

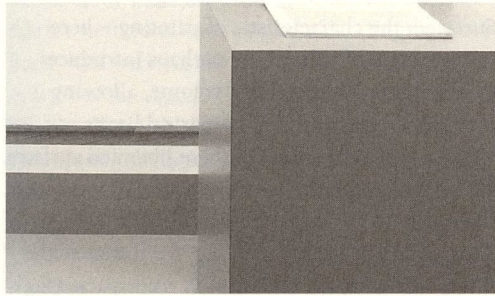
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BLANKS AND NOISE

On Cheney Thompson



Today, painting that is aware of its own historical and present conditions seems to be conceivable only as a cascade of translation efforts. The works of Cheney Thompson could be mentioned as an exemplary case in point. The New York-based artist, together with Gareth James and Sam Lewitt co-founder of the nonexistent magazine "Scorched Earth", places his paintings in an elaborate network of arcane references and contemporary reproduction techniques.

David Joselit examines the diverse methods with which Thompson uses to place painting beside itself.

I BLANKS

Cheney Thompson makes blanks. In two related exhibitions of 2009, "Robert Macaire Chromachromes" at Andrew Kreps in New York and "Pedestals, Bias-cut/Robert Macaire/Chronochromes" at Galerie Daniel Buchholz in Berlin, Thompson presented doubly generic paintings. First, motifs were recursively derived from an enlarged digital scan of their linen support (in New York the orientation of the weave was true, but in Berlin, it was "on the bias"); and second, in New York the works were contoured and grouped so as to represent a catalogue of painting's paradigmatic formats, encompassing, for instance, the tondo, the diptych, and the lozenge. These objects exhibited *blankness* in two ways – they were empty of figurative referent, and typologically generic, like industrial forms before being tooled. In an uncanny parallel to photography's 19th century challenge to paint-

ing, Thompson and his generation are faced with a new question: why make painting in the digital age? After generations of ironic restaging of painterly endgames, why begin again with the tropes of modernism? If the "virtuality" of painting is compelling in the age of digital virtuality it is perhaps because it allows for the "mass customization" of the modernist project in which canvases may enter a wide range of new networks, occupying positions once associated with institutional critique. Indeed Thompson's installations can feel like kits – kits for producing 21st-century paintings. And like the finest artist's kit of the 20th century – Duchamp's portable retrospective, the "Boîte-en-valise" – Thompson's chromachromes and chronochromes fold out.

WHAT SORT OF FOLD?

"[A]n inclusion raises questions concerning edge, borderline, boundary, and abounding which do not arise without a fold."

'What sort of fold?' asks Jacques Derrida?'

Thompson's work begs the question of inclusion within a genre – of what belongs, for instance, to the category "painting". But his interest in "genre" has little to do with the exhausted (and exhausting) discussions of medium-specificity that have plagued the legacy of modern painting. Instead, his is an effort to articulate the "information" inherent in a painting with the "noise" that characterizes both its internal references and its external histories of circulation. The fold, as Derrida and Gilles Deleuze argue, may figure as an act of signification even more fundamental than language. It is a doublingover, a circling back which marks locative meaning based on position, touching and repetition. Thompson makes use of at least four kinds of folds to articulate boundaries and determine inclusions. These echo the great modernist tactics of non-compositionality, seriality and the monochrome, for instance, but their priorities have shifted from internal to external logics.

1. COLOR FOLDED INTO SPACE (AND TIME): In determining the colors of his chromachromes and

chronochromes Thompson has adapted a three-dimensional color scale invented by the early 20th century artist-theorist, Albert H. Munsell. Munsell folded color into space along three axes: hue, value and chroma (or saturation). This arrangement produced a sphere since Munsell attached a circular wheel (with hues arranged circumferentially in pie-shaped units, where saturation increases incrementally from the center to the outer edge of each section) to the midpoint of a vertical axis indicating hues from darkest to lightest (from the punctual or “polar” limit of pure white at the “north pole” of the color globe to the “south pole” of pure black). Like the paper decorations one finds in novelty stores, a flat color wheel was folded into a spherical volume: painting’s flat tinted surface could thus be folded into space. In an echo of cubism’s epic play with the shallow volumetric space of sculptural relief, Thompson folds volume into flatness, but unlike his great modernist predecessor, here spatial transformation is not optical, but conceptual – it goes from mark to system, not simply from two dimensions to three.

