UP CLOSE / MOVING BACK
DEBRA SINGER

In painting as in music and literature, what is called abstract so often seems to me the figurative of a more delicate and more difficult reality, less visible to the naked eye.
—Clarice Lispector, *The Foreign Legion*[1]

fig. 1: Cimabue, *The Fall of Babylon*, circa 1277-83, fresco, Upper Basilica of San Francesco, Assisi, Italy, 350 × 300cm

Situated atop a picturesque hillside in the Tuscan town of Assisi is the Basilica di San Francesco, one of the most magnificent examples of medieval European art. Among the highlights included within are the New Testament frescoes by the celebrated thirteenth-century Italian painter Cimabue, who has since been hailed as either the last great Byzantine painter, or else as the first "modern" painter, depending on your inclinations. History, however, has been far kinder to Cimabue than nature. Few of his murals survive, and the St. Francis frescoes in particular have suffered a startling, peculiar fate: everything that was once painted white now appears black, and vice versa. The result of centuries of slow oxidation due to the artist's own technical mishap at the time of the frescoes' making, the inversion of color imbues Cimabue's scenes with an ominous aura—similar to the haunting quality of film negatives. A 1997 earthquake further damaged the frescoes, so now large chunks are missing, and only spectral fragments of the representational imagery remain (fig. 1). The ruining passage of time and chance events have transformed these ancient narrative frescoes into something more on par with dramatic, large-scale, abstract contemporary painting. Cimabue's partially destroyed and decaying surfaces paradoxically possess both a heaviness of material and ethereality of atmosphere, as they reveal and obscure identifiable elements of their earlier incarnations. As such, the works acutely embody and project a tactile sense of time.

When artist Jessica Dickinson encountered these unique frescoes for the first time, they markedly changed her outlook on painting. "My challenge then became: How do I make a painting like this—that is made with both intention and the accident of time?"[2] In framing her artistic practice around such questions, Dickinson embraces a highly experimental approach to creating her atmospheric abstract paintings, which explore thresholds of visual perception and the affect or *feeling* of time, while also foregrounding "process" itself as part of the works' content.

Dickinson's process is, in fact, appropriately slow and unusual. Completing only about four paintings a year, she works on several simultaneously over the course of many months. She starts with a fresco-like surface made by spreading limestone polymer (more familiarly known

as spackle) in thick coats onto wooden panels to form a base that she sands smooth, onto which she applies thin monochromatic layers of oil paint that are quickly absorbed into the porous plaster. Dickinson then works the surface, carving and gouging into it, and painting on top of it—only to later scrape and sand down select areas so that she can apply again new layers of plaster, oil paint, and so on. She enacts this cycle of construction, destruction, and rebuilding of surfaces with equal parts impulsive action and careful planning, counterpoising deep, broad incisions with more restrained, repetitive notching patterns and delicately rendered whorls of lines—creating what she refers to as "a radically cared-for surface; one that is cared for, but is also banged around."[3]

To accomplish this range of activities, Dickinson is well equipped with an arsenal that speaks to her willingness to engage the surface in ways far removed from a traditional painter's means of approach. Her studio is filled with chisels, burnishing tools, awls, X-acto knives, spackling trowels, indelicate hammers, and various strange thingamajigs, fashioned out of etching tools jerry-rigged for new purposes. There are even a few paint brushes, albeit tiny ones. Such terms of engagement reveal that there is much about Dickinson's process that recalls the painter Jack Whitten, who moved away in the 1960s from his Abstract Expressionistic beginnings to a more process-based approach (and who also famously used tools of his own making to generate his paintings). He has remarked: "I don't paint a painting. I make a painting. So the *verb* has changed."[4] It is precisely such a verb change that applies to Dickinson's practice of "building" her surfaces, or as she expresses it: "I have to *push* the paintings through events to make the image. I want them to reflect a sense of naturally evolving over time, like rocks that change and weather."[5]

Her allusion to the geologic is an apt one. Take, for instance, Dickinson's painting *Of-Also* (2012–13) (page 140), composed of a cream-white monochromatic field, filled alternately with glossy-smooth and matte expanses—both of which are riddled with whimsically scored pockmarks and inscrutable scribbles and scratches. Like her work generally, this austerely elegant painting is filled with richly nuanced shifts of tone and texture that solicits curiosity about the "how" of its making. At first, one is likely to observe the paintings' alluring alabaster-like sheen, but the lasting impression is unexpectedly more of a visceral sensation, like the feeling of cool marble inside an old Italian church on a hot, sunny day. The viewing experience becomes, over time, less about what you actively "see," and more about the tactile sense that the painting's uncanny, stone-like presence evokes.

