

ARTFORUM

SUMMER 1999 \$7.00

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



JOHN BOCK

INTRODUCED BY RONALD JONES

MUSEUM AS MUSE

BY THOMAS CROW

DAVID REED



Bedside Manner

Every theory of painting is a metaphysics.
—Merleau-Ponty

The artist and dealer Nicholas Wilder once mentioned to David Reed that paintings by John McLaughlin were often moved by their owners into their bedrooms, as if the works somehow seduced them into more intimate relations. For Reed, his mentor's anecdote was a revelation: A "bedroom painter" was what he had always aspired to be. At the very least this reveals that, though an abstractionist, he was not a formalist, since, however formally impressive his paintings, they are meant to beckon viewers to an almost erotic colloquy, as with *Mary and the Angel of the Annunciation*.

Not long after Wilder made his comment, Reed staged "Two Bedrooms in San Francisco," an exhibition for which he modified clips from Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 *Vertigo* by inserting images of his own paintings into the bedrooms of the film's two main characters, Judy and Scottie. In addition, he made life-size replicas of the two beds as they appear in the film. Finally, on the wall above the beds, he hung the very paintings that had been inserted in the film clip, which ran continuously on a television monitor next to the beds. The work as a whole directs the viewer to establish with the (real) painting the relationship implied between Judy and Scottie—and the relationship the two have with the paintings visible in the doctored film. The message is this: Instead of simply viewing the painting under gallery conventions, imagine it as something with which to live intimately.

This work, like others that followed in this expanded vein, demonstrates that, while Reed is a bedroom painter, he is not for that reason a bedroom artist. *Judy's Bedroom* does not itself seem ideally suited for most homes, let alone someone's bedroom. Rather,

In each installment of this ongoing series, a writer tracks the progress of a single work of art from inception to realization.

it communicates a truth about our ideal relationship with painting, without proposing that we can or should establish that kind of relationship with the apparatus of the installation. Indeed, in these commentaries on the artist's primary practice, there may be a tacit assertion of the superiority of painting over other forms of expression that have tended to marginalize it. At Reed's recent exhibition in La Jolla, California, a girl climbed into Judy's bed, undressed under the coverlet, and was joined by a boyfriend. The two of them then made love. If they in effect transformed the gallery into a bedroom, perhaps in doing so they subverted the kind of relationship to the painting effected by the installation.

When *Scottie's Bedroom*, 1994, was installed at the Max Protetch Gallery in New York, I noticed that several paintings surrounding it were in what I thought of as lingerie colors—pinks and whites and pastel blues. Could this be what Reed meant by "bedroom paintings"? It wouldn't seem so. Reed claims that *all* his paintings belong to the genre. Here is a possible explanation: Viewers become fascinated with what we might call the "skin" of these paintings. To see them is to be drawn to touch them. A visiting art historian—of all people!—once reached over to touch a painting, consequently spoiling the work, as it happened still to be wet. She could not help herself. Touch is what we turn to, after all, when we cannot believe our eyes, which suggests that with Reed's paintings we, like Doubting Thomas, are uncertain whether what we see is real.

In Reed's images, the forms are raised only slightly above the surface—so little, in fact, that the paintings appear to be photographs. No one touches the surface of a photograph to feel through fingertips the textures of the objects shown. But given the smoothness and apparent substancelessness of Reed's forms—the qualities that lead us to imagine that he achieves his effects through some arcane photographic process—we want confirmation. His forms are thus



IN REED'S WORK, WHERE THE FORMS ARE AT ONCE BRUSH-STROKES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF BRUSHSTROKES, WE ARE LEFT UNCERTAIN AS TO THEIR MATERIALITY. THIS IS THE BASIS OF THEIR FASCINATION, ANALOGOUS TO THAT OF FLESH.

illusionistic in two ways. They are illusionistic in the traditional sense, shaded and highlighted in such a way that some details seem further away from us than others. But another illusion, almost unique to Reed, arises with the forms themselves as objects made of paint. Every painted form has a materiality in its own right, and sometimes we see the same form both as paint and as representation. When we look at a painting by Velázquez, we see the yellow impasto and the yellow glove depicted by it. When it comes to Reed's paintings, where the forms are simultaneously brushstrokes and, in effect, representations of brushstrokes, we are left uncertain as to their materiality. Hence the itch to explore their edges with our fingers, which is already a kind of caress. This is the basis of their fascination, analogous to the fascination of flesh.

When we are attracted to someone, we want to learn their story. When the object of fascination is a painting, there are always two story lines (in addition to any overt narrative content): that of how the forms were arrived at as ideas and of how they were realized as things made of pigment. A famous series of twenty-two photographs by Matisse records the sequential stages that his *Pink Nude* went through in attaining its final form. We can register Matisse's

decisions, and wonder how to explain or justify them: Why is the head made smaller, why is the angle through which it relates to the body altered? Why do stripes give way to tiles? Someone writing "Matisse Paints a Picture" would trace this story. However marvelous Matisse's touch, his painted surfaces are not in that way out of the ordinary. If hardly a matter of indifference, their specificity is not a particular mystery.

Most essays in the "X Paints a Picture" genre tell the kind of story Matisse's photographs tell—how forms are modified into other related forms. This is like the story of how one idea gets transformed into another. With Reed, it would be only part of the story. The artist has invented ways of picture making that induce synesthesia between sight and touch. So in his case there is a further story to be told of how his paintings, whatever forms he uses, are made: what we might call the craft dimension of Reed's art. It relates to the how rather than to the what of his marks. But it also explains why seeing them provokes the impulse to touch.

