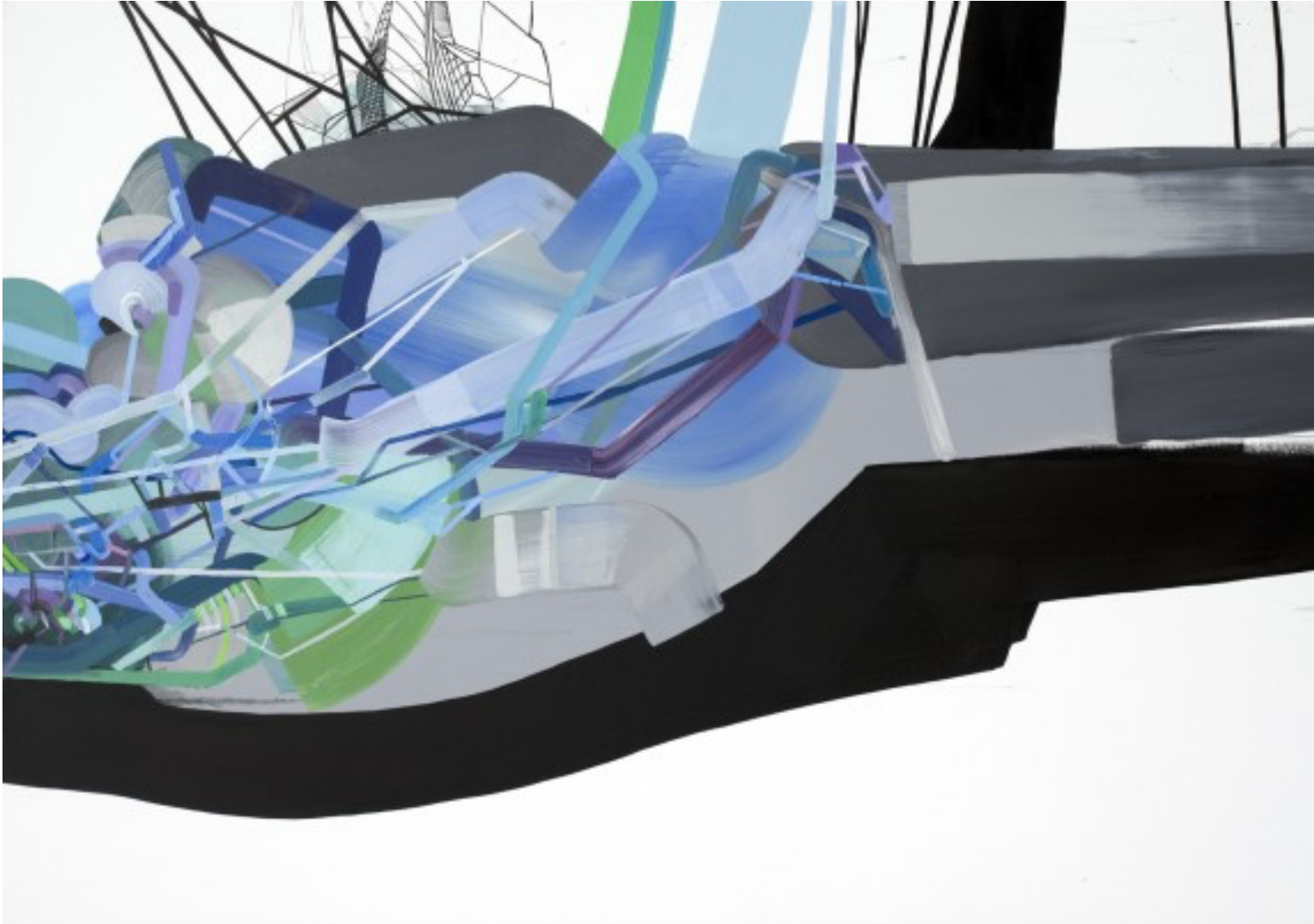


The Pleasure of Seeing

June 12, 2013 by Lane Cooper



Swing. Dana Oldfather. 2012. oil, acrylic, and marker on linen. 48 in x 72 in, Photo Courtesy of Artist.

