

Backgrounds, Clouds, Bad Nights, Vandals

Growing up in lower Manhattan didn't lead to an easy transition after college, though it was perfect up until then. I met all kinds of artists when I was young, went to the MoMA every Friday during high school. I was never deprived of any of the information I needed to form my ideas about painting. But downtown started to get a little close when I finished up at Cooper Union. So I headed out to Philadelphia for a year to look for studio space and maybe a place to set up my own life. It's hard to find independence from where you come from but it seemed important to me at 22. I had watched many of my peers arrive and discover New York. People from the middle of the country or the other side of it, got such a charge from coming to the city and carving out a part of it where they felt independent and ready to get started. I had been to all of the places they were excited to discover, and though I enjoyed seeing everything again through my peers' eyes, I felt like I was missing a chance to get a kind of critical distance from where I grew up.

When I got to Philadelphia, everything opened up in my work. I made a final break from my college work walking down Arch Street after work. I had been drifting away from the straight geometric abstraction of my college days for a year or so, my senior show already had some of the shapes and icons that occur in my work to this day. Black clouds and smoke were obscuring the patterns that I'd been happy to see previously. I was expressing a lot of doubt that the abstract work could hold up. This was 2002; a lot of things were sliding over into our field of vision, a lot of things were landing between me and the work. In many ways that abstract work was New York to me, too. It represented my first loves in painting, the work that I had visited every week in the museums. In Philadelphia I felt free from those influences. I made the decision to concentrate on these obfuscations, the shapes and forms that kept me from having a clear view of the work I had made before. Walking on Arch St. I decided to make my first shaped piece, a black cloud.

Looking at the question of the shaped panel and its content in this context, marked out in my biography, I can see some things that may have escaped me in the past. I'm often asked to explain my use of shaped panels. It's been hard to form an answer, because it seems like a natural way of relating for me. It's always hard to explain sensibility, and I guess, the answers to those questions are inevitably biographical. I have tried to approach the question logically though. The black cloud was my first icon-shaped panel, an object made as a painting. Slight deflections from the rectangles had always occurred in my geometric abstract work. I related that to an affinity for some late minimalist and post minimalist painters, as well as to a desire to incorporate more than the simple facts of geometry into the paintings. I considered the rectangular exterior to be a conceptual zero point, the universal standard for painting space, which was not meant to convey itself, rather, to fade away so that the interior of the painting could receive the viewer's full attention. I was quite interested in the painters who were challenging this convention within the realm of abstract painting. I saw geometry in the standard rectangular field as unable to account for anything but itself. As if it was operating in a hypothetical space, it demanded nothing of the reality of its viewers or the reality of its place in time. In seeking to force the paintings into the reality of the viewers I shifted the edges of the paintings from 90 degrees at the bottom two corners to 93-95 which made a tumbler-like shape that opened upwards so that the top horizontal stretcher bar was wider than the bottom. I also experimented with fan and arched doorway shapes. This was part of an attempt to see more emotional depth and impact in the paintings. In school the question of whether or not abstract painting could have anything to say outside of the concerns of formalism hung over the painting department. It was a challenge in every critique to my work and this engagement with shaped panels was part of my response. I was forced to ask myself whether or not I felt painting was capable of compelling emotional readings within the strict confines of geometric abstraction. Ultimately it's a question that I did not believe would sustain my work indefinitely and after the black cloud I abandoned it.

Still the question of the shaped panel remained and actually moved into greater prominence within the work. The idea of bringing the work into the viewer's space in the form of clouds and smokestacks instead of laying them out in a rectangular, anonymous space dominated the next few years of my production. But rather than seeing this strategy as a hold over from my days of compensating for the relative emptiness of geometric abstraction, I can see it in this biographical context as a way of recognizing the events and the forms which had blocked out my earlier interests. It wasn't that I felt compelled simply to paint the black cloud or the smoke plumes, because I had before, I'd laid them out over top of one type of painting or another, as layers in an imaginary space. After school, in Philadelphia, away from my past in New York and the old work, I saw that these images of smoke and clouds had blocked out anything else that could have interested me. In creating them as objects I attempted to show their prominence in my mind; that they had consumed me and the world I was looking at to the point that they had obliterated the frame in every way and had become a reality.

