

Melissa
Gordon

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RM You think Agnes Martin's work was dry?

MG Mmm, yeah, really nicely dry... Really succinct. I mean I enjoy the abstract painters that did really groundbreaking things with formal space, like Hopper did with filmic space in painting. I mean isn't that kind of what it is about, taking a visual space, like an *interface*, that might be familiar, but has so many angles. I think that's exciting.

art is actually a practice now, it's not about a gesture, whereas initially it was about a gesture. So nowadays conceptual artists have a practice just like painters have a practice, and this is what the Jan Verwoert essay is about that I wanted to talk with you about, because he makes this really interesting argument that painting actually has a potential to be conceptual in the same way that conceptual art has a potential to have a practice.

RM Why do you then decide for a lot of the work to use imagery from a specific time? Not a lot of it looks like its coming from the now.

MG The work in the 'Exquisite Corpse' show, for example, was based on research of the feminist art magazines of the 70s. So I guess the reason why I focused on the first wave of feminism there was because I'm really curious about it and curious as to how it has been generalized and how maybe you can degeneralize the topic with a bit of criticism that's not the kind of criticism that's been positioned at it over and over again which was that it was too personal about this or about that, but to somehow represent it for myself as a confused seeker... to work with it as a curiosity...

RM I was just getting to the feminism question, which is another contemporary issue after talking about endgames in painting. It's like we have the two big ones right after each other... But it does seem like you're using a lot of those feminist ideas or themes in your work without making your own issue about it, but just as a sort of investigation for yourself. You're giving away something as well; you're also criticizing it, but therefore –

MG I mean I do kind of feel strongly about women's roles, but then it's just not a very clear cut topic, and I'm not interested in talking about myself, personally, because that's been done. But I am interested in myself as a thing that reacts.

RM But isn't it difficult when you're painting to say where does the feminist part of it stop and start? It's an interesting question, kind of, because of course if you think of those people that are considered to be feminist painters, like Alice Neel, Paula Rego maybe. Well, it's a different thing to use inside a painting than inside of an, I don't know, performance, or... It doesn't necessarily have to be political.

MG Well those female painters were kind of classical painters. But maybe in contrast Agnes Martin to a certain extent was more concerned with her contemporaries in a political sense.

RM It might have been discussed in how far her work is feminist, I assume, because of the emotional or feminine quality of the work, but maybe that gets a little far away from talking about yours actually...

MG No actually I think if I were to relate to any female painter, it would be her and early Sylvia Mangold because they're really dry painters.

RM But an archive is a very objective thing, where as a collection is subjective.
MG Yes that's true.

RM So I would always think that these don't have a very archival quality, they are more of a collection.

MG Well maybe, but then they are a collection with the intent to ordering it to some kind of conclusion. They're not open ended. The construction always comes from a desire to order an excess of information.

RM So where do these things all come from then?

MG Well, for example in the show 'The Only Man in There', a lot of the research came from microfiche. I knew that I wanted to do a series of paintings on women in power so I narrowed it down to four women who were leaders of countries from the 60's to the 80's. I went to the British library, after doing a lot of preliminary research on their lives and what happened while they were in leadership, and I went through all these years of microfiche of *Time magazine* and British newspapers, and Indian newspapers, and printed frantically. Along the way I saw things, like an ad from the 80s, and printed that out and used it for another moment in the show. So a lot of the images come from direct research at libraries with newspapers or books, and some images come from the Internet, usually the film media stuff comes from the Internet. Because that's all that the Internet is good for.

RM (laughing)

MG It's true! You can't find a lot of stuff on there!

RM But when you are working towards a show, are you then always working on a specific theme as with that last show you said you had this group of women?

MG Umm, usually. There's some kind of question that I ask myself.

RM The other day you said you might not be so interested in painting, but maybe more in the concept of painting, or the conceptual part of painting... please explain.

MG Well it's not that I'm not interested in painting. I'm not interested in the idea of painting as a traditional medium, and there's a whole history of painters out there that haven't been, you know?

RM That's exciting... I mean that's a lot to throw away.

MG But I don't feel... for example, say people saw Frank Stella's work or Ad Reinhardt's work as an endgame within painting. And people have felt this way, similarly, in conceptual art, up until recently but nowadays this whole idea of conceptual art, being this caesura at this juncture where you can't step back from, is also at the moment being thrown on its head, because the whole idea is that conceptual

then its not about the act of doing that anymore, so then a kind of itemization begins. Because that's how I see them, as items, as being part of a group of work and which talks to something else that's next to it. Until now everything I made has been painted, so I have encountered the challenge of painting history.

RM But painting of course, more than any other genre of two dimensional art making is more about making an image your own because you have this whole duration of making it, of building it up from scratch (again), which is a little different than printing or photographic processes. So are you interested in these things because you want to make them 'personal'?

MG Yeah that's an interesting point. I've never thought about it in terms of personalizing it. I have thought about the work in terms of speed, because when you are actually physically painting something you can determine the speed at which it is read, and maybe in that sense, that angle is my own. But since everything is flattened in the first place, the text and images never function in their initial roles.

RM Let's come back to the construction thing, how far are they constructed? A lot of them are made up of several different elements The putting together of them, is that something you do, is that the story you're trying to tell or is it something that you just copy from a situation that you've seen in a space, for instance this work here where you see where there's like 10 or 12 different newspaper clippings put together? (*Timeline*, 2006)

MG I went to a talk by Chus Martinez last night, and she was saying that there is a difference between something that is a collection and something that is an archive, and the difference is that an archive comes from this idea of history, etymologically it comes from the word 'origin' or 'commencement'.