Let us begin at the beginning. Dan Tranberg's premise, "a snapshot of current painting and how it functions," ¹ gives me pause and much to think about hence this rather long musing on the subject. For those of you with less time to linger, I offer an abridged version: The show features outstanding work that anyone interested in painting should see. It presents a range of artists from heavy-hitters to newcomers. Painting that deals with the edge between depiction and abstraction, dominates the exhibition. Real standout moments include: Dana Oldfather's *Swing*; Royden Watson's *untitled for now* pieces; Tim Callaghan's *Telegraph Road*; and Julie Langsam's wall painting from Marcel Breuer's 1971 addition to the Cleveland Museum of Art. You get the idea, it is well worth seeing.

And now for those of you with a longer attention span:

In 1921 the painter, Alexander Rodchenko declared, in reference to painting, "it's all over." ² In the '50s Ad Reinhardt made his "last paintings". ³ Then came Douglas Crimp's 1981 lecture, "The End of Painting." ⁴ Somehow, even as the art world sits vigil, the heart of Painting beats on. This fact *should* surprise us in that Painting now lives in a world awash in a sea of digitally constructed images. Yet, that Painting has a breathing, throbbing, urgent life surprises no one. What does amaze, however, is Painting's continual reinvention and the eternal freshness Painters bring to their task .

In *Hold the Wall: A Painting Exhibition*, Dan Tranberg assembled the thinnest cross-section of contemporary approaches to Painting, represented by a mere sixteen artists. All of these artists have ties to the area and represent a snapshot of Cleveland's "Painting Dialogue." Their work highlights those interests which drive the current Cleveland / world Painting scene. These works play with slippages between first assumptions and real seeing. Each piece demands extended viewing time to fully "get it". None of them offer immediate consumption. Mike Meir's materially rich and ostensibly abstract works coalesce into fragmented depictions of school children or chorus lines of gas-mask wearing workers. Nikki Woods highlights the visually enticing shapes and colors of gelatin treats. Harris Johnson, through his facility, gives us a view of the desert seen by the eyes of Wile E. Coyote. Many of these artists possess the ever-rare straight up painting chops.

Dana Oldfather's piece *Swing* highlights the Painter's craft. Her imagery has logic. It includes what appears to be a shadow. One gets a sense that her forms, suggestive of crumpled metal or perhaps some mystery machine from the future, exist in gravity. As clear and precise as the painting seems, as resolved as individual shapes appear, the image nevertheless resists interpretation. In the end it leaves us with the elements of painted illusion unhinged from representation, in short, abstraction. *Swing* offers us a complexity of form, defiant brushwork contrasted against flat and illustrative passages and the illusion of a visual space. Yet what it depicts does not exist in our world. The palette, absolutely cool and measured, lends stillness and makes easy the time it takes to engage. The painting impresses with the virtuosity of its painter.



