

TOM MARTINELLI by Owen Drolet  
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Abstract painting has always been divided into two types of practitioners; those who engage in a materialist declaration and those who construct a language of non-mimetic symbols. Very few have consciously attempted both. Not surprisingly, both methods try to claim priority over the other; the former by suggesting an empirical factuality, that is in turn equated with honesty; the latter by applauding man's singular ability to form meaning via a coded system. The primal (though at least truthful and unjaded) scream vs. the complexities of a self-conscious civilization. Of course one can claim that paint, as material (usually in the form of gesture), has itself become a symbol that can be manipulated like any other, but this strategy always suffers an existential hangover that defeats its radical claim to deconstruction. As a symbol, pigment always suggests an iconography of truth.

That all forms of representation come into being via the material world makes this division quite paradoxical. It also suggests that the Abstract Expressionists were onto something more important than merely parading their libido in a materialist frenzy. They were, after all, the first to collide these opposing paradigms and ultimately send painting on a non-symbolic course that would not be detoured until the 1980's. This path was followed because the artists of importance among the next generations looked to Pollock and Newman, rather than say, Gottlieb, for inspiration. Barnett Newman's statement "I don't depict space, I declare it!" sounds much like Stella's "What you see, is what you see" remark. Both demand an immediacy that destroys the symbolic. But it is only late Ab-Ex that makes the full leap into the purely material. In its formative stages the movement did much to bridge the gap between idealist (symbolic) geometric abstraction, pictographic Surrealism and its automatist cousin. The brilliance of this period (early to late '40's) in Ab-Ex history is that it concentrated not only on creating a language, but on examining that language's epistemology as well. It also engaged in a wonderful paradox; use paint as raw, objective material in order to create an honest expression of things interior, a subtle strategy that shows an understanding of paint's fundamental nature and suggests that the simple-minded materiality of its predecessors was more than a little misguided.

Recently, Peter Halley, while discussing painting in the 1980's, noticed a common, formal thread, in what he considered the important work of that decade. He characterized it as an attempt to synthesize "...the sense of materiality inherited from Abstract Expressionism with an interest in idealist representation (painting as existing in the idealist world of the image) inherited from Pop." Which he sees on a broader level as an attempt "...to reconcile the separation of materialist and idealist experience that remains an important pre-condition to our intellectual culture in general." Halley's observation seems accurate enough, and the work he is describing did much to free painting from becoming a mere curiosity with little relevance to the culture at large. But the painting of the '80's, particularly the abstract painting, was just a beginning of the process Halley has outlined. It is important to note that Halley locates the idealist tradition only within a figurative movement (Pop), and that he sees Ab-Ex strictly on the materialist side of the coin. The synthesis that the Abstract Expressionists briefly achieved cannot be overlooked, (it is the predecessor of '80's painting concerns) primarily because it did so in an abstract environment. Idealism in our culture, from the Greeks to now, has always been located in the abstract, particularly the geometric, which

symbolizes the ultimate bridge between a knowable reality and the life of the mind. A square can never be just a container. That painters of the '80's brought the symbolic back into the discourse of painting is terribly important, but the painter of today must now walk a fine line. The great danger of an iconic abstraction is that it too easily becomes a visually illustrated philosophy, but to retreat to a purely materialist process is to fall back on an outdated metaphysic. There is still clearly a need to bridge materialist and idealist experience, though it need no longer be done from an iconcentric perspective, rather painting must recover its traditional epistemological character - something necessarily lost in the '80's - in order to better integrate symbolic material.

Tom Martinelli is in many ways an essentially American painter. Paint as material becomes a paramount concern, while composition is done away with in favor of a predetermined process whose success or failure is not known until the completion of the work. It is work, that as Newman said, 'declares space.' What differentiates Martinelli's work from that of his predecessors is the nature of its offering. American painting is supposed to be "gotten" relatively quickly; the process deciphered, the surface incident self explanatory, all in all it is work that guarantees you'll be home by eight. For all of its directness in terms of composition and process, Martinelli's paintings are never a one-line declaration; they quickly get your attention, but then they hold it. Rather than conceive of visual language as necessarily quick, or bypass it all together in favor of a verbal model, this work suggests that a direct expository statement can also be complex, and that language can be a sensual apparatus as well as a normative force.

Others have tried to use the framework of reductive painting and minimalism generally in order to create a more generous statement while retaining the clarity gained from such simplicity. Brice Marden's mono-chromes are such an example but they, like many other attempts, fall into the same trap. Marden's strategy was to humanize minimalism, to bring back the hand, if somewhat disguised. Rather than suggest the possibility of a clear but sensual expression, they simply replace the cool sexuality of the steel box, with the warm sexuality of blurry beeswax. Even when Marden hints at the process of these paintings, it is a mere footnote, not designed to clue you in, but rather to heighten the sense of mystery as to its creation. Sexuality always requires mystery, sensuality need only be honest.

In Martinelli's paintings every aspect of the process is decipherable; a white ground covered with "black" dots that are in fact built by layers of primary and secondary colors. As the stencil used to create each layer shifts slightly with each application, pure color is left exposed at the perimeter of the dots. As straight forward a process as this is, it creates a complex visual situation in which micro and macro relations within each painting are put into a state of continual flux. The optical effects, which at times create an entirely ambiguous space, are the result of both the regularity of the dots, and the irregularity of the colors that seep from them. This may also have something to do with the very odd fact that Martinelli's work appears more sensuous from a distance than close-up. Ten paces back we see a rich, perhaps thick, white ground, and dots that hint at a photo-mechanical process. Directly in front of the piece we encounter a dry, flat ground and dots layered in a waxy emulsion of base materiality. The impressions one gets are diametrically opposed, as if figure and ground (at least in terms of paint quality) were constantly reversing themselves.

The duality inherent in each cause and effect within Martinelli's paintings is key to understanding their content. Every hint at an ideal space is checked by some phenomenological situation it can't contain, while every material assertion made must ultimately play by the rules of a regulated environment. The geometric regularity of the dots suggests an ideal representation, yet the dots are built in layers; there is no illusion, they are objects in the world, like any other. That the figure and ground are divided into black and white further suggests ideal polarities, but the white ground in Martinelli's work is always dirty (a result of the painting process) and the black is never really black, but merely a composite; soon we realize the polarities exist only in our mind. This work is disconcerting because it enters an age old debate without taking sides. It collapses assumptions about paradigmatic attitudes, but does not take this as its fundamental role. It is engaging in a way singular to American painting, yet it remains disinterested. Ideal representations (in this case abstract, not media) are challenged as coming from a sometimes sloppy, material world, in a Bergsonian flux that denies their claim to static perfection. Meanwhile, material creates illusions suggesting elusiveness rather than empirical factuality and honesty. The dots and their formation constitute an icon, not depicted, simply existing, but as all things exist, in motion. We are reminded that form does mean and that a visual experience can also be an intellectual one. What Martinelli presents to us is a mirror of our day to day processes of cognition, epistemological objects that serve as sensual, visual, expressions of the life of the mind.

Owen Drolet is an artist and critic based in New York. He contributes regularly to Flash Art.