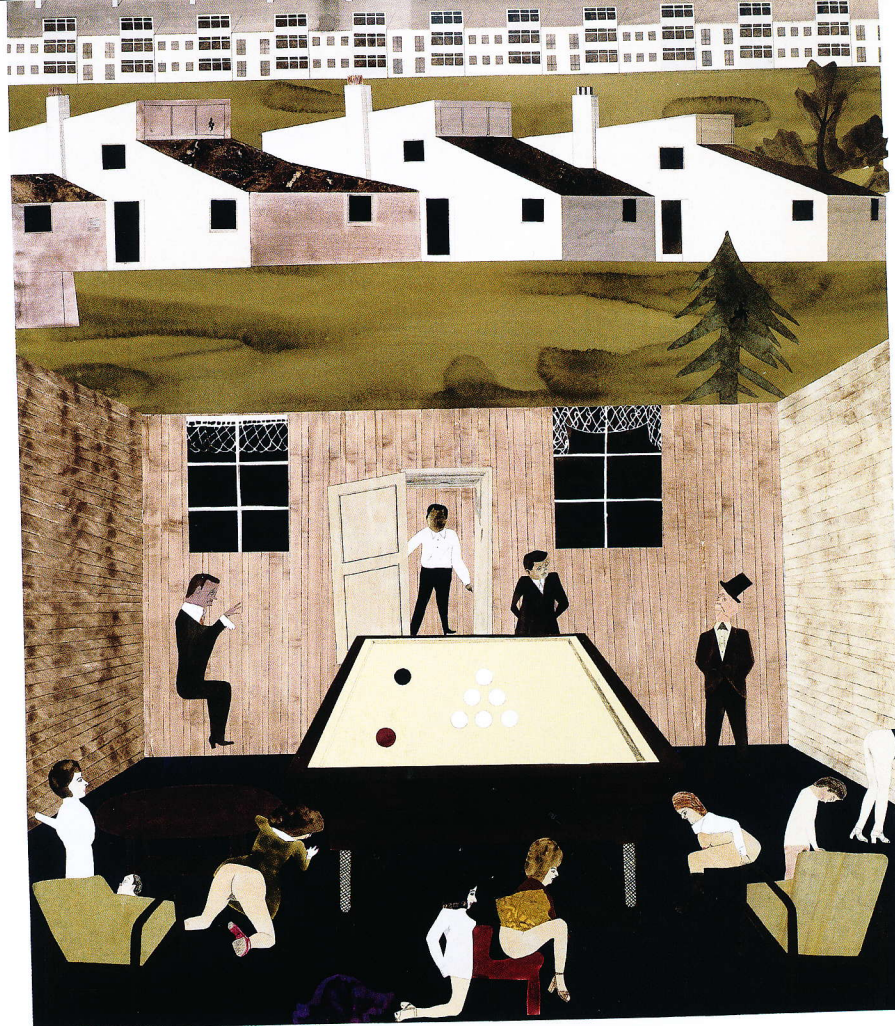


Inka Essenhigh: *Optimistic Horse and Rider*, 2002

architecture alike can, in this narrative, become part of painting's past: Hans Bellmer; Archigram, the early paper architecture of Zaha Hadid or Daniel Libeskind operate on par in this mode of working with the 'internal' history of biomorphic abstraction. Part of the performance of this painting is to configure this network of precedents (and one could certainly imagine others) into an argument about futurity—to present this contingent genealogy as coherent and motivated, as a way to imagine future bodies and environments.¹⁰

A second larger trajectory in contemporary painting is the turn toward comics and illustration, though from a position very different from either pop or neo-figurative painting. Rather than monumentalize and re-motivate the advertising image as pop art did, many recent artists tend instead both to expand the range of recycling (the icons of long-forgotten ad campaigns, the abandoned futurisms of previous decades of sci-fi, comic illustration, technical diagrams, to name but a few) and to invent new syntaxes that allow it to play a role in cosmologies that are deployed at a cultural rather than personal level. The earliest version of this work emerges in Southern California in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the work of Raymond Pettibon, Mike Kelley, Lari Pittman and others; terms are then recoded by the low-fi San Francisco artists of the 1990s (including Christian Schumann, Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen), and perhaps more interestingly more recently by artists like Jockum Nordström

Jockum Nordström
I lejonkulan / Down in the Lion's Den
 2002



(from Sweden) and the Canadian collaborative group, The Royal Art Lodge. Much of the later work in this loose genealogy has been received through a kind of primitivizing (and condescending) framework as unproblematic expressionism: as authentic outsider street art that challenges the market. While there is a kind of luddite negation of the commercially dominant digital in much of this work, the wide array of graphic languages that it does cultivate are neither univocal nor personal. In Nordström's work, for instance, the construction of a 'cosmology' is not a private realm of daydream, but an imaginative reengagement with the contending visual languages at the moment of Swedish modernization: folk art on the one hand, modernist architecture on the other.¹¹ As with many other artists in this admittedly loose grouping, the plundering of graphic waste products imagines an array of new and hybrid futures—different again from the ones each image initially failed to call into being.

