

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Love-cheek, Azteca

Aydin Hamami, Masters of Fine Art, 2015

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The act of painting is one of a physical, visceral nature, in which the intangible is made tangible, removed from our world in such a way as you allow us an abstract viewership, and intimately tied to our own physicality. The mind of the painter is one that must be simultaneously present and absent from the world of the moment. The following is a recounting of events that have led to the understanding of studio practice that my work exemplifies today, and a dissection of the significance of the actions of the artist within the studio space as well as in relation to the art object at its end.

Love-cheek, Azteca

By

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Part One:

Reclaiming Dereliction

*“People puking everywhere
Piles of blood, scabs and hair”*

-FEAR¹



Fig. 1- Aydin Hamami, *Suture #4*,
Mixed media, enamel paint, on collaged asphalt felt, approx. 55”x 51”, 2014

¹ Ving, Lee/ FEAR. “I Love Livin’ In The City”. I Love Livin’ In The City. Criminal Records. 1977. LP.

² Freeman, Nathan. “First In War, First in Peace- But In Art? A D.C. Native Visits The

“Picture-Making”

“What is that a picture of?”

-Millions of Americans

For years I had been told that what I was involved in was something called “picture-making”, or “the process of picture-making”, or something like that. Clement Greenberg was the name dropped all too frequently in conjunction with that, and, as my work became larger, I was informed that “picture-making” was great friends with the term “easel-painting”, and throw in “Ab-Ex” and “Modernism” for good measure, and I was well on my way to becoming the next of a long-list of hackneyed neo-modernists cranked out like gumballs from the vast machine of the Neo-New York School of Painting.

Having such a course laid before me was fundamentally disturbing, to say the absolute least, a feeling made more severe by my peers dropping away from their art-making practice like flies. It became clear that this fate would be mine as well unless I could figure out why I felt compelled to make paintings, and what compelled me about making paintings in general, because the idea of “picture-making” certainly wasn’t doing it for me.

At one point, half a decade ago, I had the sickening experience of having one particularly boring painter refer to me as a “paint-pusher”. I fell silent, but some part of me was rattling the cage of painting politics I had been building for myself the previous

few years, and just enough that some aspect of what I thought I had grown to understand about my identity as a painter fell unhinged.

While I had been searching for a viable way to convince myself that my paintings were all-about picture making, an evil thought, yes, but apparently inevitable, it occurred to me in that moment that my salvation would come in the realization that I could never be, had never been, a “paint-pusher”, and owed far more to my paintings than my paintings owed to me.

The reality of making a painting is less one of brutal, material conquest, and much more one of a kind of quasi-noble submission. It is, to my mind, an almost impossible act, and one that, at its very best, places the painter in the role of translator and magician simultaneously, given the task and hopefully the capacity to make visible the invisible, make tangible the intangible, and make real that which has no reality. The object end of the act of painting can be called a painting, but it can deviate beyond the realm of what connotations that terminology may imply. We may call it the painted object, but that is also in danger of being lead down the primrose path of oversimplification. What the object must possess is absolute honesty of form, and must be truthful in its creation. And Above all else, the object should speak more of its existence than words ever could.

“I use the words “noble submission” in terms of what it takes to make a painting, and I realize that this sounds maybe unnecessarily flowery, but the reality of the situation is I cant think of a better word for it. “Noble” in the kind of fairytale, chivalry, and Prince Charming sense is not what I mean here, but more, I think, “Spiritually justified”.

I realize that that maybe doesn’t even sound any better but truly is perhaps the only thing I can realistically say about what it takes to make a painting on a human level. A “quasi-noble submission”, that submission to the work, to the material, to the reality that is making a painting. So many people want to have dominance over their work, and I think, at the end of the day, their work tends to suffer for it.

My interest is not in dominating the painting, or dominating the work, but coming to terms with how my relationship with that thing functions. I am a maker, first and foremost, but I am also an observer, and I mean I am an observer of my own making! The entire thing is cyclical; I don’t think I could separate one from the other.”

-Spring, 2015



Fig. 2- Aydin Hamami, *Suture #3*,
Mixed media, enamel paint, on collaged asphalt felt, approx. 88”x 65”, 2013

Reclaiming Dereliction

New York City is the best place to live if you’re an artist. That seems to be the general consensus among people who aren’t artists, don’t live in New York City, are independently wealthy, or are any combination thereof. As a relatively penniless kid trying to make paintings, New York is the worst, unless you’re interested in seeing which you can exhaust first: your zeal for making work or your bank account. Several years ago, I was well on my way to watching my money dry up, living in a place which had bullet holes in the windows, a selling point at the time. I had a mattress on the floor, a cabinet full of ramen, and a heavy-duty CV of bars I had been 86’ed from, some of them, I insisted, undeservedly so, although I may have felt differently than did their proprietors.

