

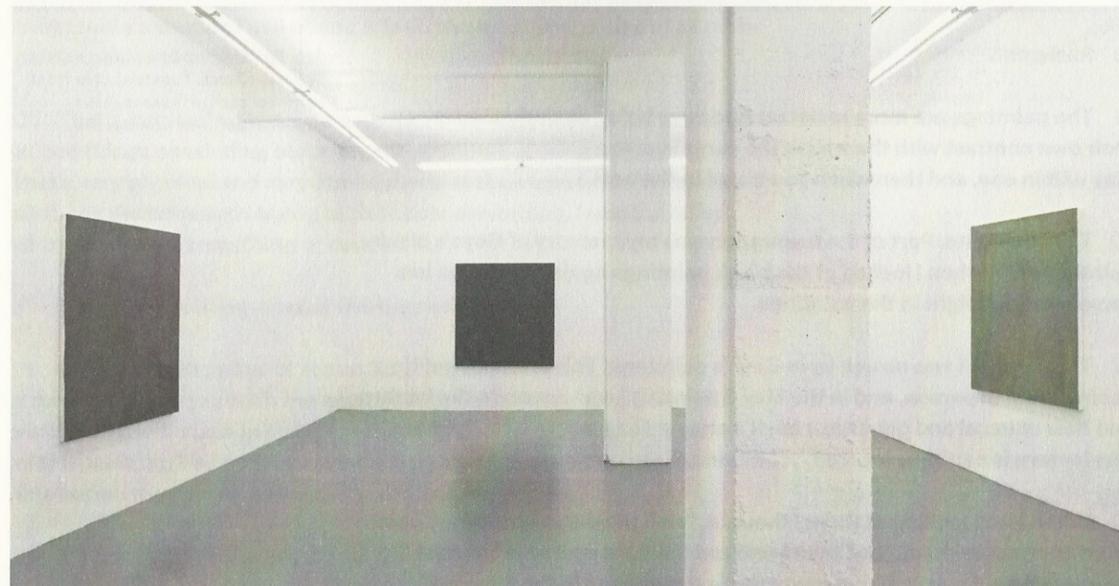
JESSICA DICKINSON AND
PATRICIA TREIB IN CONVERSATION
IN MADRID NOVEMBER 2012

PT I want to talk about this idea of your paintings for this exhibition (fig. 1) being “under” shadow, and the idea of shadow and darkness being an enhancement to perception, rather than taking away the ability to perceive. Similar to a period of dusk, where just before it turns dark, colors become more intense—you can see more just before it slips away. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that our eyes become adjusted to this new range. It takes away the high contrast, which can reflect sight and repel the eye. When you take away those contrasts you are almost seeing more, in this limited range.

JD Yes, that was the idea because there is a fourth painting—the “light” painting (Hold-; page 100) that isn’t included in the exhibition—so that light would not be there to distract. You have to deal with this darker range and this idea of seeing where you normally don’t see, or look. I feel this space itself is very bright ...

PT In a way, the gallery walls are providing the extreme contrast—and is perhaps what you meant by the work being more—

fig. 1: Exhibition view, *Under*,
Maisterravalbuena, Madrid,
Spain. Left to right: *Press.*,
Under, *With-This*.



