

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: PAINTING: DESPITE

Timothy James Horjus, Master of Fine Arts,
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“Painting: Despite” is an exploration into the possibility to paint despite the constancy of digitized images in our everyday and their effect on our ability to process images. Our contemporary culture is one primed for the consumption of images, but one woefully unable to understand them. This inability is for many a reason for the ‘death of painting.’

The paintings in the exhibit evoke a space that is fractured, unstable, and in a constant state of flux. Within the framework of past romantic notions concerning painting, its progress, and purported death, these works posit a new position for painting. The position is one of duality. These are paintings, but not a continuation of the history of painting, instead referring only to what has come before through stylistic tendencies and knowingly taking part in a culture where the time for contemplation is no longer valid.

PAINTING: DESPITE

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

To some folks who allowed me to do this thing, in particular Angela.

Acknowledgements

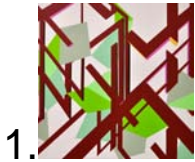
To the Faculty and Staff of the Department of Art at the University of Maryland for all your support and encouragement over the last three years.

To my friends and family. Thank you for all the love, support, and ride-sharing.

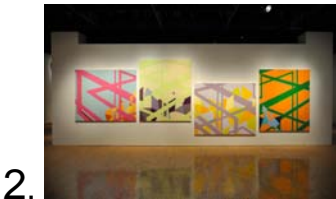
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'be her best male (Sunset Snow),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
53.5"x 53.5"



Installation Photograph
Left to Right

-'Luxury Watches at Cheap \$185: (Blue Horizon),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
60"x 72"

-'Re: Re: yo bud (Sunglow),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
72"x 60"

-'horjas: Top Pictures This Weak (Half Light),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
60"x 72"

-'Re: Online Drug Best Percocent!! (Havanna Sunrise),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
72"x 60"



'helpelizabeth_etters.foundation01@9.cn (Glorious Sky),' 2010
House Paint on Canvas
Dimensions Variable

4. Installation Photograph, See (fig 3) for information

5. Installation Photograph, See (fig 3) for information

Chapter 1: The Stage

My work is deeply rooted in the tradition of painting. Despite the hard-edges and the seeming removal of hand, I make things that are specifically paintings. I don't believe that I have an unhealthy attachment to the medium, nor do I believe myself to be romantically disillusioned by the myths surrounding painting, the gesture, authorship, or originality. I do however believe that there is still work to be done in painting. I also believe that any meaningful continuation of a medium so often heralded as dead must acknowledge both the historicity of the medium and connectivity to the current cultural moment.

My interaction with the hard edge of a taped-off form in a painting originally began as an attempt to mimic the hard edge of an LED from a micro-array. I was interested in the idea that the 'dot' of the LED transmitted information based on its color and intensity to the scientist who were mapping the genome. The dots became less about genetic information and began instead to function as nodes or points on a network. More networks followed, some with bars or stripes, others with dots, many with both, all layered to create a history on the surface, but all still flat. At this time I was very interested in the ideas of Clement Greenberg, and attempting to subvert them by using the flatness he held as the essential element of painting to cast references beyond this self-referential limit. Greenberg's autonomy led to isolation and narrow definition. My paintings at that time were driven by irony, and a desire to attack that sense of isolation, but I needed more. I needed the

paintings to reach beyond their historically driven content into contemporary visual, and particularly digital, culture.

Upon entering graduate school I began to T.A. for drawing. I began to realize how much I missed 'space,' the idea of it, the perspectival systems, the illusion, and the references to architecture. I began, against all better judgment, to apply perspectival systems to the stripes and bars paintings. These paintings were still concerned with the ideas about information proposed by Jean Baudrillard in his essay *The Ecstasy of Communication*, "We are here... living no longer as an actor or dramaturge but as a terminal of multiple networks." (Baudrillard, 148) My stylistic tendency for late modernism reflected this contemporary shift in culture through an embrace of a mechanized application of paint and the hard edge of a pixel.

The work was also becoming more conversant with the history of painting. Not simply through the re-embrace of spatial concerns, but also in an understanding of their referents to other artists work both contemporaneously and historically. The stylistic tendencies of the paintings coupled with the introduction of a 'space' worked against the Greenbergian ideals for painting and I began to feel that the paintings were having a more specific conversation with the contemporary issues I had been attempting to address in my prior work. There was a much more specific reference to the history of painting and within the work there came to be an interaction of the concepts concerning networks and digital culture, and the theoretical questioning of paintings role in contemporary culture.

