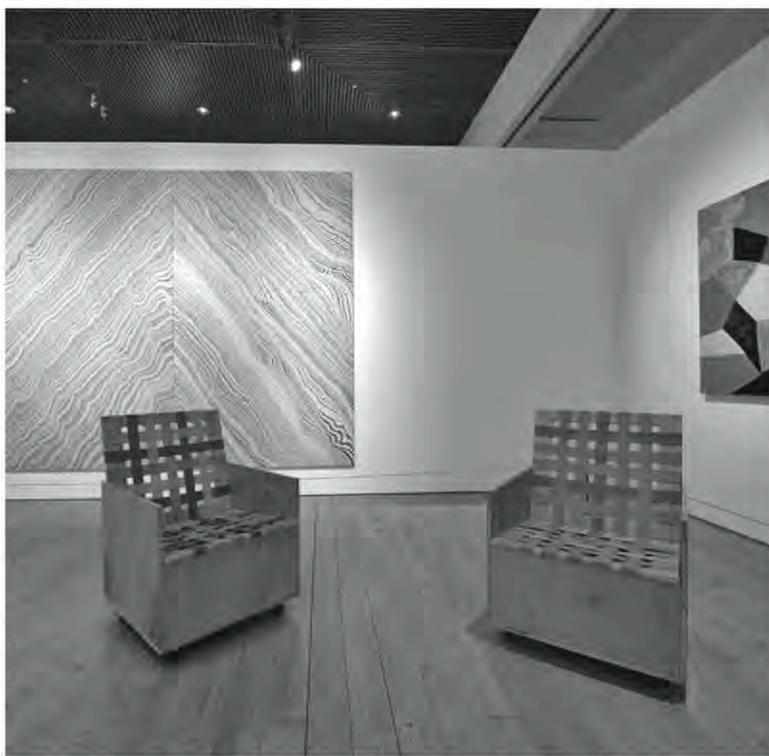


## David Ryan redefines the concept of the medium of painting to include time

Over the past year or so there has been considerable activity devoted to painting: the Gerhard Richter exhibition at Tate Modern (Reviews AM352), Terry Myers's volume *Painting* for the Documents of Contemporary Art series, *Vitamin P2* published by Phaidon, and Daniel Sturgis's touring exhibition 'The Indiscipline of Painting' (Reviews AM353), not to mention the development of an art school devoted to painting by the editors of *Turps Banana*. While each of these might look in very different directions – from personal curatorial choice, surveying the critical landscape and fixing a pedagogy gone awry, to examining what the art market and its peripheral machinery has thrown at us recently as painting – this urge to examine painting once again in its separateness is perhaps characteristic of its unstable purchase within the present contemporary art scene. This instability is not so much because of a crisis in painting necessarily (for once), but rather in the light of broader deliberations and predicaments around the present legitimising structures of the art world and their relation to, and appropriation of, the everyday and the political. Any discussion of painting is certainly no 'answer' or aesthetic corrective to the current situation, as it does not reside in some privileged vantage point outside these current problematics. However, examining painting as a discipline once again, and in terms of questions around its medium, is, at the very least, to refocus possibilities within the concentrated fields of intentionality and reception that painting might still hold.

Eight years ago, in reviewing Jonathan Harris's *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting* (Reviews AM279), I asked how painting might be thought through as a critical practice and what tools might be used to discuss it now. This was in response to Harris's very useful but inherently cultural studies-orientated overview. Indeed, no sooner is there any attempt to address a painting than a network, an institution, a whole culture even, is necessarily invoked. All too often this generalised discursive framework replaces the specifics that a

The Indiscipline of Painting  
installation view



# On Painting

It is remarkable how painting continues to be addressed simply as an object – almost as a token either within market economies, scenarios of globalisation, or caught in the fire of criss-crossing traditions, ideologies and allegiances. It is as though the time of making is still endlessly suppressed in any conception of painting.

particular painting might demand. On the other hand, while a philosophy of painting might degenerate into simply decorative verbiage at its worst, central to serious painting practice is a philosophical core lying somewhere between the phenomenological and the hermeneutical, and any attempt to get to the heart of the matter would seem to revisit these, even if to find a way to think out of them. Painting, visually, is implicitly connected to such discourses, just as the visual endlessly imbricates language. Myers accepts this, and maps a multiple positioning of thinking and talking around painting.