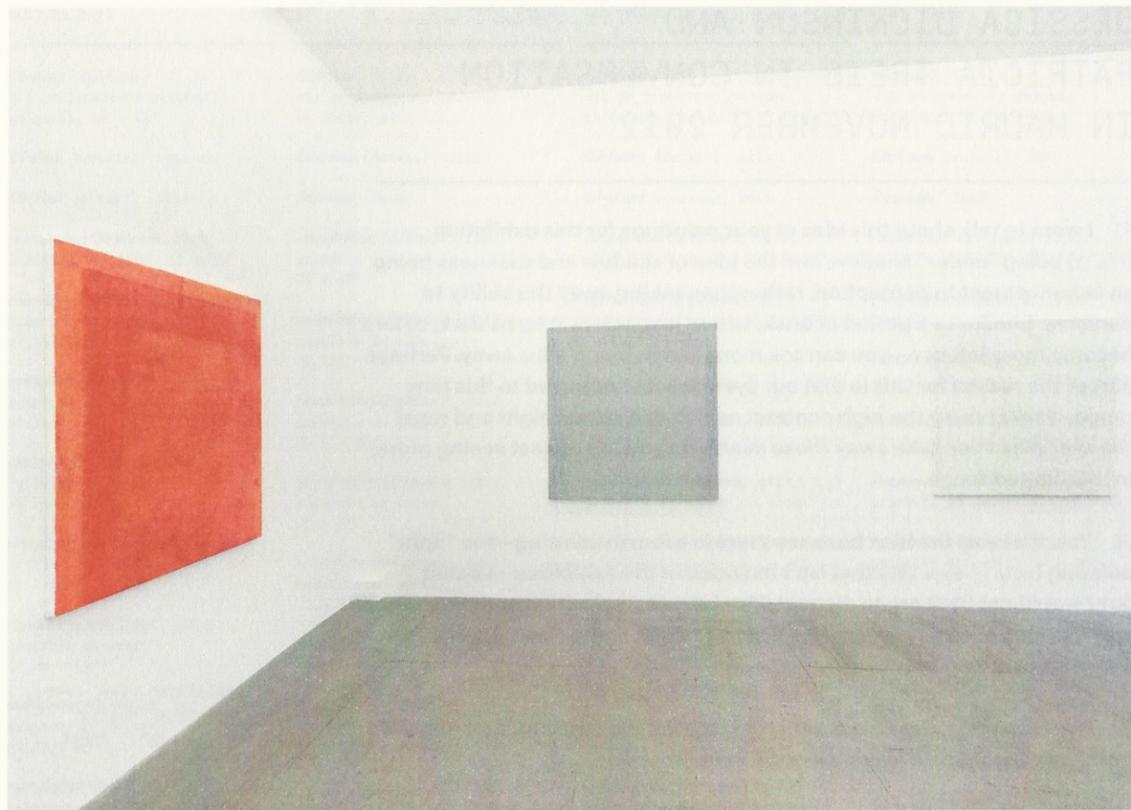


fig. 2: Exhibition view, *Before/Beside*, James Fuentes, New York. Left to right: *Always-Also*, *Close/Close*, *Before/Beside*.

JD **Resistant.**

PT **The paintings are more resistant because, being so dark, they create their own contrast with the wall in the context of the gallery. You have to stay within one, and then when you travel to the next ...**

JD **They calibrate. Part of the inspiration was my memory of Goya's black paintings. But when I looked at the black paintings again, he always has some source of light in the paintings.**

PT **This is what I was struck by in Goya's paintings. This was my first time seeing them in person, and in the May 3 painting I was drawn to the lantern and how unusual and gigantic it is—it's almost like a minimalist light box. The lantern is centrally located, yet hidden.**

JD **When I was looking at them I thought, "well maybe my paintings need more contrast in them," but then I realized the light source is the missing painting. Also, I was thinking about the last paintings in the Fuentes**

show in 2011 (fig. 2), and imagining that a shadow fell over them, that these are the next state, what happens next. In that show there were bright paintings, a bright blue painting, an orange one. If they emit light, would it cast a shadow? That's the other thing I was thinking about: that these paintings in Madrid are the cast shadow. It's all very obtuse, but it's a way of thinking about the paintings and making a poetic construct to develop a body of work.

PT **Do you see the paintings as extending beyond any one physical surface?**

JD **I would say in the case of the *remainders* and *traces* (fig. 3), the painting does extend over multiple surfaces through the different drawing indexes made during the process.**

In terms of the ideas behind these paintings, I felt the paintings in the previous show were finished, but when I was thinking of what I was going to make next, I wanted to keep painting them. The desire wasn't to keep working on those actual paintings, but somehow to extend their subject, their forms, and what they were for me. Each of the subsequent paintings started with an action that came at the end of the previous painting. For instance, the painting *With/This* from this show followed *Before/Beside* (fig. 4) from the previous show.

PT **When I first saw *With-This* (page 72) yesterday, I found it surprisingly dimensional. These marks, the really carved in marks—I can see that they have physical dimension when I get up close, but from a distance they create a trompe l'oeil effect. It feels the most image-like of all of the paintings I've ever seen of yours.**

JD **That's interesting because with that title, *With-This*, I was thinking of two things coexisting, stuck together, so part of it was this thing that's very physical and very atmospheric at the same time. There are all these demarcations trying to delineate something. I was thinking of trying to hold something or capture it.**