Of-Also is also one of many works that demonstrates how Dickinson has absorbed the legacies of Abstract Expressionism as well as those of post-Minimalism and process art of the 1960s and 1970s, but also importantly differentiates herself from them. Although her paintings' fields of color and intricate, entrenched abstract mark-making may formally recall

at times the work of such earlier figures as Rothko or Twombly, Dickinson approaches her gestural work from an opposing conceptual vantage. Unlike twentieth-century Abstract Expressionist traditions, Dickinson is not interested in the emotional register of the mark and even less so in abstraction's "transcendental" potential. As she elaborates, "I prefer the term *inexpressiveness*," which for her signifies "something felt which can't necessarily be defined or verbally described. . . . I am interested in the physical thing, rather than the transcendent." Correspondingly, she talks about the "ungestural" gesture in her work, in which passages that might seem purposeful are incidental, and those that may appear offhanded are actually the result of an incredibly labored task. Moreover, if much of mid-twentieth-century abstract gestural painting reflects a heroic sense of action, Dickinson, by contrast, consciously embraces incremental "unheroic" marks of small, modest gestures that aggregate and accumulate to articulate energetic fields of activity, as the imbedded stippling in *Of-Also* reveals (fig. 2).

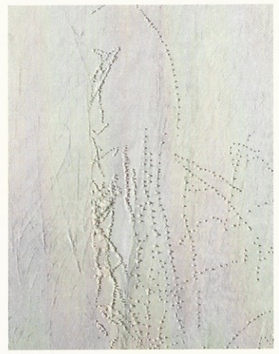

fig. 2: Detail, *Of-Also*, 2012-13, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 50 × 48"

As her theoretical orientation indicates, Dickinson's abstraction is more closely aligned with the process-oriented, conceptual and minimalist work that came after the Ab-Ex generation. Considering *Of-Also* specifically, Robert Ryman's all-white paintings, made since the late 1950s, most prominently come to mind. Ryman's emphasis on an experimental approach to the materiality of paint and his idea that the "material" and "process" are both the subject and content of his work are key precursive concepts to Dickinson's work.

However, unlike Ryman's work, Dickinson's abstractions often begin with a subtle representational anchor. Often her reference is a quotidian space or surface, such as the concrete wall outside her kitchen or the window in her studio. Window forms, in particular, recur in her work; they usefully serve a formal function as a means to frame a view or open up a space. For example, *With-This* (2011–12) (page 72) is a primarily gray-greenish painting with subtle blue-red undertones in which one tilted rectangle is etched into the surface resting on top of another, upright one. The bracketing of the space between these two conflicting shapes plays tricks on the eyes. Depending on the light in the room and the distance from which it is viewed, the painting seems to undergo capricious shifts of color, tone, line, and texture. When you get up close to the work, the surface is flooded with chaotic micro-activity, as you notice the wisps of bright yellow surrounding surface incisions and swarming black speckles circulating throughout. As you step back, faded contours recede into the background, and other areas protrude. With still longer looking, ultimately the space flattens outs into something resembling a segment of a worn-down building façade.

As *With-This* and many other works demonstrate, we as viewers learn more about Dickinson's paintings by considering the works from multiple perspectives and taking time to perceive shifts that occur within them

fig. 3: *Of-More,* raking view

(fig. 3). Such an extended and embodied process of observing recalls Rosalind Krauss's 1993 essay, "The /Cloud/," on Agnes Martin's, in which Krauss cites at length an earlier text by Kasha Linville, who initially put forth a phenomenological reading of Martin's work. Linville, per Krauss, describes the distinct experiences of looking at Martin's paintings from three different viewing positions. First, there is the "close-to" reading, in which the details of the work's surface materiality, such as the facture of the drawn lines and the stitches of canvas, is the focus. Second, is the "moving back" middle vantage, whereby "the ambiguities of illusion take over from the earlier materiality of a surface," and where "the paintings go atmospheric"; it is at this point where what the painting *feels* like, rather than what it *looks* like takes precedent. Finally, there is the "fully distant" perspective, from which the previous "atmosphere" dissolves and Martin's paintings become solid entities, "impermeable, immovable as stone."[6] As Krauss summarizes, "Linville's three distances make it clear that /atmosphere/ is an effect set within a system in which an opposite effect is also at work, and that both defines and is defined by that opposite."[7]

Dickinson's works establish a dynamic with the viewer analogous to that created by Martin's. For instance, *Of/How* (2013) (page 164) appears from afar like a solid slab of light, bluish-gray, weather-beaten concrete. As one moves closer, the solidity dissolves, a gaseous, amorphous spatial depth opens up, and previously elusive color contrasts and textural variance emerge. Then, when you are right up close, an intimate touch prevails, derived from the incessant notching and flecking that constitute distinct strata of the surface. Although Dickinson's works possess none of the linear geometries of Martin's famous grids, there is a graceful, meditative tempo conveyed in the work of both artists, and both reward patient viewing. Indeed, when Dickinson talks about making a painting, she describes wanting to create "a space that is slow."

