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Art & Vision: Intermittent Archives

by Nathaniel Smith

Brooklyn-based artist Jessica Dickinson returns to the Twin Cities with the first-ever collection of her conceptually-driven and subtly striking recordings reminiscent of her painting process. l'étoile arts columnist Nathaniel Smith talks with the artist before the closing of her exhibition, "final remainders," June 22 at David Petersen Gallery.



remainder: Hold- (final) by Jessica Dickinson

Contemporary art is full of examples of artists with expansive practices. Artists are often encouraged to experiment with as many different media as they are able, an expectation which can unfortunately pull their creative endeavors into too many directions, creating a disjointed and unfocused body of work. Other artists utilize the intrinsic strengths of many different media to their respective best advantages in exploring the concepts central to the artist's work. Jessica Dickinson is an artist who falls in the latter category. Painting is the foundation of her practice, but her work is informed and expanded through the creation of drawings, art-books and mixed media works on paper. These separate yet related works simultaneously investigate themes of visual sensations, the passage of time, and inner sight gained through outer sight. Perhaps this dynamic is most evident in her graphite rubbings on paper called *remainders*, which are collected in her exhibition *final remainders* currently on view at David Petersen Gallery.

slowing down/ paying attention

Working out of a studio in a building shared with several other artists in Brooklyn, Jessica Dickinson works slowly, building layers upon layers of oils and a limestone-like additive onto the surfaces of each of her panels. As each layer takes extremely long to dry before another layer can be built up, reduced or altered, she generally finishes only four or so paintings a year. This does not seem to be an intention to limit production, but the fact that the artist uses this particular, time-intensive method indicates her willingness to explore the nature of materials in her work, as well as the patience necessary to complete each piece. The process itself aids an investigation into the nature of time, as well as how small changes (and taking the necessary time to notice them) can affect perspective. Dickinson says, "I think there is a life painting leads outside of what we can grasp of it that is very mysterious, and I want to honor that."

This glacial, focused pace is countered by her mixed-media works on paper, as well as two related practices she calls *traces* and *remainders*. The *remainders* are essentially large sheets of white paper which are laid over paintings in varying states of completeness, and documented by rubbing the paper with charcoal. These rubbings are kept as intermittent archives of the painting, eventually becoming singular works, and later collected into art-books, which Dickinson makes. While all of these processes are connected, they all bring their own possibilities as "markers of a space outside of the verbal and within the visual," an idea essential to her work.



remainder in progress, 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

While Dickinson's paintings are an exercise in a long-view perspective of time, her *remainders* serve as drawings or sketches, in that they are a quicker, though inexact, documentation. The work is not related to horometry or any other form of specific time measuring; rather they materialize as frozen moments of a surface, before the landscape that they captured is permanently altered. These rubbings are not related to stop-motion documentation, which has a mechanical and automatic detachment. Instead, Dickinson records the works in progress by hand, using a graphite tool on paper rubbed directly over the painting, documenting their most pivotal changes, and eventually, their end result. This documentation is incomplete of course, as all color, sheen, and many characteristics of a painting are lost. But what is gained is equally important; a rough and uneven surface that records the 3-dimensional aspects of the painting's present state.

Perhaps most intriguing about Dickinson's remainders is the fact that although there is strong theory behind their creation, they exist as beautiful, monochromatic works on their own. The paintings are intentionally absent from *final remainders*, allowing the work to be seen on its own visual terms. In viewing the works on paper, the eye follows their irregular, rocky patterns and markings slowly, as if touch has become more essential in understanding than vision. Their appearance, paired with Dickinson's intense interest in the passage of time, and how we what we see is effected by time, recalls the study of tectonic plates. While some artists are more results-driven (creating as many pieces as quickly as possible), Dickinson's work seems more similar to the slow-moving plates that permanently alter the geology of our planet, invisibly and almost indiscernibly, unless seen through vast expanses of time. *remainders* as recordings brings to mind a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "We learn geology the morning after the earthquake". What is particularly intriguing about the *remainders* is not just their aesthetic, but the fact their delicate existence is a recording of a surface forever lost.



remainder: Under (final), & remainder: With-This (final)

“The concept drives the aesthetic”

While considering the works on view at David Petersen Gallery, and then recalling the origins of the pieces in a conversation with the artist via email, it became apparent that many of her thoughtful answers were far more revealing without any verbal framing or writer's intervention. The following is excerpts of our interview:

l'étoile: I assume most people are as aesthetically interested in the pieces as I am, but for you, what is the balance between the aesthetic and the concept in the pieces creation? Which takes precedence most often?

