

SLOW PAINTING

The deliberate pace at which a painting demands to be viewed is key to its contemporary relevance.

by Stephen Westfall

Jessica Dickinson:
Are: For, 2016–17,
oil on limestone
polymer on panel,
56¼ by 52¼ inches.
Courtesy James
Fuentes, New York.

THE LARGE PAINTINGS Suzan Frecon recently exhibited at David Zwirner Gallery in New York revealed themselves slowly. The works were illuminated primarily by the gallery's skylights, and the quality of light changed with the weather and time of day. To experience the color contrasts between Frecon's seemingly simple shapes and the fields of color upon which they rested or floated required patience, and even a willingness to return at different times. It seemed nearly sacrilegious to check one's cellphone under the circumstances, though visitors couldn't really be prevented from doing so. The exhibition demanded a certain kind of attentiveness, one that could be at odds with modes of behavior common in contemporary life. To be fully present with Frecon's paintings, one had to adjust one's sense of being in time. Upon making such an adjustment, visitors were rewarded by the revelation of a layer of meaning that subtends the merely retinal: the fullness of Frecon's paintings could be said to emerge from their illumination rather than to be laid bare by it, and that sense of emergence is something that must be felt in time.

The title of poet and critic John Yau's September 24 review of Frecon's exhibition in the online publication *Hyperallergic*, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings,"¹ got me thinking that Slow Painting was an actual stance, an intention and practice shared by other contemporary painters who, without constituting a movement, collectively insist on a phenomenological experience over a connotative one. Since so much contemporary discussion of painting is understandably focused on signification (urgent narratives of identity being an obvious example), the phenomenological aspects of painting by hand are in need of renewed focus. Without resorting to nostalgia, it is necessary to understand how and why a single body working patiently in the studio might achieve moving results that have a distinctly contemporary relevance.

The slowness of painting—both in its creation and in its apprehension by viewers—is routinely overlooked because it is so often taken for granted. Compared to digital media, painting is always slow. When painters seek to speed up the medium—offering quickly rendered "fast takes"—they are often doing so to self-reflexively critique art's commodification. In Richard Prince's work, for example, this fast take can be read as a deliberate strategy to reveal the problematic nature of viewing painting under the deadening realities of contemporary capitalism—a realization that supposedly prompts further thought. But it feels deflationary with respect to the multiple levels of the experience of time that painting may address.

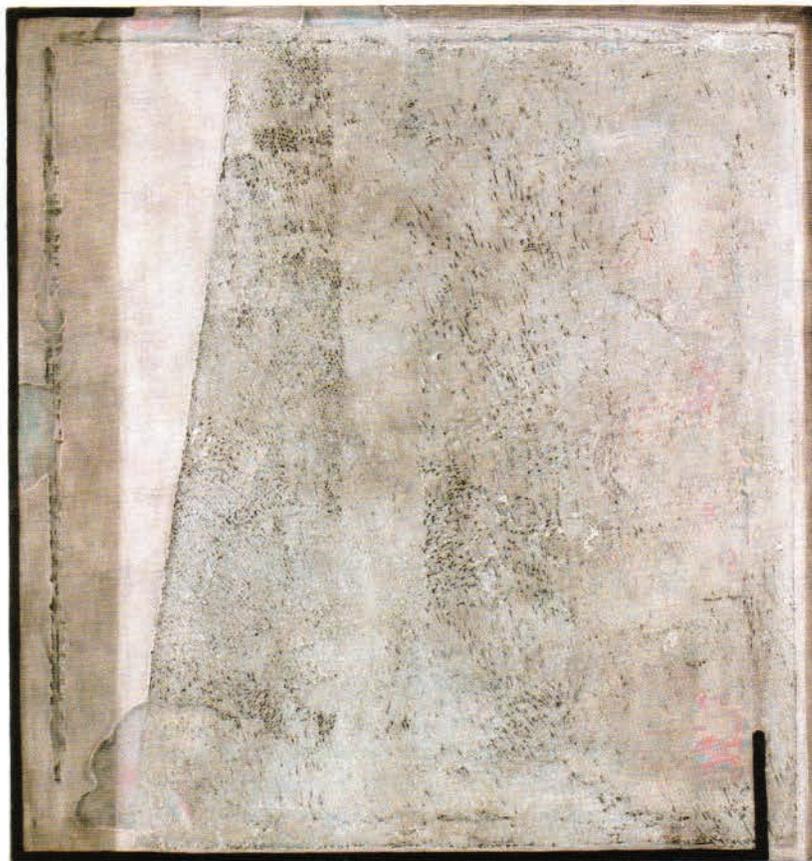
There are notable painters who can knock out a profoundly elegant painting in a day. I'm thinking especially of wet-into-wet figure painters such as Alex Katz, Luc Tuymans, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, with their careful preparation and constant skill-building subsumed into a concentrated daily performance of painting that registers as an autographic style. And it would be misleading to regard Slow Painting as antithetical to the gestural Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, or Joan Mitchell, all of whom could take months to complete a canvas, mixing bouts of swift maneuvers with hours to weeks of simply looking.