In his New York and Berlin exhibitions Thompson invented arbitrary correspondences to the Munsell scale to determine the colors (and/or values) he would use to render his digital scan of the linen support (painted by hand). In the chromachromes, Munsell complementary pairs were chosen for each work by assigning a numerical value to the values of the original digital scan of the linen surface.² Because value differentials are typically associated with shading – with the illusion of volume – this strategy resulted in a quasi-anthropomorphic transfer from the spatial to the optical. In the chronochromes, Thompson linked times of day to the Munsell system, making his paintings into simultaneous clocks, registering the moment they were painted through color and value: areas fade from blank white (corresponding to noon) to the dark tones of midnight.

2. SURFACE FOLDED INTO VOLUME: In Berlin, Thompson explored the malleability of surface topologies in a second way. He calculated the

surface area of a blank (generic) pedestal and then made five of them – each with eccentric and “unmotivated” shapes, except that they all shared the normative surface area of the generic pedestal. Surface – the characteristic of painting – here takes control of volume, or perhaps introduces an absolute anarchy within volume, allowing it total freedom within the numerical limits of a single surface expanse. On these liberated surfaces, surfaces of another type were placed: documents that relate to the arcane research that is part of Thompson’s process, including, for instance, the Wikipedia entry on the Munsell colorspace. One could say that these documents (these sources or iconographic clues) lie behind Thompson’s paintings in terms of interpretation, but in the gallery, they were laid on top of the surface of his liberated pedestals. Discursive surfaces were thus understood as a detachable supplement to the pedestal-paintings as though they held their own interpretations at bay. If, in their status as folded surfaces, these pedestals must be categorized as paintings, then Thompson’s effort to absorb institutional procedures of display into the logic of painting is apparent: three sorts of surfaces are set out beside one another – the meaningful optical surface of painting, the subsidiary support surfaces of pedestals and the explanatory discursive surfaces of text. Each exhibits its own singularity, but together they constitute the distributed network, painting.

3. DIGITAL FOLDED INTO DIGITAL: As I have said, the motifs of Thompson’s paintings are based on a digital scan (of a presumably mass-produced expanse of linen). But the paintings themselves are painstakingly constructed by hand – with the human digits. As in most of Thompson’s work the handmade is folded into several generations of digital reproduction. In this way, he exploits the temporality of painting – its *longue durée* – to dilate the instantaneous moment of the keystroke. As in the chronochromes, which simultaneously chart the moment of their own production, the anachronism of the hand within a system of digital representation vividly actualizes the time signatures of networks.

4. ON THE BIAS: In fashion, the bias cut was invented to enhance the draping of fabric on the human body. In painting, the bias in Thompson's Berlin show folds the illusion of fabric back into fabric's heft, into linen as garment, clinging to a body. And here rushes in a whole history of modernist bodies exposed and repressed from Manet's "Olympia" to Matisse's languorous odalisques. Thompson thus hints at a long and complex tradition of modernist invention accomplished literally on the backs of women.

II NODES

Thompson's art veers from blankness to noise. The pleasing lyrical surfaces of his paintings are sweet and emotionally calm. But their critical apparatus – their almost absurd multiplication of non-compositional strategies, which index the painted image to a digital scan of its linen support, and determines colors based on arbitrary correspondences to a somewhat crackpot color system, for instance – are legion and often, as my demonstration of the previous few pages must demonstrate, laborious to articulate. Why frame the clarity of the modernist monochrome in such a surfeit of interference – of noise? By way of an answer, I wish to introduce a trickster figure that haunted both of Thompson's 2009 exhibitions – namely, Robert Macaire, a raffish underworld type who emerged out of a minor play in Paris in 1823 to become a media sensation, ultimately codified in the "Physiologie du Robert Macaire" published by Pierre Joseph Rousseau in 1842 with illustrations by Henri Daumier. This was the period of so-called panoramic literature in Paris, which codified a spectrum of emerging urban types. Macaire held a special place in this Balzacian universe of social speculation: Alexander Zevin has called him "the type of types",³ because of his many guises, a designation that could also describe the monochrome which, in its own myriad transformations over time, is arguably the "type of types" of modern painting. Macaire, who was represented in the New York and Berlin exhibitions through a series of lyrical

