

ABSTRACT

Title of thesis: AN APOLOGY OF PAINTING

Jeremy Richard Ratcliff, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

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Recent works have presented personal observations of the world's inner-functionality, as connections between my experiences which existentially have little relationship or concern for one another. By breaking down the world into smaller, manageable pieces, the world becomes empirical and credence is given to every basic form. These formulaic, analytical observations have built up a language that mimics structure and pattern. While these works visually have a plethora of poststructuralist appropriations from geometric abstraction, lozenge camouflage, other works by artists, crystalline form, and cartography, it is impossible to dismiss any one reference conceptually. What results from the entanglement between conceptual and visual is a calculated disorder, a seemingly recognizable structure with an inherent chaos disrupting the comprehension.

AN APOLOGY OF PAINTING

by

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PREFACE

In the search for a format and content, it quickly became clear that an appropriate strategy was needed to employ a number of topics in various content areas. The two tempting options eliminated were the pedantic, archaic thesis-style essay and the shallow and personal narrative, often perceived as conceded. Both would not have allowed for a large range of topics. In an academic essay, some topics would have no transition or segue, leaving them isolated and alienated from the body of content. In a personal narrative, superfluous information negates the explanation of the work.

In regards to the body of work, its deconstructive nature prompted a need to transfer that approach, energy, and style towards its written defense. Although simplistic and minimalist, the theory and material explanations are the most effective way of communicating these ideas. But in the case of using an actualized dialectic format between two individuals, there is a loss of control and relevance through the use of leading or unrelated questioning. By writing both the question and the response, the flow and content was maintained without conforming to traditional expectations of the dialectic.

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Why 'An Apology of Painting'?

Well 'An Apology of Painting' is a dichotomy. In Plato's Apology, it also meant defense, since Socrates was not apologetic, meaning the title is also 'A Defense of Painting.' The intent of this specific body of work was to deconstruct and expose painting in a different light. Just think; if 'Defense' had been used, it would have been applicable, but the title chosen, 'An Apology of Painting,' seems to suggest that painting has a quality that must be resolved.

With allusions like 'An Apology of Painting' and 'A Defense of Painting', is painting dead or near death?

As Phillip Taffe said "...I think we've gotten to the point where it's been proven that painting cannot be killed, you can't kill painting. It won't die, and we have to accept that fact" (Robbins). Painting as a tradition will continue to strive, but that same tradition will likely constrain its avant-garde ambitions.

What would painting as a material have to apologize for?

There is little question of the consistent onslaught proclaiming the 'the death of painting.' Painting is both a material and a method. In the case of this specific body of work, the nature of painting is questioned through the use or absence of material and through a painterly approach. Painting it seems has the leviathan ability to fight back.

Do you think painting's contribution to the avant-garde is over?

Its elite dominance is over, but it will always contribute, even if it is through subversion. Since painting is an excellent conduit for translating conceptual thought, paint as a medium will never be in danger of extinction. Painting will not be about the application of paint or brushstroke.

What caused painting to lose its dominance?

It is multiple issues from painting to the painterly to the avant-garde. Donald Kuspit suggests that "...we no longer see the painting, only the reproduction, or at best, the painting through reproduction, so that painting and reproduction become identified and seem virtually the same to the popular eye (9)." This only deals with the struggle between photography and the painterly or the process of paint, but paint needs to deal with TV and digital media, which seek to steal ownership of the landscape proportioned canvas.

Considering that your pieces deal with multiple representations in a whole, do Kuspit's views on painting apply to this body of work?

Yes, to the general populace, but only because they are removed from the process of creation. They don't see the process of painting any longer. We as artists can take advantage of this. As it pertains to this specific body of work, it's more likely that the

newer, flatter illusion, created by the mass availability of photography, printmaking, and digital, would move these paintings toward the sculptural, rather than the pictorial.

Does the tape leave this body of work in a state of process?