The Slow Painter openly courts time as a partner in the process of distributing paint on a surface and as an arbiter of style. For the purposes of this essay, I'd like to focus on six artists: Frecon, Jessica Dickinson, John Zurier, McArthur Binion, Vija Celmins, and Catherine Murphy. While each of these artists works with different material densities of paint (Zurier's paintings are nearly evanescent) and takes up different positions in the spectrum between abstraction and representation, all are

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Dickinson: *Knows*, 2013–15, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56¼ by 53¾ inches. Courtesy James Fuentes.

preoccupied with setting the stage for time unfolding slowly in the viewer's perception. Their work takes time to make and the time it takes conditions how we view it.

Such an equation may not be as self-evident as it first seems. A work executed quickly may reveal itself slowly in terms of understanding the painter's preparation and training before the strike, the way we appreciate the training of an athlete's or dancer's movements. But within the first take the Slow Painting imbeds a premonition of something potentially enormous held in reserve that can only be revealed slowly. I believe it has something to do with a willingness, perhaps even a desire, to lose oneself in process beyond the point where an autographic mark remains legible. This may require either building up or paring down actual material density: both can be self-effacing forms of labor.

SLOW PAINTING IS NOT anti-gestural, but Slow Painters for the most part avoid flourishes, emulating a relatively anonymous sense of touch that seeks transparency to material and process. Thus, Jessica Dickinson, the youngest and perhaps the most physically forward painter among these artists (if we understand "physical" to denote mass) begins her paintings by building a spackled (limestone polymer) surface on