The urban environment at large has always been a hotbed for artistic genesis, I suppose, but to suggest, as many do, that this is due to the fact that culture is easily available when there is a heavy concentration of its progenitors is somewhat short sighted to me. The thing about cities that spoke so heavily to me and to my work, as I think it does to everyone on some level, for better or worse, was the decay.

My neighborhood was a great one for decay; it was quite literally all around me, and was only made more glaring by the efforts of its denizens to cover that same decay up. I recall people around me remarking at the sorry state of derelict buildings and run-out storefronts, or strange row-houses that had somehow lost their rows, and now stood alone, bleak, on a gray street of rubble.

The wonderful thing about this kind of urban decay is its immaculate inevitability. For all the efforts made to prevent it, it creeps up upon us anyway. It is the inevitable result of aging that things will tend to decay. The derelict is born from the pristine, regardless of our best efforts to tilt the scales otherwise.

How very like the human body! This reality is, I think, the very reason we are so troubled by the sight of environmental decay, urban or otherwise. It is a stark reminder that all things must come to their inevitable end point, living or not, human, building, or painting. And, of course, this is the connection.



Fig. 3- Aydin Hamami, *Suture #2*,
Mixed media, enamel paint, on collaged asphalt felt, approx. 81”x 59”, 2013

The small series of works referred to as *Suture* collectively, and pictured in part herein, are in many senses my first nod to the physical act of decay I am referring to. Their very bodies are made of that same city stuff that we have learned to build our world with, and that we inevitably take for granted. They are objects, first and foremost, but objects that exist in the world of painting. Here I make the distinction between things that are *of* painting, and the paintings that are indebted to picture-making, as I referred to earlier.

The *Suture* series use the language of paint and painting to address non-specific image issues, instead seeking to digest material and environment in a cohesive object that

speaks to paint, decay, environment, and material at once. The object references the appearance of decay, but will itself decay over time, more so than we tend to think typical of paintings. The material used is the material depicted; the image and the object here exist simultaneously.

What, then, is the significance of the phrase “reclaiming dereliction”? At first glance, this seems counterintuitive, especially in light of the fact that when devalue those objects which are decayed, derelict, and troubling reminders of our own fragility. (It should be noted, here, that we do not reserve this kind of disdain for the inanimate: you need only look to the nursing homes and Hospice centers of America to glean an understanding of how frequently those closer to death than the majority of the population are regarded as unappetizing to the senses of society as a whole as a building whose structure has become grievously unsound) but in understanding the genesis of the derelict, we can begin to make sense of the issue. Those objects that we tend to cast off can trace their point of origin to the very individuals who intend to dismantle them. In reclaiming the derelict, we admit ownership of decay, and in doing so admit to our own mortality, even if on what may be the most impotent level.

Decay is ours, whether we choose to accept it, or not. There are those, like myself, who tend to value this hard evidence of the disasters of our own physical reality, and the way it becomes reflected in our surroundings. If decay is of humanity, and humanity has cast it aside, then it is available for reclamation.



Fig. 4- Aydin Hamami, *Bound #1*,
Mixed media and steel on panel, approx. 25"x 36", 2013



Fig. 5- Aydin Hamami, *Feast*,
Mixed media and collage on panel, 48"x 65", 2014



Fig. 6- Aydin Hamami, *Famine*,
Mixed media and collage on panel, 48"x 65", 2014

Part Two:

Anxiety and Chaos

“...we went upstairs where more gems awaited. Henri Matisse, *Interior With Egyptian Curtain*, 1948—a work that directly presaged the cut-outs that are so gloriously up at MoMA, a painting flecked with such evocative cerulean and draped by the thrillingly exotic curtain of the title. There was Joan Miró, *The Red Sun*, 1948, which was just stunning. And then a Kurt Schwitters, which I thought was excellent, slashed with dark purple.

“Don’t you wish it were, like, a big fucking juicy black?” Mr. Hamami said, about the slashes in the Schwitters. Perhaps he’s more critical than I am.”

- Nate Freeman for *The New York Observer*²



Fig. 7- Aydin Hamami, Studio in Process, spring 2015

Anxiety

“When I began to take medication for anxiety my friend Nate became worried and commented that it may cause me to suffer in the studio; it may cause my work to suffer, you know, whatever, it just might ruin my ability to work as an artist which is something I laughed off at the time, but, you know, of course it didn’t affect what I was doing or, at least I didn’t think it did, if anything my work became darker and more aggressive.

But the fascinating thing about what he said to me was that it spoke volumes about the understanding, even on an innate level, a preconscious, pre-verbal level, that anxiety has a tremendous amount to do with the success of the artist in the studio. That anxiety is not necessarily something that Nate was ready to put a name to at the time, but he could tell, fundamentally, that taking something that could potentially alter my brain chemistry could also affect my work in the studio!