drawings based on the letters of his name as well as more explicit press materials and documents, is precisely an anthropomorphic blank who runs through various permutations and relocations. For me the fictionalized picaresque adventures of this personage suggest an analogy to how Thompson treats the monochrome as a "character". Simply put, Macaire's engulfment in the tumult of Paris is the anthropomorphic analogue to Thompson's engulfment of painting in informational noise. The 19th century satirical type becomes the 21st century non-objective cipher: an episodic adventure is updated as network circulation.

But there is an even more significant theoretical dimension to Thompson's opposition of blankness to noise (which by the way, is shared by many of his cohort, including artists like Wade Guyton who use digital strategies to generate non-objective paintings, Jutta Koether for whom painting becomes a performative personage, or Rebecca Quaytman, whose optically charged images always refer outward to a particular institutional or historical condition)⁴. Thompson is attempting to solve one of the most vexing aesthetic problems since the end of high modernism – the contradiction between the artwork as a theoretical object and the work of art as commodity, or to put it in shorthand, the problem of reification.⁵ We know that any kind of painting, no matter how slight, how vulgar, or how insulting to its prospective buyers, can now find a market. Instead of pretending to resist this omnivorous appetite, Thompson has put pressure on what might be called its internal limits. In the fullest sense, his paintings are networked – they are conceptually linked to Munsell's colorsphere, to arcane art historical references, to Robert Macaire, and so on. The meaning of each painting, in other words, is distributed, expropriated from its material surfaces, literally, as in the pedestals in Berlin that hold, but do not absorb their own "meanings". While an artwork's value has never been fully accessible to any individual onlooker, modernist painting was premised on the simultaneity of optical experience and meaningful perception.

Thompson makes this experience radically asynchronous: the associations he proliferates cannot ever be perceived in a moment of pure presence. A collector can buy a Thompson painting but s/he can never really possess it, just as anyone can own a computer but no one owns the Internet. In a very profound way these chromachromes and chronochromes cannot stand on their own and they explicitly declare this in their physical display – they have the status of a Xeroxed printout of a download from a website. They aren't just blanks, they are information portals as opposed to information receptacles. Buyer beware!

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre", transl. by Avital Ronell, in: *Critical Inquiry*, v. 1, n. 1 (Autumn, 1980), p. 69. Thompson has expressed deep interest in this text, but Derrida, of course, is not the only one to identify the fold as a mode of signification that undergirds or perhaps precedes the distinctions of language. See, Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, foreword and translation by Tom Conley, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- 2 Thompson's procedures are hard to paraphrase clearly, though their contours are important to understand. Here is the fuller description included in the press release for the New York exhibition: "The scanned fabric sample is divided into three equal sets of numeric data which correspond to the value axis of the digital image, resulting in a template which consolidates the value information into zones of highlight, mid-tone, and dark. The lights and darks of the image provide the coordinates for the distribution of complementary colour pairs based on Albert Munsell's colour model. These complementary colour pairs are arbitrarily assigned to the individual paintings as a means of providing a minimum of identity within the ensemble." Undated [2009].
- 3 Alexander Zevin, "Panoramic Literature in 19th Century Paris: Robert Macaire as a Type of Everyday", <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/paris/Zevin.html> [accessed 1/20/10], p. 4.
- 4 I attempt to identify such a painterly tendency in my "Painting Beside Itself", *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009), pp. 125–134.
- 5 I am grateful to Nicolás Guagnini for his comment in response to my article, "Painting Beside Itself", *ibid.*, that it is necessary to come to terms with the commodity status of these "networked paintings". He should not, however, be held responsible for my manner of arguing this point.