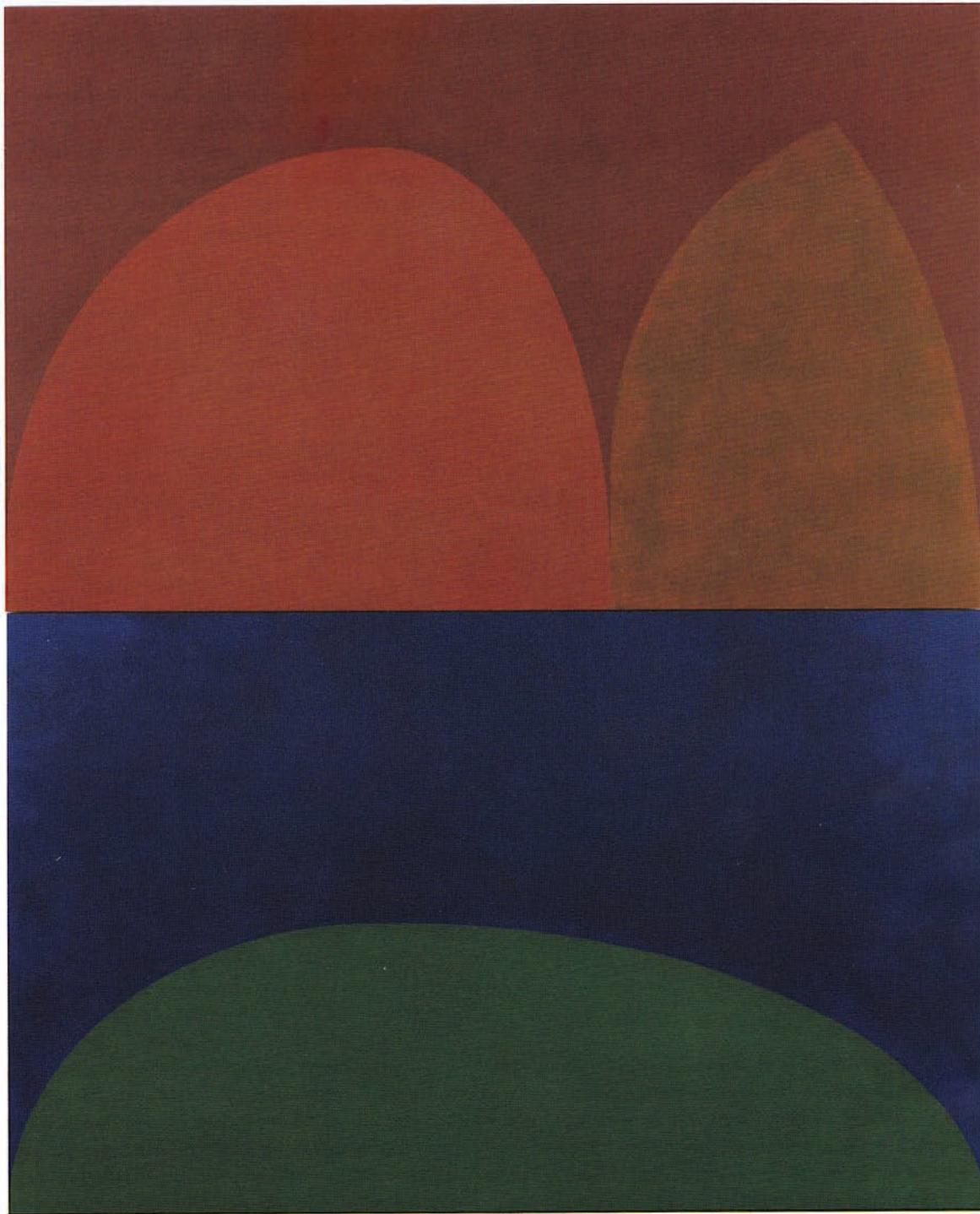
panel into the density of a wall, recalling painting's atavistic origins. Her colors are layered into her surfaces in near monochromes tinted by the surface material: fluctuating shades of grayish blue, algae green, carmine, a yellowing white. As she is working her surface she will gouge small pockets here and there and score it like a drypoint etching. These marks don't constellate nor do they appear to represent an anxious emotion—but neither are they disinterested. They are there partly as markers of time expressed in the layers of material.

In her essay on Dickinson, "Up Close / Moving Back," curator Debra Singer cites the artist's viewing the New Testament frescoes by Cimabue at the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi as a touchstone. Cimabue's frescoes have been altered by oxidation that has reversed the original effects of light and dark, turning the paintings into near negatives of themselves; the devastation of the 1997 earthquake has cracked off whole sections of his images. Singer writes:

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 actually embody and project a tactile sense of time.²

Inspired by the Assisi frescoes, Dickinson wants her paintings to be "made with both intention and the accident of time."³ More recent antecedents to her painting can be found in the aggressive physicality of Lucio Fontana's sliced and punctured canvases, but in its density her work is closer to Alberto Burri's large "Crack" paintings that monumentalize the effects of oil painting's craquelure into monochrome (white, black, or gold) invocations of sun-dried earth. Closer to home we might recall some of Jay DeFeo's bulkier paintings, particularly *The Rose* (1958–66), which was famously rediscovered walled up like Poe's black cat for twenty years at the San Francisco Art Institute and is now in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The role of time in the years it took DeFeo to paint *The Rose* is self-evident in its patched and faceted surface, but it has also become part of the lore surrounding the painting's reemergence into the world as a veritable time capsule. It takes time to reveal time.