Chapter 2: The Backdrop

The cultural position into which paintings are currently placed is one of disenfranchisement. The acceptance of painting is one that is based on the commodity fetish of the market and the anachronistic revamping of traditional methods or approaches. They are based on either the possible commodity value of the work, or an antiquated belief in the possibility of truth or beauty in painting. These methods for an acceptance of painting negate a contemporary approach to making paintings. The contemplative time of and for painting is no longer a model for the viewing of work. The current culture is one that is primed for the consumption of images, but not prepared to understand them. My current work seeks to understand both the position and time afforded to contemporary painting from an educated position, and to speak to a broader audience through its understanding of the contemporary condition. Through an understanding of the time afforded painting based on cultures inundation with two-dimensional images, my work becomes a contradiction, both needing the time of contemplation, but willingly bending to immediate understanding.

At this point it is appropriate to address the reasoning behind such sweeping statements about the culture at large. In his essay, *Modernity - An Incomplete Project*, Jurgen Habermas frames the alienating forces of modernism, "The project of modernity... consisted in the efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according

to their inner logic. As a result, the distance grows between the culture of experts and that of the larger public.” (Habermas, 8) This growing divide between the public and the expert has led to a negative autonomy of art, it no longer was able to ‘reach’, ‘speak to’, or ‘interact with’ the average person. The culture of the expert and the desire for arts autonomy through self interrogation resulted in an alienation of the broader population from both the art itself and the increasingly theoretical aesthetic of modern art.

In an effort to reconnect with the public sphere, art began a deskilling of itself and an embrace of the public image. The validity of the modernist artist’s assumption of cultural expertise and originality was brought into question. This was largely a reaction to the fragmentation of society and to a larger cultural shift in the perception of time. Fredrick Jameson explains this change in time as a result of the planned obsolescence of a consumer society. A society in which the constant deluge of imagery from television, media, and the internet have shifted our society away from a sense of history into what he terms a “schizophrenic break down of language.” (Jameson, 138) He contends that the breakdown of language has lead to the transition from signifier with signified to the signifier becoming an image. The shift here is immense. The understanding of language is no longer one based in language, but instead one based in images, images that become the signified, eclipsing a multi-level lingual understanding of reality and its referents and simplifying it to a mere image. Instead of the signified being language that exists in the structure of multiple referents to other signifiers,

the signified is an image, an image that exists within the structure of a media culture. This planned obsolescence and breakdown of language has led to a 'schizophrenic' time, a time of constant immediacy and consequently a loss of a sense of history. This constancy of imagery as signifier coupled with the instantaneous nature of time has led to a culture where the mirror of modernism has been removed and we now function as a screen, no longer reflecting what is around us, but instead becoming a surface for imagery and communication to play out upon.

As the stream of images in contemporary culture increases in volume and velocity, pure consumption overtakes judgment and selection. It is nearly impossible to understand or interrogate the number of images we interact with in a typical day. The constant connection into the networks of communication and information has diluted our understanding. This is the context in which contemporary art must exist. We are on some level complicit in the interplay of image as signifier with our furthering of images to consume. This is the paradox within the contemporary approach to making, the autonomous approach of making found in modernism is outmoded, yet the oppositional approach of post-modernism and its negativity are also finding their ends, so artists are left in a strange place of being involved in the thing they fought for so long to deny access to the art world, contemporary culture. "Artists in large part are working in recognition of their relations of compromise and contradiction, their more self-consciously positive - or nuanced and complex - engagements with the culture industry" (Drucker, 8)

Chapter 3: The Play

This chapter will focus on broad descriptions of the work and the process and their interactions with my concepts. My work is created by using masking tape to tape off areas of paint, which when removed, leaves hard edged forms. The hard edge has a history in post-painterly abstraction and a contemporary reference in the pixel. The compositions in this work are layered and arrived at through a seemingly programmatic deployment of lines, geometric forms, and color. Within these programs are systems that I am interested in. I impose constraints upon my process and ability to make choices. My limitations serve to expand my concepts. The lack of hand due to my constraint of tape and rollers is a specific reference to mechanical reproduction, a mediation of myself. In the same fashion my color choices are also made within a set of restrictions. The first choice made based on the name, and the subsequent colors chosen from a bevy of mis-tinted house paints. The paint itself is a mediation of authorship, there is no intuitive color mixing, no art materials. The colors are also pre-mixed rejects and within this limited commercially dictated palette I must make my choices. These methodical processes are often in conflict with the idea of painting and serve to highlight the conceptual drive behind my constraints.

