

Ulrike Groos in Conversation with Melissa Gordon

I have put reproductions of your works from 2007 until 2010 next to each other in a chronological order and was on the one hand very impressed by the load of work, on the other hand by the diversity of artistic forms of expression – the development of your style, so to speak.

You have worked with one of the most classic genres for some years – painting. Creating aesthetic surfaces seemed to be of less interest to you than the depiction of content, the telling of stories on the basis of your research on our world and the human beings living on it in different places and at different times. Your sources were political, philosophical, historical and sociocultural topics that you have meticulously collected from newspapers, books, movies and art historical works.

Your painterly position was independent, as your artworks carried your personal handwriting and your working method of personally choosing and rating historical motives as well as their „translation“ into figurative collages could not be found in art until then.

Nevertheless, during the last years you have been asking yourself about the possibilities of painting, its development and its borders. This concerns so many fields such as concept, technique, exhibition space.

In a conversation with Rita McBride you talked about your search for a „reformation of making pictures“.

Can your new works be seen as a step into this direction?

Renewal, or reformation of the meaning of imagery plays an inherent role in my practice, as does the act of translating information into artworks, as you describe. The gesture of re-telling (which must always be a renewal) is fleshed out in my process of making images- whether on traditional surfaces of paintings, spatial configurations of paintings, surfaces which have been painted or printed, or other two dimensional elements. Even though my practice has become broader and now includes working physically with materials and space, I still see everything that I do as being painterly, or relating to the dialogue of painting. If the classical 'task' of painting, as the early Renaissance architect Alberti describes, is "...to represent with lines and color ...the visible surface of any object upon any given (plane) in a certain position from the center of vision", with the goal of course to present something flat which resembles objects in space, then in this respect my works are always dealing with layers of 'flatness', but self-consciously so, and with the aim to confuse a readable and an inferred understanding of content.

The aesthetic choice to paint historic and narrative constructions of information on painterly surfaces involved playing with how a surface is seen and read- these actions often calling each other into question. In works that use untraditionally painterly materials in layers of flat space (as every work has been constructed from two-dimensional surfaces), decisions are still made to create mood, setting and plot, with the aesthetic means of balance, color, line, weight, and light. The possibility of painting for me lies in its ability to alter our sense of illusion, whether this be in a formal and/or conceptual manner.

Content is still important for you in your new works, but it is realized differently. To me the works seem more conceptual and more clinical. This is, among other reasons, due to the fact that painted canvas used to be the basis, today it is printing techniques like silkscreen and xylography.

Some of your works feature visual effects, like "Parallax Curtain": Only from one certain point of view the viewer can see the entire picture as a congruency of different motives. What is of interest for you concerning these techniques apart from sharpening the sense of sight and checking on the validity of pictures?

What role does the use of materials like gauze play in this context for you?

I originally studied printmaking in college, so modes of reproduction and their functional uses have always been in the foreground of how I look at imagery. Recently, I have become interested in the dialogue between painting and the print matrix, as in a recent series of paintings that blow up the moralistic, kitsch illustrations of Norman Rockwell (which were only seen as printed magazine covers). I duplicated the fastidiousness of Rockwell by duplicating the printed painting, at a scale at which the original image falls apart into the abstract pattern of the color print rosette. So increasingly the medium of printmaking, both the matrix and the reproduction, has been a method by which to address the cyclical relationship between surface and reproduction, representation and abstraction, seeing and reading.

I also was thinking of how the content of work can relate to the matrix/reproduction dichotomy, and specifically how an image itself can be a matrix which gets 'reproduced'. In the work Collisions (Kent State), I took the image of the Kent State shooting, and chronologically arranged the resulting images of protests inspired by the original event. I laid out two linen surfaces, and silk-screened on them as I would make a painting- making choices about composition, color, transparency, and layering, but with complete images instead of direct paint. Hanging in front of these are frames strung with colored string grids, which reference the materiality of silk-screen as well as create a visual moiré. The frames are suspended on an elaborate pulley system used for props in theatre so that they are kinetic.

In Parallax Curtain, I wanted to visualize the inherent theatricality of press images by means of perspective. I was thinking about a press image as something that has a foreground and a background, or back stage -which for a printed media image is the press office. The curtain of colored shapes hangs in front of a wall-sized image of the New York Times press office. A parallax perspective is created between the foreground abstract color composition and the background representational image. The gauze also functions to switch between opaque and translucent, depending on if it is lit from in front or behind. Here and in other works that use a visual interruption, the foreground planes can be seen through but also hold their own pictorial space- so they obstruct and reveal. But also- importantly, the gauze, and strings, like the paintings of moiré and print patterns and fabrics, have a perspectival relationship with the viewer- they move as the viewer moves, or a piece changes depending on the viewers position.