PT **To hold something, almost like brackets?**

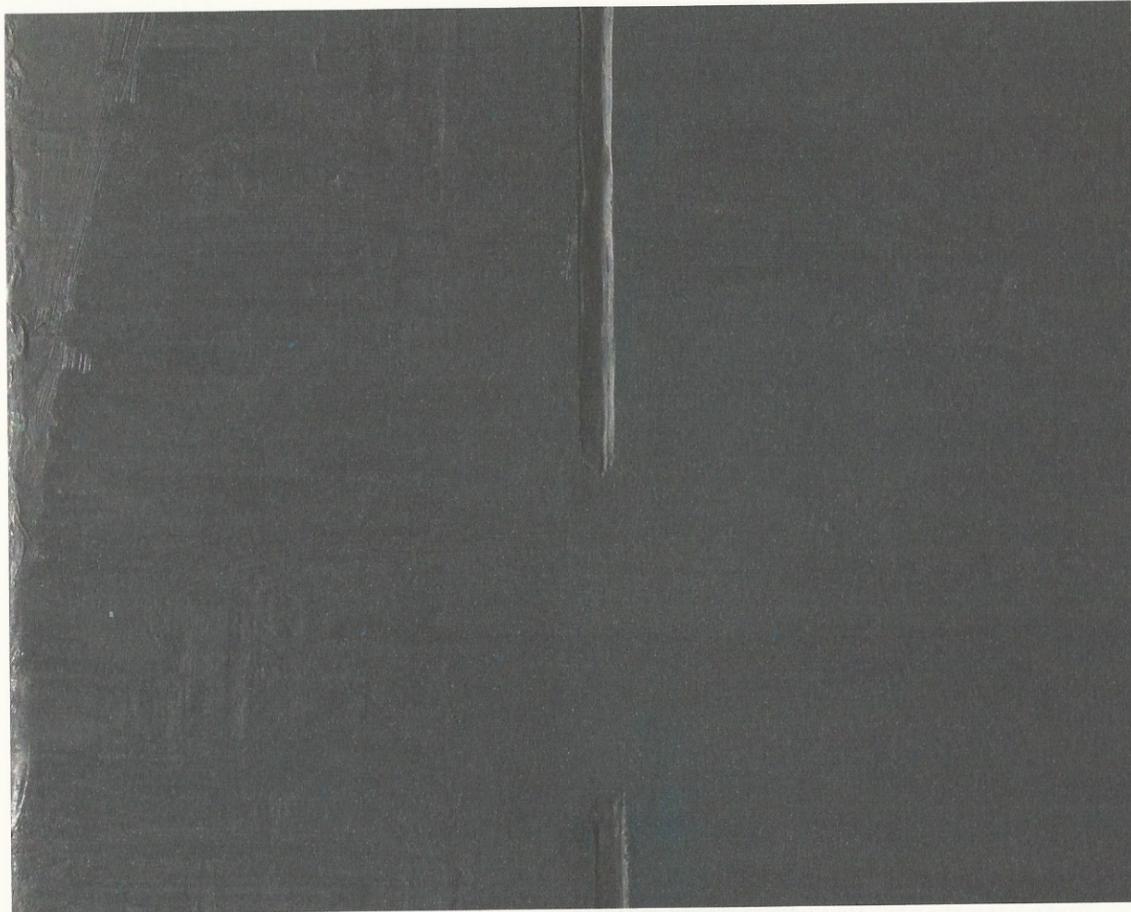
JD **Or locating the edge of something that came before. There is a form that is underneath the whole thing, almost eradicated but still visible on the surface in some areas, and present in the *remainders* of the painting. The demarcations are trying to feel out the edge of this buried thought or lost activity, or trace its progression.**

PT **It's marking what is not there.**



fig. 3: *trace [Under 3]*, 2012, wax oil pastel on paper, 40.125 x 36"

fig. 4: *Before/Beside*, 2010-2011, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 50.125 x 48.125"



JD What is not visibly there. And you can see, there are other places where I was trying to mark it with these other cuts and scratches. Underneath this painting there are concentric rings, some you can see coming through. At one point that was over the entire surface, I mean, it still is, I just have covered over it. The scratching was in a way trying to access them.

PT It's your way to get to the history that you had established?

JD Or some sort of activity. I had sanded it first to try to access the previous layer. Then I lightly carved these thin lines where the random sanding marks were to inscribe them deeper, and this became a repetitive procedure similar to painting the rings, to somehow access it. They also look kind of accidental.

fig 5: Detail, *Under*, 2011-12, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 53 x 51"

PT It looks as though it could have been a build up from multiple people; it could be aged painted wood, or something that has been around for hundreds of years.

JD Yes, exactly. I was thinking about the stained cement in our backyard, where things were and then they are moved again. Marks that accrue slowly and quietly.

PT And the color is really opening up the more that we stand here, it's very green and purple, moving between the two.