My last trajectory engages painting of the semi-remote and remote past by rubbing it against the grain. While much of this work compellingly and playfully rereads abstraction as illustration, or the non-objective as design, (Ruth Root, Bruce Pearson, Ann Pibal among many others) I want to turn first to work where this rereading is less successful—this as a way of suggesting how painting's act of turning the gratuitous into the logical and unexpected depends in large part on the subtlety of a painter's reading of the past. In Cecily Brown's work, for instance, the already clear connection between abstract expressionism and eros becomes the occasion for monumental canvases that now literalize this link, sketching in copulating figures among the gestures. Though Ghada Amer, too, literalizes eros in work that references abstract expressionism, her gesture is much more subtle: first, her intervention involves sewing on the canvas, which introduces the idea of gender coded art production; second she shows serial images of female auto-eroticism, which shifts both the painting's gaze and its object. Emilie Clark's relation to the history of abstraction is similarly complex: in her paintings and drawings the gendered visual language of botanical illustration turns back on its taxonomic and literal frames. Thus when abstraction enters, as it frequently does, in Clark's projects organized around the works and lives

of 19th century women naturalists, it operates not as a past site of parody but as a future, utopian claim about objects that fluidly move between categories.

Another subset of painters recode the more distant history of the sublime in painting: Peter Rostovsky, for instance, both literalizes and updates Caspar David Friedrich's paintings (in which the viewer is always behind and removed from a solitary figure who gazes out onto a sublime landscape) by placing small sculptures of 1970s dudes in jean jackets taking in the sublime mountain and ocean scenes offered by the shaped canvases. Tim Gardner's more literal watercolors based on his friends' vacations and parties paradoxically engage these same concerns from a more abstract angle: one of the historic functions of watercolor was as a quick way to document extreme or significant experiences. Thus this grand tour mode of representation now gives us not just triumphant mountain climbers at peaks, but also partiers entering hot tubs, raising pints or reclining from the last bong load. Finally, Steve Mumford's watercolors of the war in Iraq—done while the artist was in the country—use the history of watercolor to recover affects that seem to have vanished from our responses to photo journalism.

In all of these cases the distant past of painting rushes forth, making the contingent choice to engage this area seem coherent—seem, that is, like a possible future. Now more clearly than ever painters appropriate and recode the histories they engage rather than appealing to their supposedly objective existence. Clearly these appropriations no longer manifest the psychological angst of Fried's "forced passage" through an artist's take on painting's recent history. Nor does the power of each new invented position emerge from the familiar model of pluralism, in which the forgetting of art history and theory would seem to authorize a bad infinity of knowingly gratuitous (or 'authentic') stances. Painting's force emerges instead as a series of imagined futures to this last condition. Could the history of these futures itself eventually become one?

¹ *Chromophobia* (Reaktion, London, 2000), p. 100

² Douglas Crimp, for instance, sees Robert Rauschenberg's 'breakthrough' in terms of his help in what Crimp calls the "destruction of painting": "In the work of Rauschenberg photography began to conspire with painting in its own destruction". See Hal Foster: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Bay Press, 1983), p. 53. Benjamin Buchloh's writings on Gerhard Richter also explore this contamination

³ There were, of course, compelling reasons to disagree with Fried's terms and presuppositions. Leo Steinberg, Robert Smithson and Rosalind Krauss, among others, were quick to point out the problems: the insistence that art history still be written as the histories of painting and sculpture even as the legibility of those categories was eroding; the attempt to locate instantaneous, and paradoxically timeless, aesthetic experience inside tightly contained and discipline-specific art objects at precisely the moment that art turned toward duration, toward its environment, and toward interdisciplinarity; the theological insistence on presentness as grace—all of this subtended Fried's amazingly narrow history of contemporary art

⁴ Fried continues: "This means that while modernist painting has increasingly divorced itself from the concerns of the society in which it precariously flourishes, the actual dialectic by which it is made has taken on more and more of the denseness, structure, and complexity of moral experience—that is, of life itself, but life lived as few are inclined to live it: in a state of continuous intellectual and moral alertness." This text is reprinted in the collection Michael Fried: *Art and Objecthood – Essays and Reviews* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998)

⁵ The drama of a "forced passage" places Fried perilously close to the existential lexicon's dreaded enemy Harold Rosenberg. For an account of Fried's and Greenberg's writing in relation to that of Rosenberg and Frank O'Hara, see my Frank O'Hara: *The Poetics of Coterie* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 2006)

⁶ Problems are not, as many critics of Fried charge, latent in the essential properties of the medium, but rather produced by a possibly mistaken "assessment of the situation" whose ontological basis is not fact but belief

⁷ Barry Schwabsky (ed.): *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, (Phaidon, London, 2002), p. 8

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ For a good account of Fried's work see Stephen Melville: "Notes on the Reemergence of Allegory, the Forgetting of Modernism, the Necessity of Rhetoric, and the Conditions of Publicity in Art and Criticism" in *October* 19, 1981

¹⁰ In one of many less successful turns to the digital, the iconography of the computer itself—the screen, the mouse, the hard drive—becomes a claim about futurity, though one, of course, lacking in the utopian possibilities of hybrid bodies or built worlds

¹¹ I expand on this take on Nordström in "Orgies of Modernization: Nordström's Exemplary World" in *Parkett* 74, 2005, pp. 14-19