Tracing a starting point from 1980, with the incompatible frenzy of new wave painting on the one hand and Douglas Crimp's brilliantly cool autopsy *The End of Painting* on the other, it weaves together various attempts to grab hold and make sense of painting in its contemporary moment. For Myers, and others, the various trajectories of painting are marked by an eschatological shadow, certainly since the 1980s, but also, famously, stretching as far back as the invention of the daguerreotype. Obsolescence has continually been predicted and projected since that time. I remember, only recently, raising the question of painting with a curator, who simply said, 'please, this is the 21st century...'. Such a response underlines, more literally, Myers's starting point of its institutional death. But more to the point, we might ask what is this hypothetical painting that

raises hackles? Painting, after all, as the past 20 or so years have shown, cannot be determined solely by a set of abstracted constraints or even necessarily by a reductive logic of its medium. That is not to say, as we shall see, that the question of medium is not important. Rather, it points firstly to the fact that the medium's permeable nature refuses any idealised, determined picture of what 'painting' actually is, and secondly how it can position itself within a differentiated landscape of media. This situation is one where the 'medium' of painting, or other practices, can be seen as translation, transposition, infiltration and echo rather than any core identification. New media has ironically created an open playing field of related media, as the growing involvement with 'older' media, such as analogue tape in sound or Tacita Dean's championing of film, clearly shows. It goes without saying that what was previously linear and teleological is now spatial and multi-dimensional, partly through the intensification of the digital and its ability to simulate the fundamentals of earlier technologies. In such a context, media archaeology and the endless opening of archives of past media become exponential. Art historian Caroline Jones, in tracing the relationship of technologies and contemporary art in her 2006 book *Sensorium*, even suggests that the human sensorium is now more mediated than ever but without the 'bureaucratisation' of the senses imposed by Modernism. Medium, for Jones, becomes a matrix that can be activated in any direction and address any sense, whether visual, conceptual, auditory or even olfactory. Given this wide open field, it is hardly surprising that a rethinking of media for each individual practice becomes 'repurposed' and that the very question of medium takes on a different inflection than in the past.

The work of RH Quaytman might point to such a 'repurposing' within the context of recent painting. In an interview with David Joselit in *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine* last year, Quaytman, talking of the initiation of certain rule-based strategies in her work, suggested, 'they were made as a kind of protest against preconceptions of particular mediums. My rules were also made as a protest in a sense, but as a protest in favour of a medium – specifically painting'. Here, Quaytman suggests that the dismissal of the medium of painting is both short-sighted and premature. At the same time her work demonstrates that painting is not to be 'contained' by certain presumptions as to how that medium is constituted – and certainly this is not delimited to paint. Quaytman works with ensembles that are elastic: from the image-making

RH Quaytman  
*I Modi*, Chapter 22 2011  
detail



technologies utilised (paint, photography, print) through to the gathering of image-banks and the processes of research (whether personal photographs, found or researched images) and the dissemination or distribution of the work – its realisation as a massive work-in-progress, whereby each exhibition is a ‘chapter’ of pieces specifically organised for the duration of a particular show but which can be reformulated in new contexts and ensembles (literally combined) in the future and separately archived and documented as the whole project progresses (as in the book *Spine*). This activation, storage and documentation creates a visual equivalent to what Umberto Eco described in the late 1950s, in the context of music, as a ‘work-in-movement’, an open work where each performance is a provisional manifestation of a broader field of possibilities. What Quaytman also reminds us is that the nature of the medium is problematic in itself, that it is an accrued set of diverse practices that do not form a homogeneous set of effects or even basic materiality. So, allusions to photographic traces, to perspective, to optical surfaces and systems form a set of oblique mirrors through which the viewer must negotiate relationships and meaning. Quaytman’s practice, as in *I Modi Chapter 22*, 2011, shown at the Venice Biennale last year, combines this reassertion of the medium of painting with its own critique and, rather like the way she sees the insertion or graft of subject matter into ‘a foundation of abstraction’, this is an art of constant deflection and interruption. This would certainly argue against Noël Carroll’s formulation in his 1996 book, *Theorising the Moving Image*, of ‘the medium-essentialist [who] thinks that the so-called medium of an artform is also the essence of the artform in the sense that it carries within it the distinctive telos of the form, somewhat in the manner of a gene’.

While Carroll has called for an outright ban on discussions of the ‘medium’, this raises the question of what is lost in such an approach. Two points might suffice here: firstly, the conception of medium (even if accepted as non-homogeneous) as a site of resistance, whereby the materiality of an activity undercuts intentionality in a fruitful way; and secondly, Jacques Rancière’s proposition of the medium ‘as milieu: the milieu in which the performance of a determined artistic arrangement comes to be inscribed, but also the milieu that these performances themselves contribute to configuring’, as stated in ‘What Medium Can Mean’, in *Parrhesia*, no 11, 2011. This broader sense of medium would also include other meanings that are mobilised by such a milieu: medium as technology, as substance and as an instrument of realisation, as well as its determining and determined wider context.