The actual paintings start with a color choice. The first choice is one based on the naming of the color by the industry. The names reference a utopic situation or naming of the sky or light. This linguistic promise of a better situation or sublime experience is a jumping off point. I paint the large

canvases with a household roller, a way to avoid brushstrokes and replicate the surface of a wall. I then use the antiquated process of drawing, photocopying to transparency, and projecting the drawing with an overhead projector. There are natural distortions of the subject matter through the mediation of the drawing by the machines. The images are those of traditional mountain-scapes filtered through the lens of abstraction into crystalline forms. I then re-assert my hand in the image by tracing the forms onto the painted canvas, another mediation. The color choices for the drawn forms of the crystalline mountain are then made from a wide array of mis-tinted paints by my intuition guided by basic color relationships. The majority of the work begins with a complementary or oppositional color choice, another linguistic promise of relationship. The forms are taped-off in groups and painted with foam rollers. This mechanized deployment of paint serves as a reference to our shift towards the mechanization of our daily interactions, as well as a means of removal of the hand, an affront to ideas concerning the unique and authorship.

The crystalline forms are not complete in this body of work. I want the viewer to suppose as to whether they are unfinished or in a state of deconstruction. Through this supposition the viewer may realize that the forms may actually be interpreted as either. I believe that I am making decisions in the painting that work against my own ideas and concurrently in tandem with them. These are paintings that doubt the power of painting

today, yet they are very much so paintings. This dichotomy is the contemporary condition evoked in the work.

I then rely on a digital or computerized experience to reach the next stage. In Photoshop I crop and edit images of my other paintings. I use information from parts of my network infrastructure paintings to create a flattened grid-like structure. I use a digital projector to translate this information to the surface of the painting where I again tape off the form. During the taping-off of the grid work I make decisions as to when and where the information will overlap or be overlapped by the crystalline forms. I then paint the forms again with a foam roller. After removing the tape I apply a flawed perspectival system to the grid work. The flaw can be as simple as a systemic approach which is not based on observational perspective rules, or as complicated as multiple arbitrary and irreconcilable vanishing points.

These paintings are not painted quite as straight as this description may lead a reader to assume. In traditional abstract geometric art the tendency is to rely upon the formal elements to achieve a balance which lends itself to a slow contemplation. I subvert these traditional goals by consciously employing a process that leads to an unreliable, shifting space that collapses, folds, reverses, and sends contradictory signals. My paintings are constructions, constructions which evoke the time of contemporary culture, not the slow time of contemplation. These paintings evoke a time of fracture and immediacy, similarly to Jameson's description of contemporary time, "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents."

(Jameson, 144) The time of these paintings is non-linear and wholly immersed in the moment. This time is how these paintings evoke the contradiction of contemporary painting. They are immediate, one can simply consume them, but as with painting itself, there is more work to do. The paintings can be submitted to more time, more interrogation, and can still stand alone, but they do not ask for it. Instead the work is there, immediate, in the moment, but it is a moment within the context of others, it can be consumed simply as a two dimensional image, or as a painting. A painting, despite. Despite the preponderance of images in culture and our predisposition towards pure consumption, these paintings persist to be paintings and welcome time. These paintings are contemporary realities.

This fracture of time and its effect on the space of painting is further amplified by the nature of the grids relationship to the crystalline forms behind. The grid work falls behind the forms in strange places and the forms protrude in nonsensical ways. The interactions of the colors seem to suggest illusionistic depths that allow areas of the form and the grid to float up like a relief. These complications and tensions in the spatial relationships in the composition lead to a new energy, an energy that extends beyond the edges of the canvas suggesting movement, an endless flow of information overtaking and being subsumed by the subject. The end result is a lack of program despite the methodical processes of making, congruent with contemporary culture, de-centered, fractured, complex, and non-contemplative.