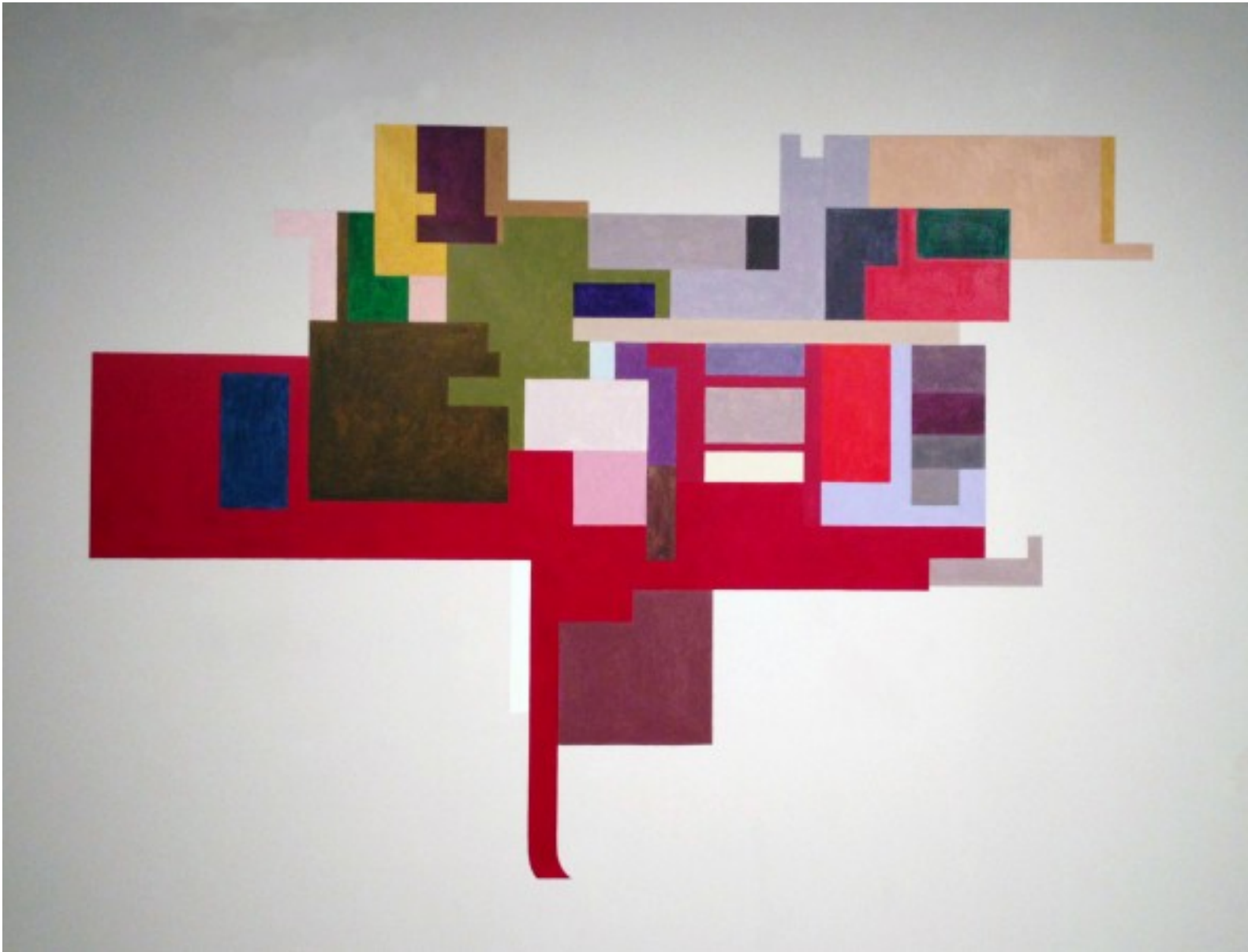
(Left) *Untitled*. Royden Watson. 2013. Oil, acrylic, fabric, resin and spray paint (Right Top) *Black*. Royden Watson. Oil, acrylic, fabric, resin and spray paint (Right Bottom) *Disappear*. Royden Watson. Fabric, acrylic and spray paint. Photo courtesy of artist.

In two large paintings hung side by side as one piece, Royden Watson demonstrates his own virtuosity through trompe l'oeil surfaces depicting fabric and plywood. These recent, "unnamed" and somewhat provisional works show marks layered on illusionistic backgrounds, some appearing highly intentional while others seem incidental. At first glance it looks as if an abstract painting on fabric hangs next to a found plywood panel, once used to support spray or brush painted items. The arrangement seems completely casual, as if the artist hung scraps and unplanned paint traces in the gallery so that we might compare the accidental and found to the deliberate and intentional. Closer examination reveals the fraud. Each highly considered mark exposes the painting as a product of labor and skill. The viewer's experience shifts back and forth between assumptions made about the seen illusion and the collapse of those assumptions. The painting, built on the intrinsic qualities of painting, creates the effect through the quality of its marks, the illusion of its infinitesimally shallow visual space and its palette of ochers, oranges, greens, whites and teals. It shimmers back and forth between imagery and abstraction, between the direct experience of a painting as an object and painting as an illusion.



