

Catalog essay by Max Presneill
Published by Kristi Engle Gallery, May 2008

Discovery –
The paintings of Mary Addison Hackett

As a general rule when writing about art I think it is hardly worthwhile attempting to describe the visual aspect, outside of general terms. As with all painting, seeing it for oneself is the only truly valuable experience of art. This being a catalog with images present, my intention here is to try to lead the reader to an understanding of the "why" not the "what." And so...

In writing about the paintings of Mary Addison Hackett there arose three major starting points which it seemed necessary to address in trying to find their locus. By sitting in her studio and essentially interviewing her, I became aware of her link to both the past and the present. Her vibrant paintings could not have existed before now but also could not exist without the past of Modernist history. Although this is of course true of most art, it is particularly relevant here, as there are several strands of thought within her work which establish her practice as a 21st century retake on some fundamental ideas of the 19th and 20th centuries and which I have seen reappearing recently in the work of younger artists: Evolution, Existentialism and the Flaneur.

Hackett's paintings are evolutionary in the sense that each mark, each reactive gestural movement is made in a non-prescribed way and either succeeds or fails according to its suitability in context with the larger organism of the picture plane and so exists within a state of perpetual reconfiguration wherein its fitness to survive is in constant flux. This subjects it to constant changes which may render it obsolete, placing the importance of 'finishing' a painting into doubt. It is an ongoing process of change and each painting cannot truly be said to be finished. Just finished for now, all might soon change. This doubt and uncertainty are the bedrock of the paintings and should not be dismissed. They are central to the work, the very basis of the endeavor, the reason to continue. It is the search itself that contains meaning, rather than what is sought. From the very beginnings of humanity's quest to know this has been a driving principle. The first known work of fiction was the *Epic of Gilgamesh* – a Mesopotamian tale of the search for immortality, for meaning from Chaos. Things have not changed as much as we sometimes think...

In a self-reflexive game of choice, responsibility lies entirely with the artist and reflects upon the existential position of realization that meaning lies not in the world but in the choices made. Like Camus's doctor in *The Plague*, it is the acceptance of the responsibility to act that surmounts the question of meaning. This act contains its own potential for failure and futility. It is an attempt worth making. It is the attempt to reconcile the minute-by-minute choices, to fulfill a hidden promise and to transcend the sum of its parts – without reference to spirituality but to 'fact-ness' – that grounds these paintings.

Reconfiguration upon reconfiguration, self-generating with no end point until no choices are left (for the time being, of course, but one must let go at some point), her paintings reflect an intent and that intent is of discovery itself. The attempt at receivership of information, with its own awareness of the possibility for failure. A failure to translate this knowledge via the painting and the ironic knowledge of its own futility when not allowed the generation of its own meaning to be the meaning, regardless of truth. Hope triumphs.

This realization of self, via the mechanics of painting places, meaning at the feet of the participant in life and by inference at ours. Interpretation becomes active rather than passive and holds us, the viewers, to account for our investment in engagement – with our own set of paradigms, knowledge of art history, our own search for meaning.

Essentially abstract, of the gestural mark-making form, they begin with a deliberately vague set of ideas on which to hang the approach, as a starting point only, then develops as associative linkage via its own development. Minimally a 'landscape' or something/anything of interest this soon becomes the half-remembered location for this new beginning.

Hackett becomes the Baudelairian Flaneur of this landscape – the 'disinterested' stroll through the associative mind with no destination in mind, but creating that landscape as she travels, an unrestricted meander through directions and options and the history of painting. Hackett is simultaneously the Dandy - of joyous color, dedicated to the lusty attention to the details of her surroundings, to the vital relationship between things, for the odd moment and the unnoticed around her. Starting with this generalized framework to build the painting upon, be it an idea of landscape or another structure which has gained her attention the painting mutates as it increasingly moves in its own directions. As a basis to begin the work it soon disappears under the weight of other thoughts, directions and associations to become an essentially abstract painting about painting. These vivacious works address the meaning of the act itself.

Hackett's canvases are a veritable painter's toolbox, as much drawing as painting, a regeneration of the history, languages and possibilities of painting. New 'words' slotted into a sentence, fitting so well and appropriate that one doesn't notice they are invented, and still knows what she meant. They are the vocabulary of now, the urban visual languages we share but with new utterance, visual slang - hot pinks and contemporary advertising, iPod colors. They are aesthetic but in an unforced and intuitive way, the result of imbibing the world around her rather than a slow and deliberate rationalization of a decision. Lunging between flat and spatial, challenging their own paradigms and positions (literally) to conceptually force themselves into new, often uncomfortable spaces, continuing the barrage of questions of oneself – both artist and audience – while leaving behind answers which are ambiguous, knowingly elusive and provisional. If answers at all, they snake through a labyrinth while dressed in camouflage - an uncertainty principle of art.

To use text in the way that might best reflect the working process of Hackett's paintings: Mash-up, Fiona Rae, landscapes real and imagined, Sci-fi, Technology, Bladerunner, Dorian Gray, The Plague, ad infinitum.....

See what I mean?

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2008