Chapter 4: The Actors

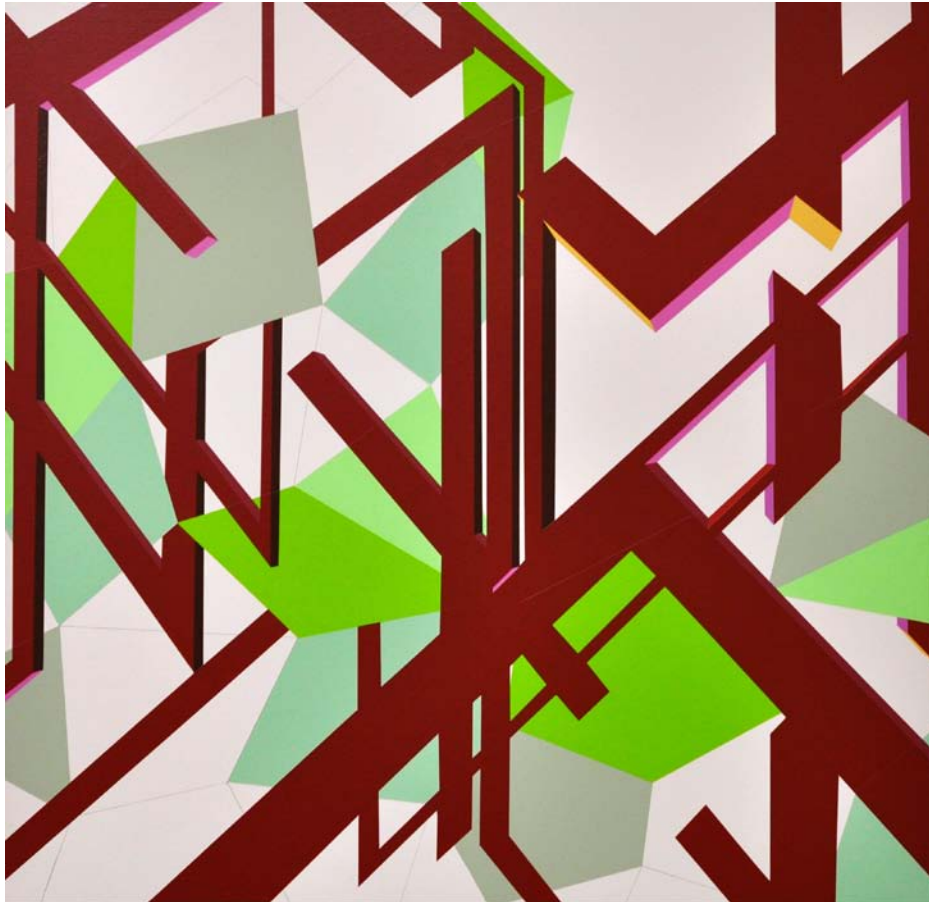


Fig. 1 'be her best male (Sunset Snow)'

In this piece we find a light pink background we can assume from the above chapters' description is named 'sunset snow.' Upon this idyllic backdrop lies a loose grid of pencil work filling all but the top right corner of the square composition. Roughly half of the forms mapped-out by the grid are painted in greens ranging from pale pastel-greens, to a dusty gray-green, to a bright lime-green. These triangular and polygonal forms abut one another and touch points, referencing a three dimensional form, but never quite realizing it. The space of the painting is further confused by the overlay of deep red grid

work. The red of the grid work vibrates off the greens of the forms in places and in others subtly lies over the pink amplifying the glow of the sunset snow. The balance is set askew by the application of a non-observational, arbitrary vanishing point to the right center of the grid creating a space that is confusing and virtually impossible to reconcile. The figure ground relationship is made more unstable by the fact that the grid work is not dimensionalized equally, much of it is blocked out to reference perspectival space, but large sections in strange spaces are left completely flat, fighting against the very space the perspective seeks to allude to.



Fig. 2 Left to Right

'Luxury Watches at Cheap \$185: (Blue Horizon)'

'Re: Re: yo bud (Sunglow)'

'horjas: Top Pictures This Weak (Half Light)'

'Re: Online Drug Best Percocent!! (Havanna Sunrise)'

The next works to address are a grouping of four pieces that are the same in size, but vary in orientation and hanging height in order to interact with one another and form a new composition and a new whole. This new composition is one that is unsettled, fragmented and decentralized.