Suzan Frecon also builds up her paintings slowly, from drawings and watercolors to small graph compositions for images she's particularly interested in expanding into large paintings. Since she introduced an arcing shape into her pictorial vocabulary in the late 1990s, her paintings have shifted from earlier layered monochromes to compositions featuring arched and elliptical planar shapes that seem to drift, rest, and hover inside the larger shape of the painting's carefully calibrated rectangular format. Each shape is of a single hue of remarkable depth and inner variation, partly due to the pigment being suspended in rich concentrations of oil mediums that can vary from glossy to matte. She can occasionally



Suzan Frecon: *book of paint, version 3*, 2017, oil on linen, two panels, 108 by 87 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches overall. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

work on the painting vertically, but much of the time she has to lay the painting flat, un-keying the stretchers and letting the painting dry for days and sometimes weeks, then re-keying the linen so the surface is taut. Many of her larger paintings are diptychs, and when a color crosses from one side to another it maintains an exquisite material consistency that isn't driven by a signature mark, but instead by what Yau, in his *Hyperallergic* article, called a kind of anonymity, where the artist disappears into the form and process of art-making. Frecon identifies with the "slowness" of oil painting, at least with respect to her own processes.⁴

Some of her recent diptychs may have only two shapes, an ellipsoid and a rectangular field and, therefore, two colors.

Others have as many as five, with the ground also functioning as shape. In *book of paint, version 3* (2017), one orange curved arch and one peaked yellow ochre arch rest on the bottom horizontal of the top panel embraced by a red ochre ground. In the lower panel a green half ellipsoid sets on, or rises from, the bottom horizontal surrounded by a deep ultramarine field. The forms are collectively reminiscent of domes, gallerias, mountains, rising suns, and bodies of water, but Frecon, while allowing that all art comes from nature, also insists that her forms aren't meant to conjure landscape. She has said that, like the anonymously created Tantric art she admires, "They are paintings you experience, there is no story."⁵



John Zurier: *Hvast*, 2017, glue-size tempera and oil on linen, 27½ by 19½ inches. Courtesy Peter Blum, New York.

John Zurier, like Dickinson and Frecon, is an abstract painter whose works emphasize the phenomenology of surface and color through the visible traces of the painter's labor, though his touch is by comparison almost shockingly light and simultaneously visible. In contrast to Frecon and Dickinson, Zurier applies his paint in the consistency of a thin wash that registers every stroke and pat of the brush. Sometimes it's a wash upon a wash. The diaphanous veils Zurier patiently creates appear equally dry and plush. Over the last twenty years, Zurier has shifted from working exclusively in oil paint that has had the oil largely blotted away to working largely with distemper, which involves mixing pigments with rabbit skin glue. Here and there a rectangle, a wedge shape, or a line may hold a composition, but these elements are the most refined of architectural members, meant to hold the veil or trembling membrane of color that is each painting's keynote.

There is a faraway echo of Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings in the sparest introduction of a vertical or a horizontal, but Zurier's near monochromes are not only more decisively reductive, they are also influenced by a different light. Though based in Berkeley, California, the artist has been spending half the year in

Iceland for more than a decade, and that country's exposed geologic landscape and northern light has clearly influenced whatever other place the mind goes when almost all attention is directed to studio contingencies. In an essay on Zurier, art historian Robert Storr identifies how singularly unhurried the artist is in realizing his wide range of effects with means that would appear to fuse reductivism with Expressionism:

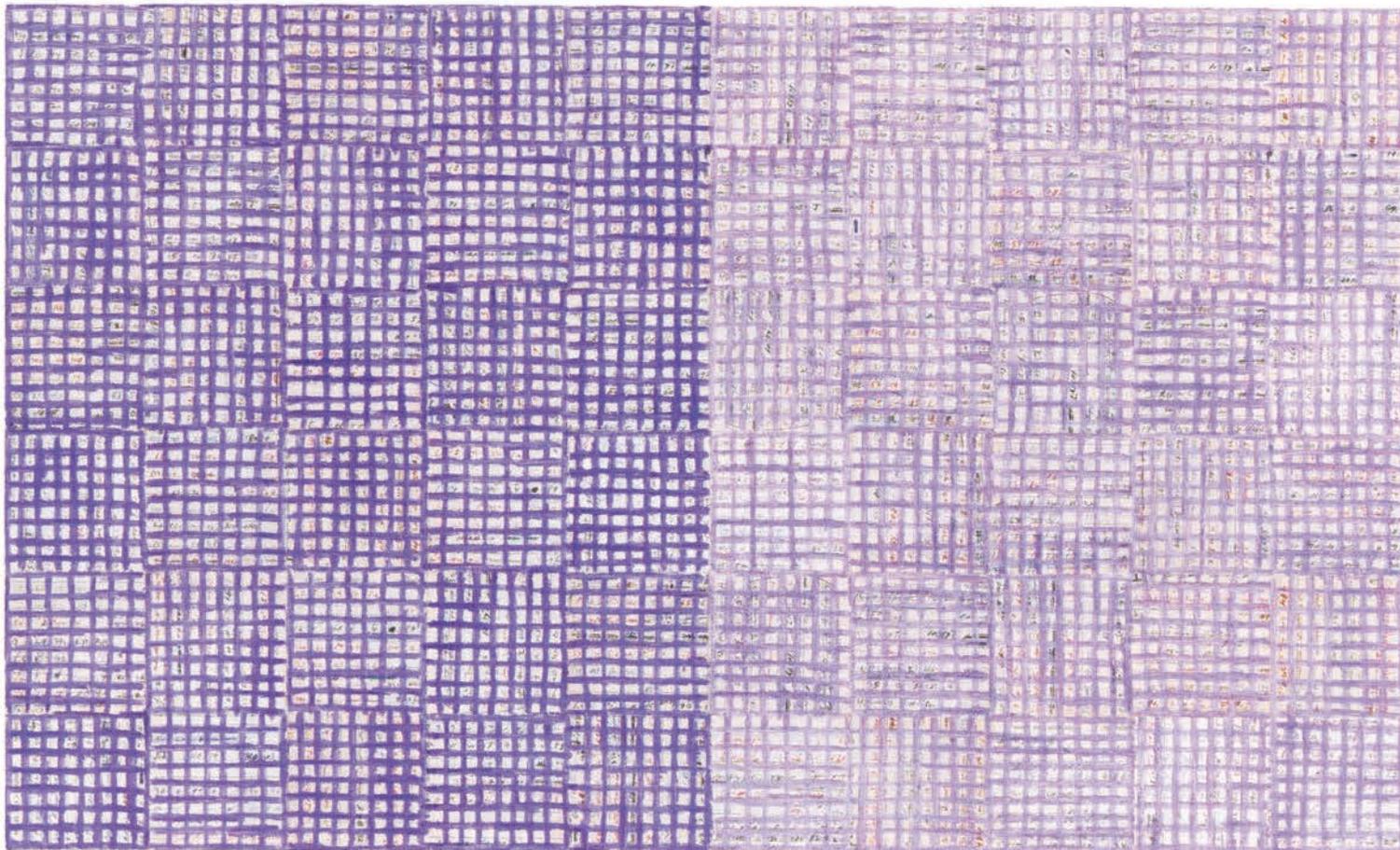
... he has arrived at his own way of working, by closely studying his means and their capacities and then deploying them with maximum efficiency in gradual stages that permit him to scrutinize the consequences of every move before making another. To that extent Zurier counts among the deftest of contemporary anti-expressionists without ever sacrificing the surprises and pleasures of the hand to the requirements of an idea or design. For if Expressionism, Neo- or old-school, has signified anything, it is impetuosity, the sense that paintings are the sum of sudden insights and urgent responses.⁶

This passage strikes me as insightful and even-handed. Sudden insights and urgent responses have earned their position in art-making, as they have in rhetoric. The slow painters may even have used them in the course of their own practice, but their attention remains focused on a slow emergence. And yet that emergence can indeed arrive by design, as it does in the paintings of McArthur Binion, whose rich crosshatched grids, velvety from a distance and furiously energetic close up, reveal a distinct substrate through their checkered basketlike mesh. Binion's substrates comprise a grid of 4-inch-square "tiles" of photocopied images. In one painting, the image might be negatives of his birth certificate; in another, photos of the rural Mississippi home where he was born; and photo documentation of a lynching in yet another.