Dickinson: For me, the concept drives the aesthetic. In general with all my work I am interested in setting up a situation that unfolds slowly through time, perceptually and materially, and where delineations start to form within what first appears possibly to be an overall field, atmosphere, or impenetrable surface. This drives an aesthetic where there is minimal contrast, an element of initial restraint, and a lack of quick visual reference. The aesthetic of the *remainders* comes from the procedure of making them; I do not manipulate the surface the way I do other works. I like that they are stark and atmospheric at the same time. With them hung directly on the wall, I like them existing like documents that don't really explain everything, but in their size confront the viewer's body a bit. They sometimes feel like seeing out of focus, but somehow foreground and come from something very hard and factual.

l'étoile: How many *remainders* exist for each painting? I know they are for different phases of the paintings, when subtle differentiations can be recorded and compared, but was hoping to hear more about this important aspect of the process.

Dickinson: Every painting gets a *final remainder*, which happens once the painting is complete. Every painting also gets a *remainder set* that happens during the development of the painting. Every time the surface of the painting changes significantly, when I finish a certain procedure, I make a remainder of the painting before moving on to the next stage. This set stays together as one piece and is shown left to right on the wall. I've only exhibited a set of remainders once and actually don't get to see them up in my studio, they need a lot of wall. How many remainders per painting depends on the painting and the events and processes it goes through, right now they range between seven and eighteen, depending on the painting. Since I started this whole thing doing *final remainders*, I always do a second *final remainder* that is not in the set, and that is what is exhibited here. It is not a copy since they end up different.

l'étoile: I am sure I know the answer to this, but have you at any time ever felt that either the *remainders* or the paintings themselves or more important? Has it ever been a case by case basis, as in, have you ever preferred the look of the graphite rubbings much more than the painting, or vice versa, even though both are equally important?

Dickinson: I've never thought of it as one as more important, but that painting is central to what I do, and the *remainders* and other works on paper I do extend from this and support it. I think there is something the paintings can do in terms of aggregating time, illumination, color, and material that the remainders can't do. But I think there is something in terms of directness, muteness, and austerity that the remainders can do that I find necessary. It completes the work, on the periphery, while being independent of it.

Likewise I think my other works on paper deal with chance and the pressure of peripheral time in a way my paintings and the *remainders* can't. All of these things interest me as an artist and speak to the larger project of my work, and everything I do in other media help my paintings be what they are. I have never really preferred one over the other. A friend says the *remainders* are like the paintings “baggage”, which I like, like here is this subtle, slowly developed painting, and here is what remains to remind you of something you may not see. It was also said the *remainders* look like “depictions of dried up mud,” which is what a painting is, really – dried up mud.

l'étoile: Can you briefly speak about how time affects your work? On your website you say you generally only work on four paintings a year, which makes documenting them through drawings an interesting way to reverse the drawing/painting hierarchy in regards to completion of the work (drawings typically precede a painting). It also seems important because you can

create many of them, while focusing more time on the comparatively more labor-intensive paintings.

Dickinson: I typically work on three to four paintings together over a year's span. I put the paintings through many stages and events, and this process makes the final painting. The *remainders* and other works on paper me make the paintings because they are a different place for me to go so I can be disciplined about the decisions in the paintings. They also reflect stages that get lost or absorbed into the painting.

And finally, I think I can do things with paper and drawing materials that I can't do with my painting materials, all of which reflect different manifestations of how things shift and change through time. I guess there isn't a hierarchy just a contingency.



final remainders, installation view

l'étoile: Paul [Dickinson, poet and founder of the much-beloved Speedboat Gallery, also the artist's brother] mentioned that although you have exhibited quite extensively worldwide, this was your first show in Minneapolis. The Twin Cities gallery scene is not incredibly healthy at the moment, which makes what David Petersen Gallery is doing so important right now. How does it feel to show here, and also how did you and David get together to work on the show?

Dickinson: Yes, this is my first solo show in Minneapolis, if we can all please forget coffee shop shows I had in my college years. I met David through the artist Aaron Spangler, David came to visit several artist friends here in Brooklyn that Aaron introduced him to. I liked that he had been to Speedboat in his youth, which is often a bonding thing for artists of our generation outside of the Twin Cities. The alternative attitude towards art and music at Speedboat was just normal life to me, and making art happen outside of pre-programmed confines has always kept me alive as an artist, and pushed me to find my own direction.

I liked the idea of showing in Minneapolis because although I've lived in New York for almost 15 years, and went away for art school at age 18, I have always felt very lucky and proud to be from the Twin Cities, which is a rich and specific cultural center...So this is a long answer, but when thinking about community I think of the large community of art outside of just the people on the ground, so it felt good to show in this place that really had an impact on how I work as an artist, and how I understand art in general. I think it is great David is creating another forum for art in the city, and bringing in artists outside of the city as well.

***final remainders* at David Petersen Gallery closes Saturday, June 22. David Petersen Gallery is located at 2018 Lyndale Avenue South in Minneapolis, and is open Wednesday through Saturday from 11 am to 6 pm and by appointment.**