The first painting is hung at the 'appropriate' viewing height of 60" to center and is a horizontally hung rectangle of 5'x 6'. The work has a dusty, yet bold, blue background color called 'blue horizon.' Upon the blue background we find a variety of orange polygonal forms which cluster in the right bottom half of the canvas. The grid work that both overlays and underlays the forms is a bright pink that is harsh and grating on the blue, yet unconventionally attractive. The grid work is dimensionalized in a conflicting manner in darker pinks and a deep red that vibrates off the blue of the background.

The second painting is hung vertically with its base line is at the same height as the first painting despite the change in orientation. This leaves this soft yellow, 'Sunglow,' painting with an awkward and aggressive feel. The forms are a continuation of the forms in the first painting and are purple in this piece with a subtle yellow green grid. Also almost disappearing due to its subtlety is the fact that the grid work is not a continuation of the prior paintings grid work like the forms seem to be, but instead it is a mirroring that occurs. The reflection of the grid is loose, more akin to a refraction, there is a slight stutter or mis-step in the translation.

The third painting is hung in a landscape orientation returning to the format of the first painting in the grouping. The light purple canvas, 'Half-

Light,' drops in height significantly compared to the first two canvases, lowering the bottom of the canvas to a height that seems almost dismissive of the painting. This piece has a double reflection in it. The crystalline form which traveled over and between the first two compositions is now itself reflected, starting over at its end. The grid work is also reflected again, thus returning to its original format, but significantly altered through the mediation of the two prior paintings. There is an all-over composition of yellow polygonal forms which is echoed by the dusty purple grid work. The colors of the shifts in the dimensionality of the grid work are quotes from the two paintings which surround it, the yellow-greens and purples from the painting before, and the teals from the painting yet to come. This painting serves as a place holder, a conduit through which the information from the first and second painting is mediated in order to translate again into the fourth painting.

The fourth painting in this tetraptych returns to a jarring palette similarly to the first painting, and the vertical orientation of the second. The orange of "Havana Sunrise' functioning as a bold visual field for the final dispersion of polygons in the lower left of the canvas in deep and soft blues and teals. The grid work is also a bright and bold hue, the green is almost stingingly ugly on the orange, vibrating and seeming to 'float' over the space of the base color. The teals and greens used to add dimension to the grid work further complicate the color relationships in the painting by their near analogous hues to the forms in the corner, but their value blurs them almost together till they pop against the orange. The perspective applied to the grid work is the

strangest of the four paintings, with two impossible vanishing points applied and utilized in separate areas of the piece to directly conflict the dimensionality with itself.

These paintings are significantly quieter than other works in the show and in this visual quiet there is the opportunity to concentrate on the concept. These are four paintings that can stand alone as individual works, but it is what they do to each other when combined that I am most interested in. The piece as a whole is one of a dual nature. It is four individual paintings, but it is also only an amalgamation, it is read as a narrative, but also simultaneously, it is a representational landscape painting in a romantic sense, but it is fragmented and broken, it is a portrait, but not of an individual, instead a portrait of larger cultural issues, it is about my conceptual theories, but it is also about my fascination with color, it is a painting, but there is little evidence of the hand. These are not contradictions but rather serve to combine concepts once believed to be antithetical. This is not ambivalence on my part, it is not that I cannot or do not want to make a choice, it is that this situation, one of being between, is in my mind the only possible way to evoke the contemporary condition. This is the artist's knowing involvement with contemporary culture; it is the reliance upon digital realities and information to bring us closer to people.



Fig. 3 'helpelizabeth_etters.foundation01@9.cn (Glorious Sky)'

The final piece in the show is an elongated horizontal rectangle. This painting, due to its background colors name, and its format, most specifically references the romantic yearnings of American landscape painters like the Hudson River School. The paints name is 'Glorious Sky' and it is indeed the color most of us would equate to the sky, a complex yet light baby blue. The polygons are filled almost in their entirety on the left side of the painting with various greens. This is where the possibility of narrative enters the work; as the colors shift to yellows and finally to oranges, the structure becomes less full. The viewer is asked to decide if the forms are in a state of incompleteness, an unfinished endeavor, or a state of deconstruction, being torn apart or decomposing. The answer is not within the work. The story of the narrative is not a program, not an answer, but a question.