This separation of strata is itself a metaphor for slowed time: a visual delay, then a burst of meaning. The miniaturized photographic detail of the substrate introduces representation and a narrative facticity in contrast to the measurable labor of Binion's mark-making with oil pastels that is both in the service of abstraction and an overt, nearly expressionistically concrete record of the artist's bodily presence. The photo documentation is of a past, but the mark-maker is *here*. He chooses colors that embellish a grisaille field with additional earth reds and yellows, so the overall palette of his last two shows at Galerie Lelong in New York was of something akin to early Cubism and some of Jasper Johns's muted chords of gray and mixed-down colors. Every mark of the oil pastel in one color is gone over at least once with another color. Even as Binion's patterns organize into Minimalist geometries of alternating warm and cool, or light and dark tonalities, haloes of ambient color flicker from within.

The cohabitation in Binion's work of personal and political narrative with a covering abstraction is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile except as what it is, the way two forms as contextually different as an apple and a shotgun can sit together on a table in the same light. Binion, the abstract artist, insists on disclosing, in the echoing language of the grid, evidentiary facts about his life before art, like a body moving under ice. The

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light and ice are the unifying, holistic optical binder to what fragments upon close inspection into one kind of wrenching visual discrepancy or another.

If photographic representation complicates Binion's abstraction, it serves as a visual trope for Vija Celmins's ostensibly realist paintings that push back into meditative realms that have for the last few decades been reserved for abstract painting. Certainly, most of Celmins's imagery has its origin in photographs either taken by the artist or cut from magazines and journals. The mostly small to mid-size scale of her paintings coupled with their depth of field means that unlike the other artists being discussed, Celmins requires the viewer to establish and maintain nearly the same proximate distance in relation to her paintings as the artist had while painting them. On close inspection, one sees the startling range of measurable space and time in what she has chosen to paint.

Most of the images that Celmins created from the mid-to late sixties depict discrete objects: an ominously glowing heater in her studio, World War II airplanes (Celmins arrived as a child from Latvia, which her immediate family

fled in 1944 as the Russians were pushing west), a hand firing a pistol, cars on a freeway (from a photo Celmins took balancing the camera on her dashboard).

How these objects fill her paintings is not about verisimilitude in rendering the surfaces of things, but about the artist's uncanny ability to give painterly body to her renderings of the surfaces of photographic reproductions. The explosion from a pistol shot can't be observed by the naked eye in real time, but it can be photographed and that photograph painted. At the time she was making these drawings and paintings, the ubiquity of black-and-white reproduction coincided with her desire (partly inspired by Ad Reinhardt's *12 Rules for a New Academy*) to purge her work of its already faint blush of color.

During this period, Celmins was living in California and had access to the ocean and the desert, which suggest an entirely different relation to scale and spatial field than one finds in her paintings of objects, providing vistas of what might be described as pure field. A horizonless photograph of the ocean she took from a pier in Venice, California, became the basis for an alternate kind of pictorial meditation that has continued into the present, one that

McArthur Binion:
Looking for Seasons XVI, 2016, oil paint
stick and paper on
board, 24 by 40
inches. Courtesy
Galerie Lelong,
New York and Paris.

Catherine Murphy:
In the Grass, 2011,
oil on canvas,
48¼ by 75¼ inches.
Courtesy Peter
Freeman, Inc.,
New York.



spreads an observed topography across the surface of the paper or canvas. Even the deep space of the astronomical star fields she paints is still a surface in reproduction. And yet in her meticulous and sometimes exasperated patience she's giving us something much more than surfaces. In his essay for the catalogue of her exhibition last winter at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, critic Bob Nickas writes:

... we come to understand in retrospect that she has been abstracting representation all along, that what her paintings represent is the act of painting, her drawings the act of drawing . . . Although the hand of the artist may or may not be discernable in marks, her touch is unmistakably evident.⁷

By the mid-1980s in a career that began in the 1970s, Catherine Murphy was clearly also “abstracting representation” in her paintings and drawings, but photography is less a bridge to her observational inclusiveness than it is a challenge that she meets with brio by rendering everything from direct observation. Murphy is a relentless recorder of what she sees with a hand that has long outstripped doggedness (she asserts there were far more talented draftsmen in art school than she) to achieve a mastery that, in the spirit of the other artists mentioned in this essay, disappears into her forms in the spirit of anonymity.