JD Again, these two things coexisting, like something that was hard as a rock, but then had this green atmospheric purpose, fresh. And with this one I did think a lot about the passage of time, like you mentioned, at dusk or dawn, when things are just starting to appear or lose their appearance, so color is either fading or coming in.

PT In what you wrote about *Press*. (page 44), I was interested in the idea that something is pressing from the inside out, rather than it being a surface with various modes of application to it. It's as if nothing is being applied, that it's all coming from the inside forward. What you were saying about stone, that it's solid all the way through, with those various histories of how it was formed, and not façade. Even though the painting is created through layers and it is still appearance and façade, it has a feeling of having preexisted on the inside and the face is just wearing away to reveal more.

JD I like that description. I knew I wanted there to be some appearance at the end, to not fully appear, but allude to something perhaps underneath or behind or within. In my previous paintings, there usually is optical color or light that comes through. With these paintings, I realized I needed them to operate at a more tactile and less optical level.

For this exhibition, I reread Clarice Lispector's *Passion According to G.H.*, and there is a section where she's talking about not letting herself have hope, she's trying to really face a certain material reality. I think that word hope maybe sounds kind of hokey, but I think what she means is that you're not thinking about the future. You're not projecting, looking for that moment of opening, you're just being in material reality. And so I think with this painting—the darkest painting, titled *Under* (page 16)—I thought about it as a night painting or trying to see in the dark, feeling your way. There's a closed or thick air, or a shallow space. I think if you're not always looking into the future you start to see more depth in the space that you're in. And I think that's an element of what I like to do.



fig. 6: Shadow in the painting *St. Francis in Ecstasy* by Giovanni Bellini, c.1480, Frick Collection, New York. Photo of the interactive monitor of painting at the Frick Collection by Jessica Dickinson.

PT There was something slightly dark about that at first, to understand a space without hope, the association would just go towards hopelessness, so it's a little counterintuitive, but if one is projecting into the future, you are destroying the pleasures of the moment or your ability to pay attention to your experience of the world.

JD I think, yes, it's material, physical, connecting touch with the visual. Some people say this painting *Under* is the least pictorial—maybe because the other ones have a hazy atmosphere and this has more intense cuts in the surface.

PT Although, I could make a case for this one being, if not pictorial, slightly more spatial, in the way that this circular form suggests something being cropped off, like it could be a curtain. And the far left could be a shaft of light. Also I think the heavy indented square shape is like a ledge or something to look through.

JD For me those indentations delineate a decision, a very forceful way to etch out a place to enter even though it is dark.

PT They are quite severe cuts, almost like branding (fig. 5). They really look like welded steel.

JD *Under* is the most physical of the three paintings, even though each painting went through a similar amount of events, the residue at the end is the most buried in terms of the materiality in this painting.

PT When did you know that you were not going to include the light painting?

JD From the beginning, that was the whole idea. I wanted to really let this exhibition exist in a certain dark, slow space. I was also thinking about the shadow in the Bellini painting of St. Francis at the Frick (fig. 6). In that painting, there's this intense radiant light—such an aliveness. The giant rock is really heavy, but there is so much growing around it and from it. And hidden in the painting is this really interesting shadow that connects St. Francis to the entrance of the cave—the dark hole in the painting. He paints this shadow with such attention it starts to get really abstract.

After spending some time looking at this painting, it feels like this illuminating moment can't happen without the cave that he lives in, what he walked out of. If you think of all the weird light in that painting, it's how you see things when you walk out of a cave.

PT Almost like sensory deprivation—you are experiencing the world anew.

JD That's part of the philosophical space of being alone and contemplating, and then you walk out and everything looks different, because you've been in a space with reduced stimulation. And there are, in Bellini's painting, behind the rock, other points of contrast in the painting, it's not the only dark thing. The cave entrance and the shadow are very abstract flat elements of the painting—with un-namable forms compared to the rest of the painting. I think that was part of my thinking, that this show is the shadow of my work as a broader project, an anchor, a weight.

PT And this parable of moving from the darkness to this other space?

JD Not so much, I don't think of darkness as a bad place, it's more of a place that's overlooked.

PT Because in a way this work is not about moving into the light. It's about moving through the darkness.

JD I would say that more specifically my work is about examining passages of time when how we see things change, and the notion of light plays a role in that passage of time. For this exhibition I wanted to focus on the less luminous, because it's dark half the time that we're alive. I've been a lifelong insomniac and the last year-and-a-half I've been up at night with Nora having to function in the dark, and you don't turn the lights on and wake the baby. I've had a lot of time to sit in the dark and look, and think in that space. I don't necessarily think that dark is bad, but rather it is under, to the side of, behind—and within—everyday life.