The dimensional grid work on the left of the painting functions like an overlay should, it is on top and the green forms below, evidenced by the indications of edges visible through the bright blue of the grid. As the grid progresses from the left to the right, it breaks and the space becomes more confused. The grid does not follow the rules of an illusory space; it seems to indiscriminately dip behind some of the yellow and orange forms pulling forward the things that were so clearly behind earlier. It is when the viewer reaches the end of the narrative, the end of the two-dimensional plane that they are asked to question the space once again.

When the viewer reaches what they know and believe should be the end of the narrative in this flat two-dimensional painting they are confronted by an actual object. The planar structure alluded to by the pencil lines and the polygonal forms on the flat surface come together and begin to form an actual three dimensional form, a continuation of the forms in the painting, but realized into actual space. The actual crystalline form is painted in colors that are the oranges of the end of the structure in the painting, the blue of the glorious sky, the white of the wall, and a bold red in the lowest right hand corner. The form is itself existing in a confused state. The surface is painted, but it is sculptural, the colors are relegated to planar shifts in most instances, but they are occasionally subdivided leaving your eyes looking for the shift in space you believe should be there but isn't. The relationship of the sculptural to the painting must be reconciled by the viewer as well as the relationship of the sculptural to the wall. The form appears to be a part of the wall,

seamlessly attached, and in a few places painted the color of the wall, visually fighting the space of the form itself. The physical presence can both obfuscate the painting (fig 4) and appear to be a logical continuation (fig 5) of the surface and forms of the painting.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Paintings are always actually flat, but they depict all kinds of space, whether a flat space, an illusory space, or a fantasy space. A painting is a two-dimensional image, and that image is the form of the constant consumption of the culture, be it advertising, television, or the web. Painting does not doubt its ability to continue its use of this surface or space enough. The majority of western culture consumes enough images in a single day to feel as though they 'get' and image instantly. This is the trouble with contemporary paintings continued reliance upon the optics of color or the tactility of paint as a method of justification, the viewer believes they 'get it' immediately. This work continues to engage the viewer through its conflation of the space as discussed earlier, but even this requires enough time on the part of the viewer to realize that all is not as it seems on first glance. This inherent contradiction is what interests me.

Chapter 5: Concluding Notes

Historically we are told that paintings need time, I believe that these paintings function in a different time than this historical mode of contemplation. My paintings ask for a time of contemplation, but can be understood quickly as well. Their titles are a realization of this seeming paradox through the coupling of the subject lines from spam email as a reference to the new vernacular formed due to digitized communication, and the utopic names of the paint colors they are all started with as a reference to the romantic promises of paintings past. These paintings are constructions based on a cinematic perception. Unlike the classic paintings they reference, they are not balanced and do not contain all of the information necessary within the frame to bring a viewer to a place of contemplation nor do they present themselves as an object worthy of such. These paintings exist more as a still from a film, within a rapid continuum of other images. This continuum is not the autonomous sphere of art, it is not that one of my paintings is the before and another the after, instead it could be the YouTube video watched directly before, it could be the Flickr page viewed immediately after, or the text message received during. The continuum is not simply the reference of one image to the next like the still frame from a film's reference to the prior frame, or the anticipation of the next frame, but instead as is true of any good film, it is in the editing that the time of cinematic perception is realized. The cuts, crops, shifts and fractures of historical time are where the difference lies. This is the time of cinematic perception.

These paintings evoke a world constantly changing under the influence of new media. They evoke this through their use of a space that is ambiguous fractured, unstable, in a state of de-construction, and constant flux. There is an evocation of the ambiguities of contemporary life. I am comfortable in the works inner contradictions because it is in their contradictions that they are able to present themselves as allegory for the contemporary condition. The mountain is no longer a signifier of transcendent possibilities of painting, but instead is revealing itself as a construct of prior culture slowly being dismantled. Without the possibility of a transcendent experience we are asked to consider the possibilities for continuation of painting. In order for painting to continue to be valid it must present itself as a part of our contemporary culture, not apart from this culture. It is in this knowing involvement, this complicity that we find the possibility of painting, Painting: Despite.

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