Born and raised in a working-class Massachusetts town, she favors subject matter that hews to the ordinary and close

at hand, if a taxonomy can be called “subject matter”: a child's helium party balloon; plastic trash bags in the snow; herself and her husband (the artist Harry Roseman) in their Hyde Park, New York, home; hair floating in a bathroom sink; and often, a window or a screen with something attached like a cut paper snowflake (with blurred snow falling in the night outside). Other depictions include the still explosion of a resting Polyphemus moth on a black window screen, Christmas lights limning a window at night, and a daytime view of a frosty pane with the name *CATHY* finger-scrawled from the outside so that it reads backward from the inside. Murphy's codex is the length of a life lived but it would probably be smaller if she didn't work ceaselessly. It took her more than three years to finish a painting of a garden hose looped in a heap on a lawn with a garter snake wriggling off toward the upper left-hand corner, and the hose couldn't be moved. Her graphite drawings, like those of Celmins, can take as long to complete as her paintings.

The uncanny seeps into Murphy's meticulous, yet self-effacing realism through the freedom she exerts to draw on her own dreams for visual ideas along with the myriad visual “accidents” the quotidian world provides when it is closely examined. Murphy's world is constantly set teetering by the odd detail and scale relation. The uncanny further presents itself in the way her compositions fill, rhyme with, or pun the picture plane. The ground plane of turf or hardwood floor is tilted up to demolish the horizon (the same horizon that was so important to her



Vija Celmins:
Untitled (Ochre),
 2016, oil on canvas,
 18 by 13½ inches.
 Courtesy Matthew
 Marks Gallery,
 New York.

'70s views across rooftops to New York from an earlier home in New Jersey). The parallel form of the screen or clear window dissolves into the picture plane itself. There is an off-kilter, often geometric monumentality to these compositions, hinting at another order that may provide a consolation in the face of the dissolution she documents: a close-up of Harry's face on the driveway, a dug-up pile of turf, the snake in the grass. Murphy's calculated correspondences seem momentary, almost instantaneous, but are sunk into time and emerging out of it through the painting process.

Recently I showed a beginning painting class Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1465–70) in a discussion of the evolution of subject matter away from theocratic hegemony. For a moment I forgot what I was talking about because even in projected reproduction the uncanny aspects of the painting were overwhelming. The combination of modeled sensuality in the rendering of the young girl's face (aided by a 130-year premonition of Caravaggio's dramatic chiaroscuro) and her cool regard emerging like a small moon out of the shadowed room conveyed love and loss across more than five centuries. The painting is impossible to restore, but somehow its craquelure enhances the beauty of the image rather

than obscures it, as though time itself were lending the artist a hand to achieve something greater than what was intended. I wondered for an instant whether painting could bear that weight anymore.

The painters discussed here provide an affirmative answer to such concerns. There are many others, of course. The element of time has never ceased to be there to collaborate with the painter in pushing the image to its emergent, troubled, and sometimes resiliently beautiful stillness. ○

1. John Yau, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings," *Hyperallergic*, September 24, 2017. hyperallergic.com. Yau doesn't elaborate on the idea of Slow Painting versus any other practice in his review. His purpose is to resonate with a quote from Frecon describing her paintings as "slow" and stay on the topic of her work.
2. Debra Singer, "Up Close / Moving Back," in *Under / Press. / With-This / Hold- / Of-Also / Of / How / Of-More / Of-Know*, Inventory Press, New York, 2015, p. 7.
3. Dickinson quoted in *ibid.*
4. Yau, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings."
5. Suzan Frecon, "text and related work," in *Suzan Frecon: oil Paintings and sun*, New York, David Zwirner Books, 2015, p. 63.
6. Robert Storr, "John Zurier: Painting Between Autumn and Spring," in *John Zurier—Paintings, 1981–2014*, New York, Peter Blum Editions, 2015, p. 10.
7. Bob Nickas, "Mapping Fields of Vision," as yet unpublished essay, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.