It is inherent to one notion of craft that its tasks are covered by rules and can be delegated, say, to studio assistants. There is another kind of craft, how-

ever, that is synonymous with exercising what Kant calls the “talent for producing that for which no definite rule can be given.” It is metaphysically untransferable. The artist, Kant writes, perhaps “does not know himself how he comes by his ideas.” Preparing the surface can typically be delegated. Marking the surface cannot. The making of a painting by David Reed involves a back-and-forth between the two kinds of tasks at every step of the process.

Reed uses both stretched linen canvases and Solid Ground panels for his paintings. For the past several years, he has initially painted his surfaces with gradational bands of color, typically numbering from four to eight, progressing either from the lightest to the darkest values of a given hue or through a sequence of hues all of the same value. (Reed is emphatic in saying that he is more interested in value than in hue.) When I first visited Reed’s studio last year as he began work on #439, the painting, with its uninflected bands of yellow, looked like a somewhat bland abstraction. In general, these bands vary in value or hue as well as in width. Widths are graduated so that the lightest band is the narrowest and the darkest band the widest—or vice versa. As a rule, three sets of panels are made using the same scheme of bands. Two of these will be stored for future use.

The bands, which may or may not survive as the painting progresses, serve as what I think of as value-indicators. They connect Reed to a system of coloration he learned from his studies of Baroque painting. Baroque painters knew two ways of using color to create the illusion of space. In *chiaroscuro*, the painter moves from highlight to shadow by changing the values of a single hue, as in, say, a single-colored angelic garment. In the other system—*colori cangianti*—Baroque painters juxtaposed bright hues of a similar value, achieving the maximal degree of coloration that would remain consistent with the demands of creating illusionistic space. *Colori cangianti* makes it possible for Reed’s dark colors to be exactly as intense as his light ones. Because of his sometimes lurid hues, I think of his painting as Manhattan baroque—or, as with the cheeky red and mustard of #439, Las Vegas baroque.

Characteristically, Reed checks the colors he intends to use against the bands on top of which they will be laid, using plastic wrap to see what the optical effects will be. This is the part of the process that cannot be consigned to anyone else. He improvises one of the swirled dilating serpentine or ribbonlike forms that have become his pictorial signature. His craft is to

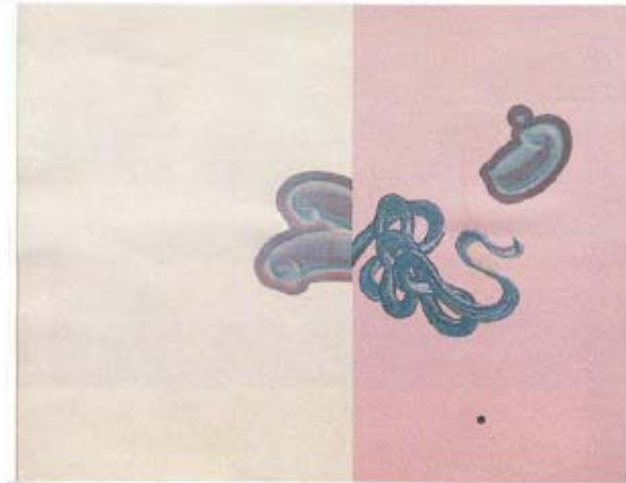


now like islands in an archipelago. The forms are illusory, in the Baroque tradition, but touch barely registers their edges. The brush marks are of a kind to imply heavily physical paint, which touch then refutes. The entire surface has been restored to planarity. The white and pink areas are painted in. The eel-like form is added last. The value-indicator bands will have been sanded away, but one can just discern what remains as two adjacent bands meet as a subtle variation in value inside the rococo forms.

While many of David Reed's paintings do not find their way into videos—#439 is an example—others do. In 1996, Reed inserted #358 into an episode from the '80s television series *Crime Story*. As with *Judy's Bedroom* (or *Scottie's Bedroom*), the painting was shown physically, as well as in an image in the video, which played continuously on a television monitor. The episode is set in a motel room in Las Vegas, and the installation itself—painting, modified videotape, and a fabricated headboard simulating the one we see in the video—was first exhibited in that city. The motel room has been taken over by detectives as temporary headquarters. They moved in desks and removed the bed, leaving only the headboard, evidently attached permanently to the wall.

Somehow, the implication of an absent bed gave a certain loneliness to the painting that Reed had inserted into the clip, and by extension to #358, displayed on the gallery wall. When the work was exhibited at Max Protetch in 1998, it occurred to the artist to video-record visitors to the gallery as they gathered to look at the painting. And in the next venue, he showed this tape together with the *Crime Story* video next to #358 and the fabricated headboard.

The *Crime Story* installation is still evolving. In a recent venue, the headboard was removed—perhaps the concept of a bedroom painting does not go with the idea of abandoned bedrooms. The various installations serve as devices through which Reed explores a number of near-philosophical questions bearing on our relationship to paintings. They are about whatever painting they show, as object and as video image. But they are also about pictorial perception, as well as something deeper than vision, which the concept of the bedroom painting seeks to capture. It would perhaps be impossible to raise these questions with a painting by itself, where our relationship should be instead personal and erotic. The installations explain what Reed hopes his paintings will achieve in terms of human feeling. □



***COLORI CANGIANTI* ALLOWS REED'S DARK AND LIGHT COLORS TO BE EQUALLY INTENSE. BECAUSE OF HIS AT TIMES LURID HUES, I THINK OF HIS WORK AS MANHATTAN BAROQUE—OR, GIVEN THE CHEEKY RED AND MUSTARD OF #439, LAS VEGAS BAROQUE.**



David Reed, #439 (in progress), 2008-09, oil and alkylid on linen, 800 x 1027. Sequence: clockwise from top left.