This leads us back to ‘The Indiscipline of Painting’ exhibition and its themes. ‘Indiscipline’, as Sturgis made clear in his catalogue introduction, dismantles the rigid and regulatory conception of a Greenbergian ‘discipline’ and relates to the ‘porous borders that current practice has re-found’. And yet Sturgis, from the valid perspective of a painter’s personal choice, gives the discipline’s historical and current ‘indiscipline’ a fairly narrow state of play. If we think of the medium’s milieu here, then it is a highly focused one with few wild cards. It charts – quite stunningly in its recent Mead Gallery incarnation – a path from its most austere post-mimimal incarnations, or work by the BMPT group, through to the decorative ‘glam rock’ of John Armleder and beyond. What it does do is to invite us to reflect upon not only the role of space, light, colour and repetition in these contexts but also the centrality of making within abstract painting. Whether this be, as generally in this exhibition’s case, a restrained or strategic facture, these methods still narrate ‘how their meanings conceptually unfold over time. How paintings can hold time, be outside of time, or indeed just be out of time’.

Even within painting’s recent theorisation it is remarkable how it continues to be addressed simply as an object – almost as a token either within market economies, scenarios of globalisation, or caught in the fire of criss-crossing traditions, ideologies and allegiances. It is as though the time of making is still endlessly suppressed in any conception of painting. Sturgis’s point is that the temporality of a work’s making is a primary key to meaning, in its direct negotiation of the medium. Here, Rancière’s notion of the medium as

RH Quaytman  
*I Modi, Chapter 22* 2011  
detail

Robert Holyhead  
Untitled 2010





Katharina Grosse  
*One Floor Up More Highly* 2010  
 detail

both milieu and performance is a double movement that both inscribes and subscribes. It is capable of telescoping and individuating while avoiding the prescription of essentialism, and illuminating the work as a work in time as much as it is an operation in space.

Katharina Grosse, whose work is represented in the 'Indiscipline of Painting', is perhaps a case in point. Her usual installation pieces, such as *One Floor Up More Highly* of 2011 shown at MASS MoCA, traverse a range of operations in a given space. Markings and traces are sprayed on the wall together with clusters of objects or residual heaps of material. Physicality and the distance of opticality not so much meld as constantly cancel each other out in the flickering operation of attempting to take hold of the 'scene' of painting. As with other pieces, Grosse proceeds by a dual motion of gathering and dispersal, each movement or gesture suggesting this contradictory grasping of the space in its intervention or even creation. Like Quaytman, although in a very different key, Grosse develops a Baroque space that entwines the viewer. Unlike the minimalist confirmation of the body, the 'impossible' spaces that both Quaytman and Grosse set up bring that very body into question through a temporal displacement. In the latter's case the work is scarred by its time of making, this being a definitive presence, and yet often difficult to reconstruct smoothly in the time of viewing. What Grosse brings to the fore is the complexity of the improvisational, in that the decisions and actions within a given space both cover their tracks and accrue sensations and associations that move beyond the methods that brought them into being. In this sense both Quaytman and Grosse, in their very different ways, see the prospect of composition, or composing, in a much more extensive field – in fact as a set of social, just as much as formal, interactions.

These concerns are not limited to a notion of, for want of a better term, painting in the expanded field. A work that remains within the singular economy of more traditional painting frameworks might also explore such a contrary motion of composition and improvisation. In this light Robert Holyhead's paintings might be seen to develop a direct relationship with the traditions of abstraction in their formulation of pristine and yet painterly surfaces, subdued gestures and unstable formations. Working from smaller watercolours, which act as catalysts for the paintings (but certainly not defined or definitive 'models'), Holyhead negotiates the slippage between a preconceived idea and the act of forming: a delicate balance which will form the image through the process of painting itself. *Untitled*, 2010, points to this situation, where an articulation of

definite form is revised by an amorphousness, whereby both position themselves as image. In articulating a space between the affirmative mark and the wipe or erasure, Holyhead searches out the particularity of the poise between colour and form as an arrest in time clearly marking the final image. Medium, in Holyhead's context, may well be reduced to painting's most basic condition: surface, pigment and its manipulation. Yet, as Pamela M Lee has described in her book *Chronophobia*, returning us back to the centrality of time, 'Medium is always already in between; becomes like a speech act, is performative in staging a dialogue between work of art and beholder. And in this sense medium always internalises a singular engagement with time.' Likewise, whatever the physical channel, improvisation requires a medium, a milieu; and the medium requires, generally, improvisation. This is not, as Lee states, 'to reinvent the wheel for modernism. If anything it is to restore to the word *medium* its sense of communicative and therefore temporal contingency.'

Painting, however, in its communicative and temporal contingencies, always possesses a delay, a gap between its implicit and actual address. It is projective, even untimely, as much as it is, generally, a solitary enunciation of a collective. What improvisation essentially does is to work with a set of givens but to interrupt and produce difference, a movement through a medium in time. Perhaps this is all the more reason to examine once more, in a new light and a new situation, a thoroughgoing analysis of painting – in its broadest manifestations – paying attention to its actual mechanics, albeit aligned within the bigger picture of its problematic cultural capital. ■

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