PT Can you talk more about those peripheral spaces?

JD I think for me there are ideas of the peripheral, or minor, in an overall sense in regards to painting, then specific ideas in terms of subject and process in my work.

I am interested in how we develop our thoughts and understanding about an emotion, a situation, an event in our lives, or the perimeters of our existence—and how thoughts develop over time and through happenstance and not always in the time and place we set aside for them. Whereas painting is a space set aside for looking, thinking, and feeling, and as a discursive apparatus. Painting, especially the "site" of abstract painting, can create a parameter of the major, whereas the corner in the room, the light moving on the ceiling, the concrete wall outside, is off to the side but there everyday, it is minor. Surfaces, shifts of light, a window that is transparent then opaque, a stain on the wall outside become spaces of thought and contemplation, not because I decide to look at them, but I happen to look up and they

are holding me a moment and illuminating a thought or sensation, expanding from something minor into something major and meaningful.

PT In a way, the peripheral is more important, or can be in terms of your lived experience, rather than declaring: "here is the main event, this is when the important thoughts happen."

JD Yes. I think of a place or surface that you may be around repeatedly through daily actions. For me, the concrete wall outside my old kitchen window, that I looked at while making coffee—that is a space often used in the paintings. It's not necessary for the viewer to know exactly these sources in the painting, or that that is what the painting is "about," but I've found that the more specific I am to my own daily experience, the more open the work is for others. There's also the window in my studio, that's the space in one of these paintings. It could be the same window that's seen from a distance, approached, then up close in the same painting—seen from different points of view, but it becomes very abstract. It holds thought.

PT It's as if these surfaces that are witness to your daily rituals are imbued with an accumulation of time that is not just physical, but cognitive. In this way, the external appearance of the wall itself seems to be at odds with what has accumulated in your memory.

JD Right, whatever cognitive space I'm in affects how the thing is seen. But then, that's when light changes what it looks like anyway. I also think a lot about the periphery in marking and making, how pressure can make a mark, coming from our daily actions through time. This is directly part of making the large works on paper (fig. 7), and through different variables with the paintings. Pressure can be exerted by a hand repeatedly wiping a counter or feet walking down the street. I'm less interested in the major action of painting, and more in something that develops almost invisibly through time, and couldn't have been thought of and acted upon in one single gesture.

PT So there is no one singular moment of appearance. Do you use photographs for source material?

JD I do photograph things in my surroundings to look at as notes, and I'll photograph certain changes. These operate more as a way to remind me of what I was thinking/feeling while something caught my attention, or for instance the changes of light on the concrete wall altered what I was thinking at different times. (fig. 8)

Like the painting *With-This*—it seems really gray, but another time you're there and it's green, but it's the same surface. I think that way

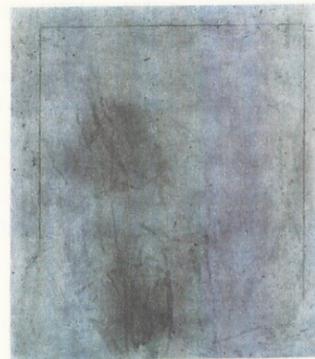


fig. 7: *Only-It*, 2012, graphite and pastel on paper, with holes, 48.5 x 42.25"

fig. 8 [page 274-275]: Wall of photos taken by Dickinson in her studio.

of thinking about something you know or understand, or that you think you know or understand, shifts. That's a locus in the work, trying to materialize that passage of time. There can be a specific thing that has a specific resonance, but it always changes with multiple points of view and multiple ways of being understood.

With the paintings, I really try to create this operation where it shifts with how you look; depending with how you look at it, how much time you spend with the physical painting, the duration unfolds. That's why the duration of me making the painting matters, why it has to take so long for me to make it. For it's not only creating the surface, it goes through all these different events, erasures, and activity for me to understand something that began as a question, as a challenge. It's a materialization of the feeling of thinking, of "seeing." In the making of the painting I am slowly changing what I understand.



...to you? Do
that I'm perceiving
Our seen through
Oh, now I have
ness of life.
through straight
I didn't notice
of grace. Now I
something else,
it just unrolling
- it's something
I more graceful,
all that does not
at vigor. I've put
that unexpectedly
snuffing out the
air that is at
lastly, I've
of chance and
a contradiction
try intimate. I
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PRES
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