

ASSUMING A SURFACE

JAMES BARTH
& TYZA STEWART

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This essay is unresolved, and gives no conclusive reading of the works in *Assuming A Surface*. It is fragmented and stunted and so clumsy that it stumbles over ideas without fully grasping them. This essay will probably be unsatisfying and confusing to read. This is because this essay was an exercise in unlearning years and years of discourse and rhetoric surrounding painting and how we talk about art.

In *Assuming A Surface* James Barth and Tyza Stewart have foregone conventional methods of painting to produce an exhibition that speaks to the functions of painting as a representational tool. This is not a new idea, nor is this an inherently challenging idea to write about. That is, if you subscribe to the accepted canon of Western art and attempt to, as many have successfully done so before, coerce the works of both Barth and Stewart to adhere to a binary of representation and abstraction. But this would be an inadequate reduction of a complex problem of image making and the role of being an image maker. This reduction would also disregard the equally complicated but compelling relationship that these artists have with representation, self-portraiture, painting, *art*. I suppose this is because the canon of painting and in a broader sense ‘image making’ is almost exclusively at the behest of cisgender men.

One need look no further than Saatchi Gallery’s 2016 offering *Painters’ Painters*¹. What should have been a celebration of art practices that appeal to makers, a coming together of determined artists wilfully defying trends of performance, video or installation was an exercise in ManPainter navel gazing. “Aesthetics is for artists’, the great abstract expressionist Barnett Newman once quipped, as ‘ornithology is for the birds,’” begins the essay of the cisgender man Martin Gayford speaking of cisgender man Barnett Newman in regard to the show that exclusively boasts nine other

cisgender male painters. Ironically, Gayford goes on to explain how these men are a diverse cross-section of contemporary painting, ranging in age, nationality and approach – noticeably absent from this roll call of diversity is of course gender.

The fact that Barth and Stewart are not cisgender men is not entirely the point that I am trying to make. Nor is it that any of the painters who were included in the aforementioned exhibition are at fault merely for being men. The problem, I think, is that the accepted canon and narrative for painting has been determined almost entirely by the most socially privileged amongst us. The concepts of representation and image making are reduced to ambiguous notions of aesthetics as cis-male painters have navigated a post-photography medium. The accepted narrative of painting follows that the advent of photography produced anxiety towards representation, prompting a reconsideration of how painting can function without the crutch of pictorialism. Artists offered that the value of painting was in the material qualities (and perhaps technical quality) of the medium. Unsurprisingly this account is dictated by cisgender men, determining the value and credibility of the art form. Paul Cezanne begat Pablo Picasso who begat Kassimir Malevich who begat Mark Rothko etc.

Those outside of this narrow understanding of painting are expected to fashion their practices around a predetermined context. Needless to say, these cisgender men cannot possibly represent that which they are not. Yet, the absence of adequate representation bestows upon those not represented a responsibility to ‘fill in the gap.’ This seems prophetically blame-like, suggesting that even before these artists pick up a brush they are held accountable for the *lack thereof* of art that accurately depicts their experiences. Even so, accepting these limitations, how are artists supposed to negotiate the rules of representation when the rules have been set by people whose experiences are not burdened by the politics of visibility?

I found myself troubled by this question when writing about Barth and Stewart’s painting practices because the existing binary of abstraction and representation simply isn’t functional. This problem causes angst towards self-portraiture; an unwillingness to portray a figure that will be read through the lens of conventional painting discourses. Further, a reliance on figuration poses many questions about the importance of the body, the face, the physical being of a person in

determining one's identity. An image of a person does not accurately capture their experience – it captures a likeness. The audience then projects upon this likeness a subjective value judgement based on their own biases and experience and in art, their understanding of the canon of figurative painting.

As viewers, we want to be able to attribute an aesthetic merit based on the accuracy of likenesses so that we can classify it's "goodness" and measure how successful it is as a painting. When expectations of a figurative work are not adequately met we adopt deconstructive practices to dismantle any metaphor that may be present. In this instance representation serves as a method of attributing signifiers and values in the absence of an actual person; the individual represented becomes reduced to an icon or a symbol. Representation is always for someone, and often that someone is not the one being represented.

Painting has an onerous history of representing bodies that don't belong to the author. Stewart and Barth have both traversed this trope in previous works, but their intentions have always been wholly different than those who have come before them. Through self-portraiture both have constructed hybrid human forms – either from appropriated photographs or digital 3D modelling. Using bodies that are not their own they have attempted to negotiate the very canon and narrative imposed upon them simply by virtue of the medium in which they practice. However, it is my feeling that the narrative of painting does not accommodate their works in a meaningful way. All rhetoric of model-artist-nude-male-gaze or body politics or abjection are symptoms of an almost exclusively cisgender methodology.

Though neither artist shies from the expectations of painting, in *Assuming A Surface* the medium is exposed. Because of the reductive nature of representation in conventional painting practice Barth and Stewart have manifested works that transcend formalist fixations on aesthetics; they infer a greater significance than just their *surface* and decline to be categorised by declarative readings. This is a show absent of conventional representation and absent of resolution.

Stewart's work sees the surfaces that they would typically anoint with strategically placed marks and sparing uses of colour, cleansed of any such blemishes. The porous, painted surface is spotless. Instead of inscribing meaning through mark making,

relying on iconography or resemblance, Stewart bends the surfaces defiantly, showing us the unseen parts of their previous paintings by peeling them from the wall. Even so, this radical departure from *images* makes the works no less at home in the legacy of painting. A look at the under belly of the works reveals familiar, physical remnants of the medium to remind us that no matter how far the artist might deviate from convention they will always be bound and measured by it.

And although the figure has not been completely removed from Barth's work, she has obfuscated our ability to read it as a conventional painted figure through unconventional means of painting. The method of production makes the works distant relatives of paintings typical of her oeuvre. These works are oil paintings made with methods of screen printing (a process that allows photographs to be more truthfully reproduced). Barth has furnished her picture planes with intention, each colourfield and brush mark added to these printed paintings speaks to a practice that has been marred and restricted by a medium that is woefully unsuited to proposition outside of *the canon*.

To assume that there is a dichotomy of figuration and abstraction in painting denies any works that do not fit within this binary, and it is worth remembering that representation is not a "naturally" occurring phenomenon in our world. It would be easy to say that Barth and Stewart are venturing down pathways already traversed by artists anxious to escape the contingent nature of images and representation. In fact, their wariness of image-based practices emerges from a similar ideological place as their predecessors. However, it is their divergent intentions that distinguishes them from this assumption. Their pursuit of alternative surfaces and extension of their medium attempts to relinquish their image from representational dogma. By creating new methods of painting in *Assuming A Surface*, Barth and Stewart eliminate the need to rely on pre-existing binaries and establish a more equitable discourse that can accommodate practices outside of the accepted canon. But these are just assumptions, and this essay barely scratches the surface of them.

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¹ Gayford, Martin. 2016. *Painter's Painters*. Saatchi Gallery. London