Telegraph Road. Tim Callaghan. 2012. Acrylic and Oil on Canvas, 44 in x 42 in. Photo courtesy of artist.

To one degree or another most of the paintings in the show operate through these shifts. In the case of Tim Callaghan's *Telegraph Road*, the work focuses on a kind of "realism" that interrupts the formal. A beautifully rendered dog stands on snow-covered ground with a pattern of grassy tufts breaking through. The dog's lavender shadow draws a silhouette. Across the entire visual field "snow" falls creating a visual disruption. The pattern of the snow echoes that of the tufts of grass. Over a more prolonged viewing, the marks describing the grass become abstractions breaking across edges, suturing apparent voids into the ground of "snow." The painting layers pattern over pattern, a stacking of visual space behind the screen of the "falling snow." We rediscover seeing as our viewing of the Painting continually cycles. The realization of imagery disrupts the abstract pattern and the play of shapes. Just the same the patterning and layering disrupt the viewing of the depiction of the "dog" and the "snow." We continually shift back and forth between seeing a picture and seeing a Painting.



Breuer Floorplan (Cleveland Museum of Art). Julie Langsam. 2013. acrylic on wall, approx 6 ft x 9 ft. Photo courtesy the artist and Gallery Thomas Jaeckel.

Julie Langsam goes after this play between abstraction and representation through a different tact. Painting directly onto the wall she gives us the already abstract depiction of Marcel Breuer's 1971 floor plan for his addition to the Cleveland Museum of Art. Each block of the plan received an assigned color from a palette of paint swatches collected from a hardware store. The artist randomly shuffled the colors and "matched" them using acrylic artist's paint. As a result we first see a "Modern" abstraction. The painting is coded. For the initiated, the colors and the forms refer back to their sources. The codes, however, no longer give us useful information about a building or potential color choices. Instead they highlight systems and speak poetically about the lingering presence of Modernism. The work reminds us of the role of the artist as one who chooses and presents. It poignantly strips away the romanticism of painting. The artist recedes from view and the system comes to the forefront. The work presents a different kind of abstraction than the one once offered by Greenberg. It moves between an emphasis on the conceptual and the experiential. A continual slippage occurs as one experience of the work gives way to another. We go from the pleasurable experience of seeing, to the decoding of the work as a system, to the realization of the absence of the artist and finally to the re-emergence of the artist as the author of the system and back finally to the pleasure of seeing.

As an exhibition *Hold the Wall* does what it promises – provides a view, however necessarily incomplete, of contemporary painting practices. It goes further, offering evidence of the role Cleveland's Painters play in building a bulwark against the "death of Painting." *Hold the Wall* demonstrates that the Cleveland "art scene" fluently converses with and contributes to the wider "art world". As well Tranberg's inclusion of a range of career stages, provides a glimpse of the promise of Cleveland's painters to come.

Lastly, a disclaimer: I am a painter living in Cleveland and as such I am a colleague to artists in this show. I also teach at the Cleveland Institute of Art and I work directly with many of these artists. Others in the show I have taught. Frankly, it would be difficult to paint in Cleveland and not know most of these artists.

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1. ¹ Quoted from Dan Tranberg's Curator's Statement for "Hold the Wall: A Painting Exhibition," May 2013. [↑](#)
 2. ² "The Death of Painting", 1998 exhibition, MOMA http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/1998/rodchenko/texts/death_of_painting.html accessed: May 20, 2013. [↑](#)
 3. ³ "Ad Reinhardt", University of Iowa Museum of Art: Collections <http://uima.uiowa.edu/ad-reinhardt/> accessed: May 20, 2013. [↑](#)
 4. ⁴ Douglas Crimp. "The End of Painting." October, Vol. 16, Spring, 1981. 69-86. [↑](#)
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