Generally speaking, I'd like to think of an art object as a narrative of its creation, of course in addition to its content. As the artist it is difficult to remove the process from the experience. It is however, understandable when process or content doesn't translate to the viewer. To answer the question, the tape is only used as a medium, not to denote process.

What do you mean by Deconstruction?

I believe there are a few interpretations of deconstruction, but I am specifically referring to that of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. It is the process of breaking down classifications, rules, references...so on. Functionally, deconstruction is a multi-layered critical approach to a work of art that involves the rearrangement or questioning of its elements and references; including, but not limited to material, process, nature, and language.

How was this theory used to deconstruct painting?

It is difficult to present these paintings as absolutely successful in the deconstruction of painting; however these ideas can be seen materialistically. In past bodies of work, embossing has been used on canvas for blind painting, magnifying glasses used as prosthetic observers, and painting stretchers have been exposed as sculpture.

Recently, a break was made with the traditional rectangular picture plane and tapewas used instead of paint. The surface pattern was translated into the form of the

stretcher, fusing them together. A majority of the paint was applied indirectly without contact with the canvas. Typically deconstruction is used to disassemble content for understanding, where as here it is being used as a catalyst for the germinal form.

What prompted you to stretch the canvas into these shapes?

Primarily the reason to take the stretching of the canvas to such an extreme is to accentuate the presence of the stretcher. This was done to emphasize painting's reliance on structure; canvas, panel, plaster, stretcher, or architecture. And obviously it was done to bring attention to the pattern in the picture. Personally the semi-sculptural byproduct from rearranging the rectangular picture plane is of great interest. Who knew how fragile painting really was?

Related to the cut holes and the 'missing portions' of the stretchers, why are there pieces missing?

That is fairly literal. Current painting is hardly whole, possibly because of its rift with the narrative and illusionistic space. Besides, the removal of sections distracts the viewer from their predispositions towards tape, pattern, and painting.

If painting is truly that malleable, do you consider these pieces to be sculpture as well?

The deconstruction of the stretcher into structure and the painting surface into cloth was done with indifference to sculpture. The shape of canvas does change their perception towards the sculptural, but they are definitely still painting.

Why did you not make sculpture?

While I have been questioning, challenging, and deconstructing painting, there was a need to use the tradition and innovation of painting. It is likely a future body of work could engage traditional and contemporary sculpture with its own dilemma amidst materials, installation, landscape, and architecture.

Do the materials play an integral part in your work?

Yes, these materials are used as an instrument to convey concepts. In the case of the stretched canvas for these pieces, it was absolutely necessary to express the presence of the traditional surface being used as a construction material for the integrity of the concept. Just as the tape was used for effect and questioning of the nature of painting as a medium.

The use of tape appears to be progressive. Why did you use tape, instead of paint or sculptural elements?

Compositionally as mediums for painting, both tape and paint are glues. The tape used in this body of work is better than a good majority of paint used by other artists. It's a

discredit to painting that we are expected to proceed with traditional materials and concepts.

To what movement or style do you consider these pieces to be a part of?

I'm not sure if these pieces were constructed to mimic any specific style or even a signature style. These are remnants of high modernism.

What are these pieces about?

They are personal observations of the world's inner-functionality, as connections between my experiences which existentially have little relationship or concern for one another. By breaking down the world into smaller, manageable pieces, the world becomes empirical and credence is given to every basic form. These formulaic, analytical observations have built up a language that mimics structure and pattern.

What structures and patterns do these pieces mimic?

While these works visually have a plethora of poststructuralist appropriations from geometric abstraction, lozenge camouflage, existing works of art, crystalline form, and cartography, it is impossible to dismiss any one reference conceptually. What results

from the entanglement between the conceptual and the visual is a calculated disorder; a seemingly recognizable structure with an inherent chaos disrupting the comprehension.

Are there any other references present in these works? And what use do they play?

There are multiple references from multiple sources. Where poststructuralism is an open source of references and meanings, appropriation is the use of a specific reference. This does appear to be an oxymoron at first, but by borrowing from compound sources the reference system is hidden. For the observer of a work, this does defeat the purpose of a reference. This is the trade-off which allows them to see novelty over nostalgia.

