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“Paintings and Sculptures and Reliefs and Installations, Oh My!”

by

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Abstract

Through my interdisciplinary practice, I create paintings, mixed-media sculptures, carved reliefs, and large-scale installations that recreate domestic objects and spaces. In this paper, I examine and connect these seemingly disjointed modes of working and how they work together to accomplish similar goals. First, I explore the act of mark-making and observation as a way to understand and process visual information and how it translates to memory. Next, I discuss pictorial ambiguity as a means to record something understandable without context. Lastly, I present my work that acknowledges its own fragility and decay in connection to its real-world counterpart, which is accomplished through the use of archival and nonarchival materials.
1. Introduction

My interdisciplinary practice contains four main branches: painting, sculpture, carved reliefs, and installation. While there is an overlap of materials and techniques, I mostly keep these disciplines separate. Painting is at the core of all my work. I draw from my experience and knowledge of painting when working in other mediums. I also hold a great deal of affection for painting and this influences all of the work I create. My mixed-media sculptures are models recreating objects that could be easily found in my paintings and are constructed in a manner very similar to the painted images. My carved and painted reliefs are the middle man between my paintings and my sculptures, possessing qualities of both, but also unique in their own right. Lastly, my large-scale installations are spaces that emphasize the experiences of the environment and the details within. The installations are constructed in a way that it feels like entering one of my paintings and exploring the composition.

While my work is spread across various mediums, three main concepts show up throughout that link them all together. First, I use mark-making and observation to better understand and process visual information. I explore how the act of making records both visual data and how experience translates to memory. Second, I use pictorial ambiguity to convey something understandable without context. By omitting or abstracting details and providing just enough for the viewer to “feel” the work without needing extensive explanation, I aim to create a body of work that is transhistorical. Third, I make work that acknowledges and accentuates its own fragility and potential decay. I create art objects that undermine their archivability, shortening their lifespan. I do this to make the works mirror and echo their counterparts in the real world instead of aiming for immortality.
Across the Street
oil on stretched canvas
10in x 12in, 2019

Across the Street, Again
oil on stretched canvas
10in x 12in, 2019
2. Painting

The majority of my paintings are made *en plein air* or from direct observation. If they are not created from observation, it is from memory, which I argue is observation once-removed. Production and repetition are vital to my practice. I often repeat subject matter, painting the same location or objects over and over. I do this because I believe there is something to gain from the physical act of making. Each time I complete a painting I gain some knowledge, while research is beneficial, I believe experience is more valuable. Or as Charles Hawthorne, who founded the Cape Cod School of Art, would say, “The only way to learn to paint is by painting”\(^1\).

My painting is instinctual, it is not overly planned with sketches and underpaintings. Each mark lends insight to the thought behind it. If I found a detail easy to understand, the mark should be equally simple. Similarly, if I struggled to understand something, for example, the perspective of an object or the feel of the light, an insecure mark, or frequent reworking of an area on the canvas showcases this inner negotiation of my thoughts. The marks of paint on a canvas can be more telling than the depicted content.

My subject matter is rarely staged, often what I paint is what happens to be in front of me. However, this is not to say it is completely inconsequential. With each piece I make, there is an innate urge to capture something about the subject I am observing. I feel affection for my surroundings and the general clutter that fills my life. I spend time with this clutter, it makes perfect sense to me to get attached. What’s being painted doesn’t need to be particularly impressive, as long as it is interesting to me as an artist. Hawthorne echoes this thinking when he tells his students, “Don’t strain for a grand subject—anything is painter’s fodder”\(^2\).

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My work is a type of documentation. However, it is not created in a way to perfectly preserve or convey what’s being depicted. Because I feel nothing can compare to reality, I do not think it is worthwhile to strive for it. Instead, with my paintings, I strive to capture the feeling more than the details. While context can provide a greater understanding, I value ambiguity in its ability to convey the experience of something without needing text or explanation. The hand behind my work is not hidden, so just as a body made the mark, another body can understand it. There is a transhistorical quality to painting that allows a person who views the work to connect and understand the person who made the work. A child can look at the Lascaux cave paintings and understand the human desire to make a mark. Someone can look at an ancient Fayum mummy portrait with its lifelike waxy surface and understand this person from A.D. 80-100 was alive.

