

New Work Notes/2005

Unexpected Windstorm
(Emotional Version/Political Version)
Untitled (Night)
Oh No, Oh No! (Thoughts)
The Conversation
Bad Nights, Vandals

S.O.S.
The Art Notes

I think that it's hard to put everything into writing. It doesn't serve the work to say it means on thing or another. But it does mean a couple of different things so I can say that. I've always tried to make work that was a function of time spent in the mind. That's why I can't be precise about conclusions.

1.

Bad Nights, Vandals is an old piece that grew out of my desire to present an idealized graffiti environment. It always seemed to me that graffiti or political slogan graffiti was unreasonable in that it took the form of a command. Not an invitation to a discussion; graffiti is the statement of a desired result. An example would be "world peace now" the slogan lacks the concept of its own difficulty, unlikelihood or impossibility. Slogan graffiti persists at the expense of a lot of factors that hold ideas of social and political reform back, legality, respect for property, the conflicted interests of our federal government; it is an outlaw gesture and that is part of its appeal. Outside the system of laws, political organizations and large groups of people that seem so slow and difficult to change graffiti has the ability to excite the public by reinforcing the idea that change is indeed possible. In changing the nature of graffiti statements to the ambiguous: "The power station/new country east", the mock demand: "new country of perfect laws" or the observational: "hard times" I'm trying to give a philosophical structure to this outlaw system of communications. These statements reflect on their own status as slogans and through ambiguity implore a longer contemplation of what they might mean to the viewer. In that context an outlaw system, or a radical system, can show sensitivity towards the struggles of the viewer. This outlaw system no longer excludes the consequences that confine the mainstream but can be shown to be similar enough to provide it with a new logic.

2.

Untitled (Night) is a recreation of the effect I noticed of someone having left Christmas lights out on their fire escape in a rain storm. Suspended over a puddle on the sidewalk there was a ghostly effect of lights floating across a surface where they didn't belong. This idea appealed to me because of its visual similarity to the technical effect I was trying to create in the surface of the paintings. To contrast the reflections of the lights with the glare they left across the puddle I chose a barbed bulb shape that repeated in the painting and served as a set of anchors for the painting. As I moved through the painting the way I represented the spots of streetlight became the most important result of the piece.

Images and drawings that comprised the basic language of my work were often derived from comic and cartoon conventions. The two dimensional images have an element of repeatability that three-dimensional images seem to have ceded to photography. Repeatability fits my strategy of reusing images with context as a variable in order to show a continuity of meaning among my concepts. This two dimensional graphic world where I wanted to be also has a relationship with the graffiti mentioned above, as well as iconography and symbolism. These to me represent two important qualities I'd wanted; the former being the ability to represent an altered outlaw system and the latter being a capacity to contain more psychological and emotional information than is explicitly stated. A lot of thinking about the cartoons and the comic conventions led me to equate them with a way of consistently and reliably communicating the inner conversation that my work represented. Most obvious here is the thought bubble which I've returned to in a number of pieces. The thought bubble grew out of the cloud a symbol or icon of bad luck. The universal understanding at the root of our recognition of these conventions gives the manipulations a foundation. And then formally the escape from rectangles for me is a break

down of the idea that these objects need a frame to form their context. They become the symbols of an interior conversation loosed from the world of their protagonist, and a step closer to the viewer.

When I was able to represent the lights in the Untitled (Night) piece with a graphic convention as opposed to a mimetic rendering I felt I'd got closer to completing the language of my paintings. At that point I made a drawing ("Fire") that used the cloud/thought bubble shape to represent rising smoke. This step closed an avenue in the work that depended on the development of personal symbols. When the symbols that define the work can be manipulated to have multiple meanings outside of their significance to the artist, in my opinion the work becomes the rightful focus.

3.

The largest of the new pieces The Unexpected Windstorm is a relatively old panel, which I have only painted recently. The time that it takes to make these panels spreads the focus of the process between the woodworking and the actual painting. The developing complexity of the joinery has been a way of reducing the tension between these two phases of making the work. Being unable to control the shape of the panel at the same time that I painted the image onto the panel has, at times been a source of frustration to me. Recently I have redesigned the guts of the panels to improve their strength and stability but also to allow greater flexibility in the way that they can be shaped. Even after the painting has begun I am able to redraw a contour or, for instance, one of the bumps on a thought bubble, to meet the needs of the piece. The Unexpected Windstorm was my first push into the territory of such complex joinery.

The Unexpected Windstorm was also the most ambitious piece from a series in which I intended to equate feelings of political helplessness and isolation with the weather. I think at the time (spring to summer of the 2004 election campaign) I was feeling an escalation in the levels of anger and disbelief amongst my peers and for myself. More than anything it was the inevitability of the republican's campaign and my determination not to be devastated if we lost that put me in mind of the weather. I wanted to find another answer for the problem that conservative ideology posed for me. Something other than the reactionary feeling that the conservatives could be reduced to a horde of jerks out to get us. If it could just be the build up and release of cumulative feelings like the weather is a build up and release of barometric pressure or some such thing, that caused large groups of people to cohere at different ends of the political spectrum it would be abstract enough for me to accept without anger. In separating the piece in two halves Emotional Version and Political Version I was referencing that reactionary reduction as a visceral emotional response to genuine discomfort and fear and then watching the whole lot of both ideas get swept up into the tree and out of my reach.

4.

I'm drawn to ambiguous statements. But it's also important to make the distinction between vague and ambiguous. I recently made a speech bubble piece, which showed the phrase "Oh No, Oh No!" The phrase is an extension of the sense of dread that gave the Black Cloud Paintings their meaning but it's also an exclamation without an obvious object. I have a very specific memory for the Oh No, Oh No piece but my memory is not the one I want viewers to have when they see it, and I'm sure they won't.

JPF, Astoria, May 2-June 17, 2005