Building a kind of "temporal" object that plays with perceptual experience is at the crux of Dickinson's paintings, particularly when considering a recent series of paintings that inhabit a nocturnal range of dark, shadowy hues. One work, titled *Press.* (2011–12) (page 44), is a dusky, grayish painting with syncopated tendrils of pinkish burgundy circulating throughout. As with the experience of entering a dark room from bright sunlight and waiting for your eyes to adjust, *Press.* requires time to decipher the barely visible shifts of color and contours. The painting thus explores limits of optical perception and how vision can progress slowly. In this regard, Dickinson's work echoes some of the phenomenological concerns of the Light and Space artists of the 1960s and 1970s—many of whom, in fact, first started off as minimalist abstract painters before using "light" as a primary medium. Many of these artists, such as James Turrell or Robert Irwin, are known for creating immersive, temporal installations that explore perception as a subject and thereby engage both optic and kinesthetic modes of comprehending our surroundings. Dickinson

is similarly interested in the physiological and psychological effects of visual and haptic perception of light and space, though she explores such concerns less directly, through painted objects, rather than through constructed environments.

Perceptual processes and the passage of time are further integrated into Dickinson's painting practice through a series of works on paper that the artist refers to as the "remainders," and which always accompany each painting. The "remainders" are frottage drawings, or graphite rubbings, of a painting's surface at various stages of its evolution. Each time the painting undergoes a dramatic transformation of texture, color, or overall feel, Dickinson makes a new "remainder," and, as testimony to her extended process of creation, for any given painting, there can be anywhere from seven to eighteen "remainders" that chart the trajectory of a painting's development.[8] The individual results generally look like some kind of sedimentary geologic formation, with an all-over, intricate web of linear surface contours. When viewed as a series, they clue us in to the key moments of major compositional reversals, when everything white became black, so to speak (fig. 4).

As topographical transcriptions of the paintings' surfaces, the "remainders" also preserve and reveal elements of the paintings that

fig. 4 [previous spread]: Installation view, the painting *Close/Close* with *remainders 1-4 and 10-12* [of complete set of 12] in the exhibition *Room By Room: Monographic Presentations From The Faulconer and Rachofsky Collections*, The Warehouse, Dallas

fig. 5: Installation view, *Jessica Dickinson: final remainders: 2011-2013*, David Petersen Gallery, Minneapolis

ultimately get obscured in the substrata of the work. Dickinson's "final remainders" (figs. 5-6), made from the finished paintings, most clearly illustrate how the black-and-white textural reading of the work yields an entirely alternative and complementary understanding of what constitutes a painting. As indexical recordings of the painting's surface, the "remainders" are both part of a given painting and discrete works of art unto themselves that represent ideas of duration, perception, and experimentation. Moreover, Dickinson's unusual assimilation of drawing into her painting practice through these graphite rubbings invokes the "body" of the artist in an indirect but legible way, communicating the physicality of the drawing action in ways that are not otherwise apparent in the paintings.

Through her vigorous experimentation with materials and process, Dickinson's work triggers responses beyond just the visual and engenders an embodied sense of viewing, akin to the "embodied thinking" of philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty and others, who put forth the idea that, given that the mind is inextricably linked to the body, cognitive and visceral processes are also inseparable and thus together play essential roles in how we perceive and make sense of the world. While *figurative* is hardly a word one would use to describe Dickinson's paintings, the figure, or the body itself, is central to our understanding of it. Her complex abstract surfaces become mercurial objects, seeming to shift in time and space right before our eyes as they delicately recalibrate the equilibrium among our optical, tactile, and cognitive abilities. In this way, her work addresses the mysterious connections of materiality to vision and perception, while simultaneously offering up a series of propositions about how "painting"—as both an object and a medium—might be considered a time-based enterprise.

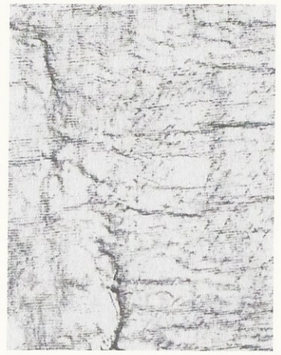

fig. 6: Detail, *remainder: Hold- [final]*, 2013

1 Clarice Lispector, in *The Foreign Legion*, quoted in Benjamin Moser, "Breathing Together," introduction to Lispector's *Agua Viva* (New York: New Directions), 2012, p. xiv.

2 Conversation with the artist , October 26, 2012.

3 Ibid.

4 Jack Whitten interviewed by Kenneth Goldsmith, in *BOMB* (Summer 1994), New York, n.p.

5 Conversation with the artist, October 26, 2012.

6 Rosalind Krauss, "The / Cloud/," in *Agnes Martin*, Barbara Haskell , ed. Exh. cat. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1992, pp. 158–9.

7 Ibid.

8 The paintings do not need to be exhibited with the remainders; however, interestingly, they accompany a painting when the work is sold, making the work "complete."