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Oil and encaustic are the two forms of painting I use most in my practice. Much of what I’ve written applies to both materials, but encaustic adds interesting connotations because of its historical context and what it is physically made of. Encaustic is painted using melted beeswax and damar resin mixed with pigments.\(^5\) When I first started using encaustic it was because of practical reasons, it allowed me to quickly build up mass and it was very forgiving in that it could be reworked extensively. In addition to these qualities, because it is beeswax, it adds a layer of delicacy and strength to the painting. Strength, because it is very archival, having the ability to last for thousands of years. Delicacy, because this quality is only a potential, one mistake and the entire painting can be lost. It is sensitive to temperature and can’t be bent like a painting on fabric. Also, any archival material can only survive if it is deemed worthy of being maintained in an archive. The characteristics of the beeswax makes one acutely aware that this painted image is also an object that needs to be cared for.

\[Drifting\]

encaustic on wood panel
10in x 10in, 2018

Playhouse
cardboard & hot glue
24in x 36in x 12in, 2018

Don’t Go Too Far
cardboard & encaustic
Dimensions vary, 2019
3. Sculptures

I often refer to my mixed-media sculptures as constructions, as a reference to them being approximations of real-life objects, but also to how the action of being put together can be seen in the finished product. The sculptures are made from cardboard I find in various dumpsters and are held together by hot glue and a prayer. They are constructed in a similar manner to the paintings. My sculptures do not start out with careful measuring or a detailed plan. They are made step by step and often collapse in the act of making them. The strength of the structure is tested during the act of making. Each plane of the form is a movement, like a brushstroke in a painting. The sculptures are simple to understand, just enough information is created to recognize the form.6

When I started painting the cardboard constructions I decided to use encaustic. The instant drying time of encaustic appealed to me and I could quickly build up the marks. In addition to these practical reasons, the non archival cardboard and the archival beeswax7 created a tension that I felt the sculptures needed. These sculptures are replicas of objects, but also stand in for them. They become a type of idol. They are intentionally constructed with materials that can not last, recognizing they will expire just like the objects they are modeled from.

These constructions are rickety, they fall apart. Gravity weighs them down, the cardboard ages and weakens, and the glue loses its strength. Repairs have to be routinely made. In addition to natural aging, they are easily damaged. Sides are accidentally pulled off, nonfunctional handles are tested, and fail and easily overlooked cords are stepped on. The sculptures are bodies, they have to be healed. They have a lifespan, the cardboard will decompose, the wax will remain. Like bodies, the flesh will decay, the bones will stay.

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5 Sorrowful Contemplations of Space, Part 1
stoneware bisque/tempera
11in x 11in x 1in, 2019
4. Carved Reliefs

My reliefs are made using techniques from both my two-dimensional work and my three-dimensional work. But the techniques in combination are able to achieve characteristics of both the image and the object. Using trimming tools for pottery I carve each mark into the wet clay to create value. The carved surface creates a composition of different values using only the shadows and reflections of light, almost like an underpainting without the use of any pigments. Once bisque fired, I paint on the surface with egg tempera to enhance the depth of the image. Using painted value on top of shadows and light that exist in reality, I am able to further complicate the observation of an image.8

5 Sorrowful Observations of Space is a series of five separate carved and painted tiles. Each tile contains an individual image, and they are all related in subject matter and how they are made. The image on each tile was made from memory. Environments I spent days, months, and years observing and inhabiting. The carved marks inform me what was burned into my mind’s eye. What values were needed to convey the space and how it felt. The tiles are painted with egg tempera, using a limited palette of only raw greenish umber and titanium white. The color is similar to the color of the wet clay and makes the viewer question the reality of the carved marks. The images are ambiguous. The only truth the viewer knows is the feel of the light in the composition. The viewer is aware of these tiles as objects that need to be handled with care. The egg tempera paint on the surface is delicate and could be easily rubbed off and the thinly carved marks could break if pressure was applied. The tiles are thick and the L-hooks clearly hold them to the wall. It is precarious, one fall and they are broken.