An increasing 'spatialization' can be seen in your pictures. They're not flat attached to the walls anymore, but three-dimensionally ("Exquisite Corps", 2007), as objects they rest on shelves, stand on the floor or on shelves or hang on grid-like wooden structures. The 'reaching out' of your pictures into the room is accompanied by questions about support, pedestal and presentation.

Recently you said that you regard an exhibition as a 'theather in the round'. In order to realize this idea you have collaborated with a theater designer for "Walls for Staging". What is so intriguing for you about theater?

Spatialization is a great term. Through trying to effect the sense that the viewing of painterly surfaces in space are altered by the movement of viewers, I was directly led to being interested in how the concerns of theatre relate to an exhibition. In double sided works such as 'A City is Not a Tree' and 'The Lesson of the Machine' (both 2008), the audience had to walk around the work to see both sides; the idea behind this was that the memory of the viewer was used as well as sight. I had been thinking of the Exquisite Corpse constructions which jutted off the wall as paintings in the round, and in starting to think about how viewers physically see an exhibition, I started looking at the history of theatre in the round.

Theatre in the round or open-plan theatre is especially applicable to my interests as it developed in relation to post war realist playwrights such as Arthur Miller, which required a minimalist décor and a close-up, almost sculptural understanding of performance. The narrative drive in realist plays of looking at others in order to see oneself correlates with the architectural space of the open theatre. I started thinking about how to arrange that the focal points in an exhibition could be mutable, and in the exhibition A Lonely Crowd, I placed standing constructions of metal frames

and painted wooden panels of traditional heraldic patterns in a way that they blocked and framed parts of the paintings behind them. The 'back ground' paintings presented cropped images culled from performances and illustrations of men struggling with the modern world. As you walked through the exhibition, the paintings were interrupted and framed by the constructions, sometimes clashing, sometimes complimenting them.

In my most recent exhibition, Collisions, I collaborated with the artist and stage designer Jessica Wiesner. Our collaboration took on the form of discussing how we could correlate the gesture of the reveal within theatre, with the content that I had been dealing with recently in my large paintings of viral media images. Perspective is taken into account in the presentation of each work. Also the material with which something is made (a woodcut, a silk screen, a curtain), refers in a loop back to the content (of looking at the construction of press imagery)- mimicking, repetitively layering, revealing.

Moreover, your works are increasingly abstract, for example "A Lonely Crowd" (2008) with its abstract patterns and ornaments.

I especially like "Two-Dimensional Men": Cut-outs of scaled-up abstract fabric patterns are painted on rough-textured linen to represent certain male characters: Pinstripe, houndstooth and checked patterns represent bankers, intellectuals and farmers.

The male world now complements one of the most important topics of earlier years – feminism and the genealogy of women.

Why do the two genders still play such an important role in your works?

There is a quote from Christine Battersby which I relate to: "... to understand what the woman artist is doing, and the merits or demerits of her work, she will have to be located in a separate female pattern that, so to speak, runs through the [male pattern] in a kind of contrapuntal way" (1).

I position myself as an artist as a viewer, and this for me is a feminist stance. Along with the ability to 'look at' is to question the nature of relationships between things. My interest in gender roles is specific to how a character in society is developed, received, and understood. The fact that a character is both representative, and abstract, is also something I am drawn to. The polemic surrounding the division of value into categories of significant vs. banal which involves the history of modernism, ornament, abstraction, and feminism is still pertinent to me.

The paintings Houndstooth and Pinstripe operate like flags, they present a generalized, abstract, but specific male character (the intellectual, the banker), and were hung next to the 'After Rockwell' paintings in the exhibit 'Two Dimensional Men'. I enjoyed the level of objectification in these works.

A lot of your works are, due to the fact that they are dedicated to certain topics and are based on intensive research, so complex that the question is inevitable how much knowledge the viewer has to bring along in order to understand them. A good example for this is p. 49 in your catalogue "Nicely Dry", where the inventory of the pictures is listed that you used for your painting "Fitting Images of the Life and Times of Kristina Drottning".

Of course it is mostly conceptual art that provokes the question about the intuitive comprehension of art – what do you, as a young representative of conceptual art, think about this?

I have always been attracted to early Christian and Flemish Renaissance painting, I love the idea that painting can be used to codify, create double entendres of hidden meaning- and have clues which deconstruct the relationship of symbolism to the viewer. I have also been influenced by Minimalist painting and its concern with the context of exhibition. If content in an artwork arises from information, the way in which the information is translated through material, and the visual reception of these, whether formal or conceptual, then I think the medium of painting is a very exciting space for conceptual practice.

I am always drawn to representing imagery that operates between recognition and reading- if something is recognizable, I will usually try to abstract it, or create unexpected relationships with it. I try to give all the information that is needed in the title of a piece. Visual pleasure in the entire object, as well as unravelling the intent and context of the different parts, is I hope all part of the joy of looking at a piece. In editing, inherent to painting, the positive space makes the negative, in the same way that what is described leaves a shape of what is left confused.

(1) Quoted from "Making History", Sue Tate, 2009.