It is this reading of the shaped panel which seems especially relevant to the work that I'm making now. The paintings progressed quickly after the black cloud. Early pieces which were straightforward object paintings gave way to pieces that incorporated text and signs to make more direct reference to political subjects. "Black Cloud" may have set the ominous tone under which the work would continue but its origins in the contentious politics of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the structures of national security post-9/11 were subjects that I wanted to deal with more explicitly. The struggle in this subject for me was to create work that lay underneath commentary and opinion-giving and instead focused on the influences and tendencies which were likely

to result in the formation of opinions. To give an example, I was looking for a way to describe the anger that I perceived in myself and others at the direction that the country was being taken. At the time I was working on a series called *Weird Weather Patterns*. In this series I was trying to relate the feelings of anger and powerlessness to our experience with something common and similarly unmovable, the weather. To watch something unfold in front of you and feel as though it is totally out of your control was an accurate point of comparison. I made a piece called “Unexpected Windstorm (Emotional Version/Political Version)” which imagined two sets of priorities which were represented as text blown out of reach and into a tree. The tree was split in two halves; the left (Emotional Version) carried letters which spelled “irrational interests” and the right (Political Version) spelled out “national interests.” These were two parts of ourselves, sometimes in conflict, which had been carried out of our influence by the unexpected windstorm.

As the war and political situation has dragged on the text and the attempts to reconfigure political sloganeering into a self-analysis has given way to a frank attempt to record the events of the last six years by making a record of their traces. Late last year I turned to an old panel which I had planned as a section of brick wall covered in political slogans. The piece unfinished for years was called “Bad Nights, Vandals.” It attempted to reveal the depth of the struggle to reconcile strong opinions on the war and the government with the possible futility of political graffiti and the, to my mind, unimpeachable human interest in their own everyday lives. A sample of the wall fragment would have revealed late 60’s political slogans, present day slogans as well as local endorsements for, presumably local high school sports teams and standard “boy’s name/heart/girl’s name” type graffiti. This range was meant to convey the reality that was daily life in the years after the war started. Of course the country watched the news and reacted to the war, but it also continued to function. The problem with the piece was that I never found the appropriate text. Any collection of slogans mixed with invented graffiti strained under a lack of authenticity. Beyond that, I couldn’t feel comfortable with the possibility of an ironic reading for the hand that made the graffiti, which was obviously mine. Looking the piece over in the studio four years later, I resurfaced it and created a ground of bricks with charcoal, which I then sealed in order to add oil paint. The resulting painting, free of text, showed clouds, plumes of smoke, and soot all possibly in the state of becoming or in the state of being stains left on a brick wall. The marks did more than a text could have to show the damage and the residue that the war was leaving on the country.

The possibility of representing these traces is what I’m working on now. I have been pushing beyond the iconographic, or specific object, shaped panel in order to give some space and context for these traces. In my first year at graduate school I began to experiment with metal surfaces that I thought could hold the marks of smoke and soot which I intended to make. I came to the conclusion that the earlier panels with surfaces of wood and sometimes plastic showed symptoms of the same neutrality as the rectangular frame. Far from being ideal, the blankness of the prepared wood grounds set the marks adrift in an imaginary space. In order to anchor the marks I turned to aluminum grounds which are built piece by piece out of strips of flashing (thin aluminum sold in rolls.) The strips are held to each other with rivets or staples. The process resembles construction techniques used to make box trucks, and various types of provisional structures. It is the relationship between these real structures and the marks that are left on them that interests me. The possibility that an honest history is recorded in the traces left on the cities and machines around us is what drives the work that I’m currently doing. And the real challenge to me is whether or not I will be able to find a painting language that lives up to that honesty.