Do you think time is a factor in your work?

I don't expect the viewer to contemplate the time spent creating the pieces, but it is inseparable from the perception. The process used is a means to an end. In other words, time was not used as a medium in these pieces.

You've suggested a relationship with tradition. Is there a need to compete with tradition?

Yes, because tradition is unavoidable, it is impossible not to use and reference tradition. Even if we as the artist feel there is a new language, the viewer is still bound by their own experiences.

Were these pieces specifically made for this space?

Yes, these pieces were made for a blank wall and a blank space. Because a gallery and subsequent group show, has an inherent political characteristic, I am not sure if they will resonate in this space.

How do you answer critics who refuse to recognize pattern or design as a viable art form?

As formalism is the idea of visual composition and arrangement synonymous with aesthetics, these crystallographic patterns are anti-formalistic and composed with the premise that if one portion of the pattern was removed, another identical one could replace it. The pattern subverts formalism by using an aesthetic surface as a medium to communicate its conceptual baggage. This doesn't necessarily calm critics, but with the inclusion of ignorant art, cultural objects, low-brow, and outsider art into the art world's periphery, it would seem rational to include pattern, design, ornament, and other less formal styles.

Other than the previous reference to subverting formalism, does subversion play a key role in your work?

Subversion is the mainstay of postmodernism. For these pieces, the tradition of paint is subverted by the absence of narration and illusion. The painterly, or 'malerish', is subverted by paint as a material. The stretchers, which typically hold canvas, are turned into form.

Why do you think this body of work is fresh and timely?

Literally, a body of work can't get much newer than this. But are these processes, materials, or ideas new? No, not even if they look or sound new. Conceptually, artists should be aware of what is being made and said, and then at least we are making informed decisions. As for the materialistic, while it is not represented in this body of work, there has been a recent push of multiple bodies or styles of work. This is a marketability issue of capitalism, not an art issue like the modernist manifesto states. The general problem is that when we view art we are likely placing monetary value on it.

Do you think these pieces were successful in defending painting?

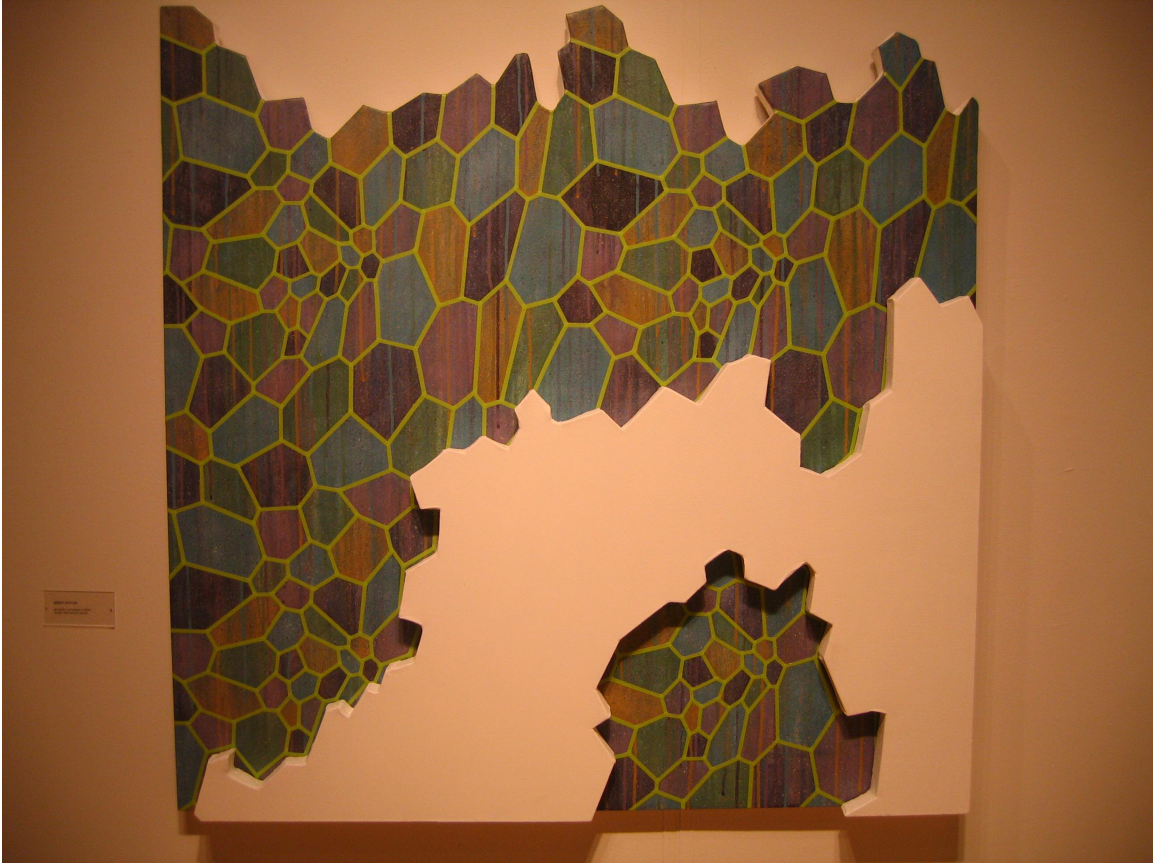
In some way, this body of work is a defense of my actions against painting, not a defense of paint or painting. This can be seen through destruction of the picture plane by adding additional canvases, reshaping it, and cutting into it or the introduction of tape and indirect paint application. All of which are fairly conservative. It is the ability to use of paint as a material, not for the genre of paint, which has helped and hurt paint.

