

*Divided We Unite: The Paintings of Daniel Sturgis*

Terry R. Myers

I won't be unduly political about Daniel Sturgis's paintings, even if it's nearly impossible these days not to be political about nearly everything. Instead, I'm rather gleefully stuck on the notion of Sturgis as a faithful divider in, not of, his work who understands that in the end (especially when it comes to painting and all of its supposed "ends") such a conceptual and material position can manifest a more resilient form of unity. In other words, agility almost always trumps raw power. To me Sturgis's paintings make his point of view crystal clear in purely visual terms: nearly all of them contain complicated boundaries built from highly suggestive repeated shapes that not only take our eyes on a bumpy ride but also ultimately calm things down in order to bring everything together. His titles often reinforce the paradoxical aspects of what he is doing: for example, a key work in his career is *Split Together* (2003), a ten-foot long expansive "landscape" painting in which a second strip of landscape has upended itself ninety degrees to become a kind of no-mans-land smack in the middle of the "naturally" oriented vista. (Sturgis has also explored this format in *Equal Refrain* (2005), albeit with what I see as a stronger demarcation of a boundary separating the left half of the painting from the right.) The associational impact is simultaneously jarring and seamless, in other words, a perfect example of something that has been "split together:" Divided it somehow stands united, all the while—as is the case in all of his work—allowing us to orient the scene as someplace either in front of us or below us.

I'm convinced that Sturgis has the art historical backbone to support the leaps of formal, spatial and representational faith that his work performs. He has thought a lot about not only the manner in which the language of abstraction has moved (just another time, it could be argued) from the exclusive realm of high modernism to the more inclusive space of design. Fully contributing to the current discourse in which abstraction can itself be understood as a subcategory of representation, the goal of Sturgis's paintings—like those of, for example, Monique Prieto to Tomma Abts—is that they remain fundamentally open, even accommodating, when it comes to a viewer's interpretations. Or, as he put it to me, "the use of repeated motifs helps the work be open by sometimes alluding to representation—and sometimes not—as well as being in principle simple and thus allowing in the mind of the viewer at least an active role in

mental re-ordering or correcting. The illusion to repetition and order is of course only that of an illusion and difference is always present." Sturgis's paintings are particularly relatable to Prieto's because of the similar impact of the minimal evidence of the artist's hand (which, in keeping with the spirit of good-natured contrariness here, manages to make the work become all the more human precisely because all of the baggage of "touch" has been unpacked and put away), as well as their shared concerns with a curious, "stacking" type of sculptural flatness. More importantly, however, both artists are very adept at allowing for the possibility that we may desire to read something into their work without being made to feel less than smart.

For example, in the aptly titled *Passionate Grounds* (2005), we are presented a location that once again upends itself by running its jumpy rows of colored rectangles around the lower left corner of the canvas from the stabilizing lower edge to the ascending, "anti-gravity" left side of the picture plane. As a meticulously cultivated "crop" of chock-a-block "pieces" of paint, on two sides they fence in what can be read as some kind of building (a barn, perhaps?) made up of several tessellated and/or overlapping blocks of color. Look again, however, and we're likely to imagine that we're more like a bird in the sky gliding over some kind of multi-colored brick road.

Even with such flights of fancy and/or other fantasies that Sturgis's paintings clearly encourage us to create in front of his paintings for ourselves, what is most striking to me about them is the manner in which they rely upon a rather restrained range of formal composition and embody it in a highly consistent material production in order to bring us back to the literal physical properties of painting and paint itself. Sturgis's even hand turns viscous paint into puzzle pieces that fit together absolutely perfectly, creating a tight fit not only between each of them spatially but also conceptually. If I were writing here about someone like Glenn Brown, I could now launch into a spiel about pixels of paint, and how the move from analogue to digital in music relates to what has happened in recent painting, but Sturgis's paintings gracefully push that conversation to one side and bring us back to ground that remains fertile within a broader historical view of painting. I'm reminded here (as I was a few years ago when writing about the work of Michael Raedecker), of my favorite line from one of my favorite painters: Joe Zucker. In 1978, when it was pretty clear that minimalism still had a lot of juice but could use a boost of subjectivity, Zucker suggested that in his work "pictorial content becomes an iconography to

discuss the topography of the painting." And while in the case of Raedecker's paintings, the relationship between iconography and topography remains essentially split between a conventional view of a landscape somewhere "over there," or somewhere far below us as we are overhead, Sturgis time and time again gives us both in one, suggesting that the conversation he is determined to have about the topography of his painting is multivalent yet never meandering, or worse yet bifurcated. More in line with the twisted rigor of a Jonathan Lasker than the lazy outlines of a Gary Hume, Sturgis prefers the term "awkward," allowing even for the possibility of the work coming across as ill at ease with itself. In this regard, a painting like *Wanderlust* (2005) literally sticks out with its eccentrically sliced-off left edge, suggesting that all of the boundaries of Sturgis's work are always available for an adjustment that may be awkward, but one that must be absolutely agile, tough and a lot of (meaningful) fun.

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*Wanderlust*, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 59.8 x 84.2"

