

I was inspired to put together *Fool's House* by the heated conversations I was having with fellow painters about ideas of abstraction and the role of theory in art practice today. I have always understood theory and critical thinking to go hand-in-hand with the action of making work in the studio. Theory should not be a band-aid applied to a cardboard flesh wound— if it exists at all in relation to a given artwork, it must be integral to it. I think Jasper Johns is the model par excellence of this specifically modernist approach. I know that saying *modernist* is almost as bad as saying *postmodernist*, in that it has become an empty place-holder. But for me, the word (and the world it conjures) still rings a little bell of pure sound, and for this reason can still be used to describe work that is being made by artists of all ages in the 21st century. It's a laughing, knowing, winking modernism. It is a hungry ghost of modernism, perhaps more necessary today in its total and complete irrelevance and irreverence.

Real life objects can be both fun and serious at the same time. Objects, like paintings (which are also “real life objects”) will still be sitting on the shelf after we die. I think this dumbly brutal *fact* is what drives our obsessive collecting, arranging, and disposing of them. The lighter side of objects is that they take the weight off the aura-bound painted canvas. Peter Gallo's *Mal du Pays* and *Silence / Cunning / Exile*, are functioning on several levels at once. The use value of the object has been absurdly compounded. Who would dare play badminton with *Mal du Pays* or attempt to wash clothes with *Silence / Cunning/ Exile*? Gallo's letter forms, singular and specific, are painted with such laconic clarity that they practically *become* what they describe. The objectivist poetry of George Oppen functions on a similar

plane—the poem/painting is a constructed object held together by a single thread: the total, rapturous artifice of words/paint. Again, this approach can be called “modernist,” and the union between painting and literature becomes a glowing star of reference, a trail of bread crumbs through the woods of art history.

Josephine Halvorson makes her paintings in one day. In *Seam, Peal*, her subject (an inconspicuous slab of burgundy colored wall) is brought into a new realized existence by the action of her painting. It is as if she is willing her subject into its own subjectivity. The painting is, quite literally, like watching paint dry. Her subjects all appear to rest in a specific kind of stillness, which is one of the reasons critics have compared her work to both the tradition of trompe l’oeil and to metaphysical still life painting. However, unlike Chardin, Manet and Morandi, Halvorson’s ultimate subject is more elusive than the play of light and shadow or obsessive meditation. To my mind, her painting inquiry is utterly world-bound, so direct and sharply delineated that the edges appear blurry, like early experiments with photography. Her paintings capture a place where sun cannot penetrate, a space in the mind that is also a space in the world.

Jim Lee’s work is a play of contradictions: a painting affixed to the wall by a delicate wooden attachment next to a ragged edge staple job. Each piece is like a musical variation, a riffing dissonant guitar solo, imperceptibly changing from a major to minor chord. *Upper Grove* is a polystyrene re-imagining of Brice Marden’s oil and wax, grey/green *Grove Series*. The painting rests on a crafted wooden sling that is mounted to the wall. The object radiates a perverse, yet sumptuous classical intensity. Like

Halvorson's paintings, there is a feeling that the work is "forged" into existence from nothing but the idea of it and a few simple materials. There is often a double set of attachments in Lee's work, between the object and its relationship to the wall, and between two separate components within the piece. In *Diagonal Pull*, a small canvas cube fits into a wooden block like a glove, its plaster twin hangs below it. Like people, the objects have a sensible face they show to the world, while directly behind or inside them is a nonsensical element that has no structural use value whatsoever. In *Untitled (Four Way Crimp)*, two pieces of wood, painted canary yellow are attached to each other with a bubble of glue. This is understandable enough, but what confuses and delights are two pieces of yellow foam attached to the back of the work like a cape, resting between the wall and the painting.

Under the paving stones – the beach!

May 1968 graffiti

Becky Brown's *Island* is a building block transformed by a growth of tiny, collaged pieces into an unusable little moment of contemplation. Like that perpetual construction site forever caught in limbo between building and demolishing, *Island*, is a special kind of aesthetically charged ruin. It is unclear whether the growth is perpetuated from inside or is accumulated from the space around it. *Island* could be like a magnet drawing image particles towards its surface and arranging them in a naturally perfect pattern. What is interesting in relation to Jim Lee's paintings, is that *Island*, as its title suggests, is only a rogue fragment from a larger body of work, an unseen "mainland" that would be the fulfillment of all the tiny joys *Island* offers.

'...as if a nail whose wide head were time and space...'

George Oppen, from "Of Hours"

Over the years Ron Gorchov has been asked many times about the origin and meaning of his saddle shaped stretcher. A few years ago, I asked him myself about the special form. Picking up a paperback book from the studio table, he told me 'I'm flawless with one exception...I'm crazy. I don't like straight lines, I even wish this book's edges were round.' The delectable idea of a circular book is both formal (the book literally as a rounded object) and theoretical (a narrative that opens onto infinite continuation). This exquisite double-bind, between the physical and the idea, is so finely tuned in Gorchov's painting that we feel as if *space* becomes *place*. This is an inhabitable artwork, similar to Halvorson's *Seam, Peal*, the sum of many actions that bring form to bear on a singular experience of space. All of the properties of *Ellspeth* are intrinsically linked to each other: the center point of the canvas, charcoal grey and cadmium green, the lead white drips on the linen edge, the ship-like armature. The painting stops time in its edgeless dimensions, there's no way to mark its beginning or end. In the words of French essayist, Joseph Joubert: "Roundness. The shape guarantees matter a long life. Time does not know where to take hold of it."

-- Nora Griffin, October 2010