The pieces also act as an apology for painting's malleable quality to use it as a medium, as well as the ability to use painterly style also seen in drawing, digital, and even sculpture. These characteristics lead to its inevitable hollowness of references and as a material, just like Plato thought. It is difficult to defend or apologize for the concept, reference, and nature of a piece, when the three are in constant conflict within painting.

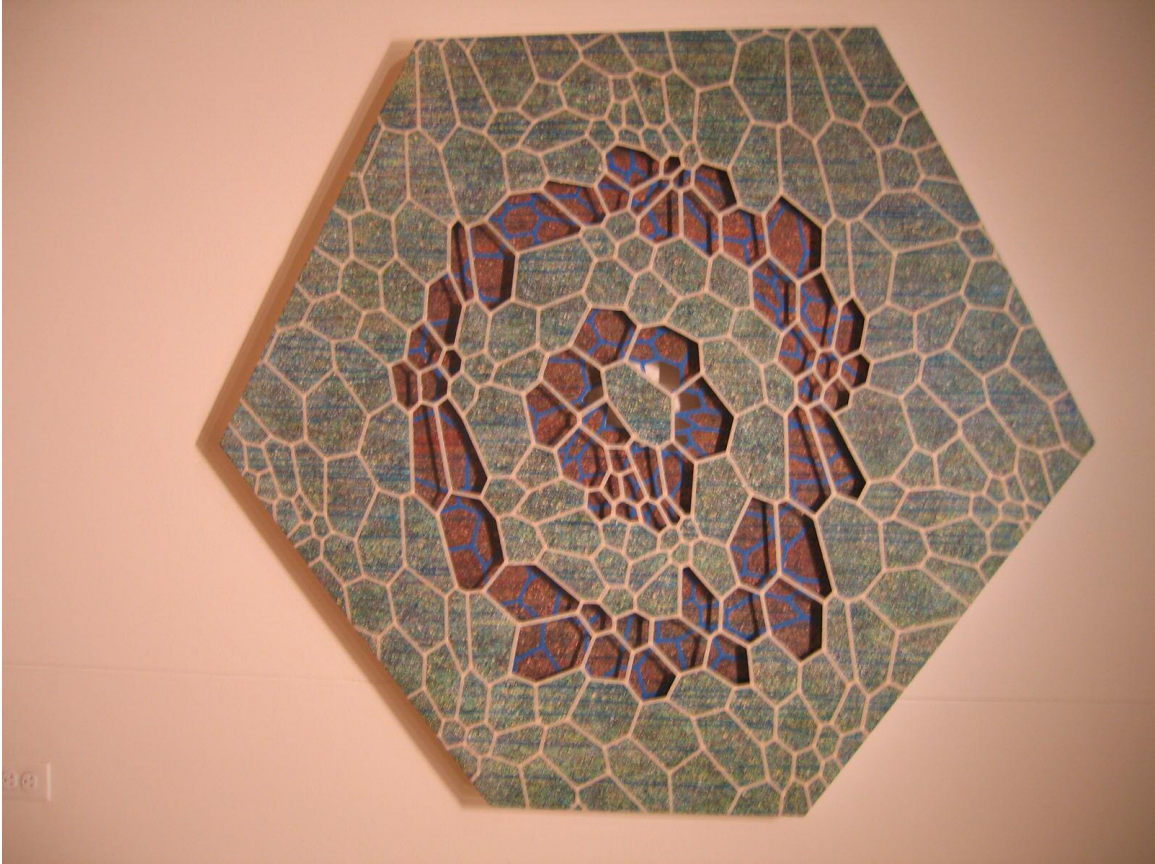
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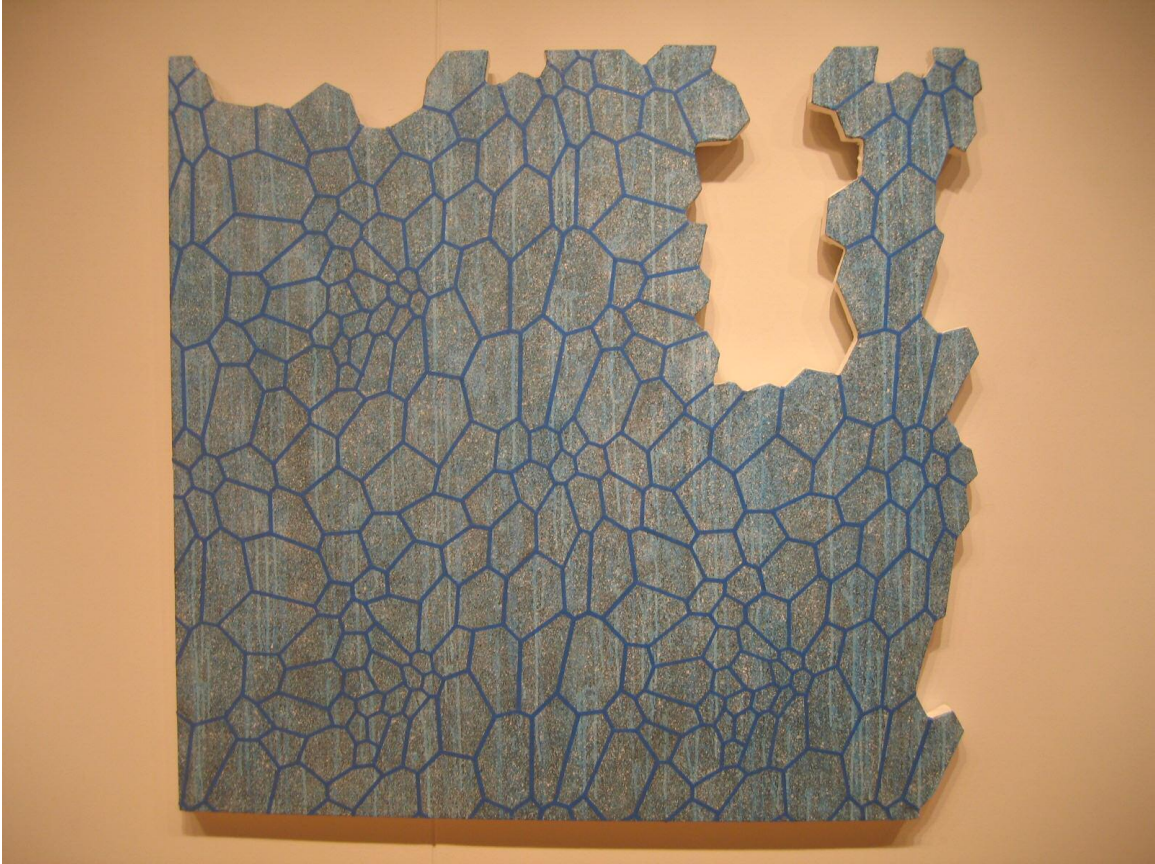