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Break Into The Bathroom
cardboard, paper, wood, tape, & staples
8ft x 8ft x 8ft, 2019

A Room with Light, detail shot
cardboard, wood, staples, & encaustic
6ft x 12ft x 8ft, 2019
A Stopped Clock
cardboard, paper, pigment & wax
dimensions vary, 2020
5. Installations

Break Into the Bathroom was the first installation I created while at Southern Methodist University. It was an eight foot cube constructed using lumber, cardboard, butcher paper, hot glue, and an unreasonable amount of staples. The first view of the cube made it appear solid, but walking to the right side the viewer would discover a “window”. In this window, the viewer would see a bizarre monochromatic bathroom made from cardboard and butcher paper. Viewers could choose to crawl through this “window” and explore the space. The act of discovery was important to this piece, I wanted people to observe and contemplate the details. With my installations I encourage the audience to observe by making it an “adventure”, each observation or discovery is an Easter egg in the constructed space I make.

In a dimly lit warehouse space, I made a 6ft by 12ft room that viewers could enter. Once inside they would find five dollhouse sized trailer homes jutting off the back wall that emitted light. This piece was titled A Room with Light. The cardboard walls of this room blocked out what little light there was in the warehouse and also absorbed sound. It was a quiet space that asked the viewer to consider the small neighborhood in front of them, to imagine the lives of the people in these tiny, precarious homes. Each trailer house was modeled after an actual home in a neighborhood I lived in, details are included that are remembered. The little trailer homes are delicate and the light is filtered through thin tissue paper in the windows. Light can be seen seeping through the “cracks” of the homes. Similar to the actual homes in reality, these tiny models are delicate. A mobile home in Oklahoma is a great example of something that is fleeting. It is hard to say which would last longer, these cardboard and wax models, or the metal homes that can barely last a generation or two without falling into disrepair.
A Stopped Clock was a large scale installation that took over a month to complete. The installation was a constructed kitchen that was installed into an actual kitchen. Every surface was covered with cardboard or butcher paper and then painted with wax and pigment. Constructed cardboard objects that were painted with encaustic filled the space. It was an echo of the actual kitchen underneath, but also an echo of the kitchens I have inhabited in my life.

Every surface was carefully covered by cardboard and encaustic, from the ceiling to the floor. Over 500 tiles, each one cut and painted individually. Each tile, every piece of paper or cardboard became a death mask of what was underneath. The acid-filled cardboard painted with beeswax attempting in vain to preserve the kitchen. The room was frozen in time by the wax. The wax “popcorn ceiling” was a relic of the past. The viewer felt the age of this space, but time was only paused. The surfaces carefully made in this space were unable to protect the kitchen. Both the fictional wax kitchen and the actual kitchen underneath will disappear.

The space in A Stopped Clock felt uncanny. Small details like the sponge on the sink delighted viewers, but nothing was functional. The sponge would not clean and there was no soap in the bottle. With every surface being painted it was easy to fall into the logic of the space. The text on the bottle could not be read, but maybe it made sense. The wax kitchen echoed enough of the reality underneath that sometimes it would go unnoticed. People would walk through and just believe the world of the kitchen. It was not until one small detail, like the overlapping of paper, or an object that caused a doubletake that people would start to actually look around and realize literally everything was constructed. In this kitchen it was easy to fall into the world and believe it, but one blip in the logic and it all fell apart.

My installations are always temporary, only surviving for a few days or weeks. Despite its short run, *A Stopped Clock* was an act of affection. I wanted to make this piece that attempted to preserve the things I hold dear, even knowing it was futile. Loaves of wonder bread and copper-bottom pots aren’t of particular worth or importance, but they are things I love that I wish could live longer. A kitchen is a space that is inhabited and used daily, it is a functional space that over time grows to reflect those who live in it. I always have an urge to hold onto the comfort of the spaces I live in and the objects I know, a want to keep things staying the same, but living means change and nothing lasts forever.

6. Conclusion

Although my work includes paintings, ceramics, mixed-media sculptures, and large-scale installations, everything is connected by the main principles of my art practice. There is an emphasis on mark-making and the pictorial in all of my work. I view creating work from observation as a way to process and understand information and memory. I make work as a type of documentation to the experience of the moment. Using pictorial ambiguity I record something understandable without the need for words. Lastly, I make work that is purposefully delicate and able to decay as a way of coping. I am interested in the moments where works of art fail to preserve reality, and also those moments when it can give us something more. There is a melancholy to my life art cannot fully remove, but the process can be a balm to the experience.
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