RM Do you consider a painting like *Timeline*, 2006 to be a sort of collection or do you see them as an archive?

MG I guess before last night I would have regarded them as a collection in the sense of them being similar to other collections in art history, for example the Ed Ruscha's books, where he photographed these subjects of interest not just as a basis for painting, but as an examination of the mechanics of painting. I'm not trying to make a connection to it, but I'm trying to say that I always thought that this was kind of what I was doing, in the sense that there is a logic system to them, they're not just random. For example this one is a timeline, it really aims at an ordering of these sources, and in that sense, with the intention of trying to portray a reconstructed history, I think, maybe they are archives.

**Nicely Dry: an interview between
Melissa Gordon and Robert Meijer**

Berlin, studio, August 2007

RM (looking around:) So what is this thing with thinness in your paintings?
The ones I've seen, they have that, almost that you can see the
canvas all the time.

MG I wouldn't say they are thin in an expressive kind of way. They're
not about the act of putting the least amount of paint you can on
a canvas. The surface decision is more about making the most decisive
movements in a painting that you can; so in some spots, yeah you
can see the canvas, if that's appropriate, and in some parts it's very
matt, if that's appropriate, and some parts it has a shine on it, or
is thicker, slightly thicker, but it never gets to the thickness of being
'a painted surface'.

RM But why is that?

MG Well because, if, (laugh), well that's kind of a big question to answer...

RM Try me...

MG ...well I think it has to do with the subject matter. For example this
image comes from a poster made by a group that believed that
a great convergence of stars and planets was going to bring about
a revolution. If I were to paint that, with the content behind it, with
thick, gooey, layers and layers of oil paint built up, it would turn it
into something that is fetishized beyond what it is. And it wouldn't
reflect appropriately for me the actual fact that these are research
images for the most part. So I feel like in a painting decision, I can
convey that I am not trying to hide where these images come from;
in fact I am trying to create new meaning and positions for them.

RM So with a painting like this: 'What Was the Great Convergence',
do you choose these images because of a certain compositional
thing that you like about them or is it more about the real content?

MG It's the content and then that's edited down, and cropped. I mean
the same way that Richard Prince talks about his work, finding,
editing, cropping, that's exactly the same process... It is not about
a simple visual reaction, although that is of course a part of it,
I find things that act as signifiers visually exciting.

RM I'm just curious if by making a painting out of these things, is that
because you want to get to terms with it for yourself, and by painting
them you can reform them, remake the image, and therefore make
the content for yourself a lot clearer or more interesting?

MG I think for the most part, my justification comes from an idea
of leveling: if everything is painted or redone to a certain extent,

Exquisite Corpse

In Melissa Gordon's paintings, the whole is never a self-contained entity, but always a heterogeneous collection of interrelated fragments. Incorporating historical, socio-cultural, political and philosophical sources, the result of Gordon's exploration of feminist genealogies usually takes on the guise of an inventory: of stories and protagonists, but also of the physical traces of their mediated existence. Film stills, magazine clippings, book covers, and paintings are often combined in storyboard-like constellations, represented in their original format to function as signifiers in what seems to be an associative visual matrix. *The Satisfaction of Knowing* (2007), a large scale canvas that was central to Gordon's recent exhibition *Exquisite Corpse* at Ancient & Modern in London, is exemplary of this approach: the book covers of *The Portable Kristeva* and Jacques Derrida's *The Archeology of the Frivolous* are painted alongside various images taken from, amongst other sources, the 1970s Feminist magazines. By doing so, the artist shows interest in dissecting the legacy of a specific socio-cultural phenomenon as a semantic system, suggesting that its visual manifestations are readable as a comprehensive and logical referential language. In the case of 'inventory' or 'clipboard' paintings such as *The Satisfaction of Knowing*, meaning is generated not only by unveiling systematic connections between pre-existing imagery, but also on a more symbolic level: the background's deep reds, for example, reference *Womanhouse*, the seminal 1972 exhibition put together by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

Across Gordon's oeuvre, the female figure is a recurring element: from the lone, cool, and self-assured heroine that dominates an entire painting to the anonymous women in the artist's representations of unspecified group photographs. More often than not, Gordon's women are engaged in some kind of performative activity. The 'performative' is a notion which has been closely associated with the cultural domain of Feminist art practice, enabling empowerment through a critique of existing power structures, and also a deconstruction of traditional patterns of social behaviour. In works such as *Futurist Construction* and *Contortions (Spinning Round)*, both form and subject matter are dealing with ideas closely connected to performativity. *Futurist Construction* is a three-dimensional object, shaped like a modernist abstraction somewhat reminiscent of a gaping mouth or clamshell, painted on the inside – both panels depicting female characters apparently involved in physical activities, such as sports or ballet. *Contortions (Spinning Round)* is a related attempt at physically extending the pictorial plane into space, creating a fierce, ominous-looking constructivist object. These works can be regarded as sculptural elaborations of their own subject matter, and as spatial continuations of the illusionism Gordon uses in her 'inventory' paintings. More importantly though, through expansion into space, these forms are able to suggest and 'perform' the gestural qualities that are the central focus of the artist's investigation.