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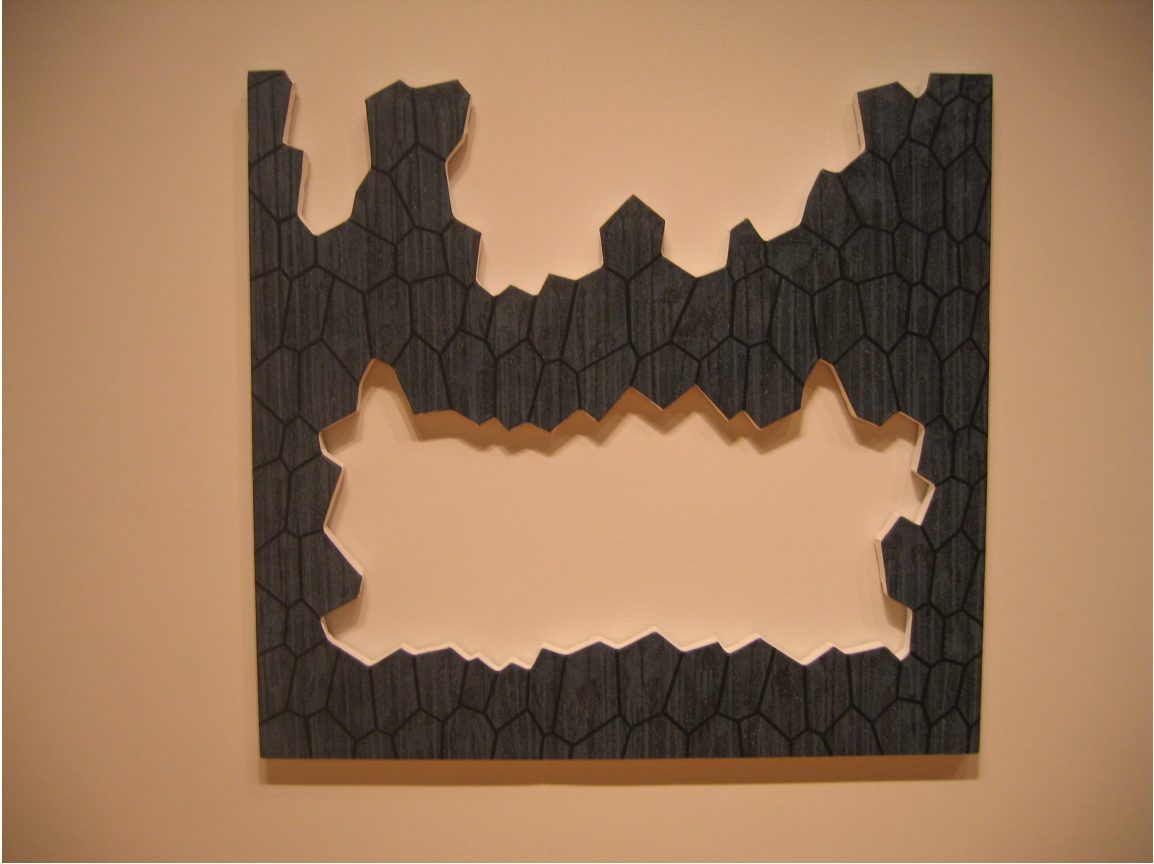
Untitled (not to be titled)
Acrylic and tape on stretched canvas
2006



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Installation View



Installation View