Now, as it turns out, my anxiety at that time was about things that were outside of my life in an immediate sense, things that were outside of my own existence as an individual, as a human being, and, to that end, taking these Prozac’s or Xanaxes or whatever the fuck it was certainly did improve my issues; I had been going through a lot of personal traumas and things like that, just... things, in fact, that should not have been bothering me as much as they did, and it was those that needed to be dealt with, coped with...

² Freeman, Nathan. “First In War, First in Peace- But In Art? A D.C. Native Visits The Capital’s Museums”. *Observer*. The New York Observer. 01/08/2015. Web. 05/01.2015.

What I would call my existential anxiety, that is, the anxiety that is essential to my existence as a human, and as an artist, however, did not leave, did not dissipate, but in being given its own voice with which to speak became much clearer; became much more consciously tangible and much easier to access in terms of the studio.

Anxiety in the studio is an enormously important part of my studio practice. I don't think there's any way I could approach the studio without anxiety and hope to achieve something successful. And that's not the same anxiety as nervousness or worry or, you know, pathological anxiety, but more the understanding that I'm getting involved in a potentially defeating task, and one that could, you know, go and leave my hands, go awry, do any of these things, simply because as I begin to put my energies out into the environment as an artist I lose something, some control of them.

The issue of control is something that a lot of people have a problem with; not the issue of gaining control. Everyone loves to gain control. But the issue of losing control. When we lose control, we are subjecting ourselves to a potentially dangerous situation. Now, what is that danger? Who can really say? And it surely varies from case to case. But in losing control, we lose a little bit of ourselves. It's a tremendously important aspect of working in the studio; of being that artist. It's a troubling situation to place yourself in, but at the end of the day, it's the job of the artist to mediate that loss of control, to mediate that threat of danger, and make it accessible to the audience in a digestible way."

- Spring, 2015



Fig. 8- Aydin Hamami, Studio in Process, spring 2015

Chaos In The Studio

There are those who crave organization in the studio: everything in its place. I tend to prefer chaos. That is not to say that the chaos of my workspace is intentional. In fact, it is anything but. I simply choose not to rein it in, and this lack of control has become an integral part of my creative process. We are all condemned to a life of chaos maintenance; this is the inevitable truth of being a human, or even simply a living creature. I once told a friend of mine that there are really only four inevitable truths in life: birth, sickness, loss and death. True, this kind of thinking strays toward the nihilistic, and it would be pure nihilism if I were to leave that thought so open ended. These things are inevitable, but the more important issue I think is that these are inevitable things that we must *negotiate*. The reality of living is one that has nothing to do with choice, only with negotiation and adaptation. The way we deal with this chaotic uncertainty is what defines our existence.

This is the same relationship to chaos that my working process possesses. In viewing the studio and my studio practice as an extension of my thought processes, and as a significant and integral part of my life, it only makes sense that I would keep it in disarray. This kind of thing is not for sport, however. There is a value to creating an unpredictable atmosphere while working: it allows me to see things I would have missed otherwise, and no make connections that I could not have made had I not come upon them naturally. Given that my paintings are so process oriented, with that process being one of making and un-making simultaneously, it stands very much to reason that I would keep the artifact of that process close at hand, as the finished paintings I produce tend to

act as mile-markers in my working process at large, rather than end points. One informs the next, but not in an artificial way: they literally share components; one piece is taken from this painting to become central to the function of that one, or vice versa.

There is also an enormous benefit to having the majority of my material invisible; allowing myself to forget certain components, only to come upon them later as if for the first time, as if I had never seen them before. I tend to believe that paintings are more responsible for their making than their maker is, and in separating myself from the artifact of my previous working frenzies, I can gain a certain level of anonymity in my relationship with the work, and create relationships between disparate elements more freely; the pieces, at a point, are no longer my own, I simply create continuity between them.

Love-cheek, Azteca

“Night before I’ve in a quiet hassel in the rain sat with her darkly at Midnight counters eating bread and soup and drinking Delaware Punch, and I’d come out of that interview with a vision of Tristessa in my bed in my arms, the strangeness of her love-cheek, Azteca, Indian girl with mysterious lidded Billy Holliday eyes and spoke with great melancholic voice like Luise Rainer sadfaced Viennese actresses that made all Ukraine cry in 1910.”

- Excerpt from Tristessa, Jack Kerouac, 1960.³

³ Kerouac, Jack. “Part One Trembling And Chaste”. *Tristessa*. New York. Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 1960. p. 8. Print.

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1. Ving, Lee/ FEAR. "I Love Livin' In The City". I Love Livin' In The City. Criminal Records. 1977. LP.
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