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Patricia Treib at Wallspace, New York

Exhibitions / Jeffrey Stuker



Patricia Treib, installation view at Wallspace, New York.

Walking through Patricia Treib's exhibition at Wallspace we find ourselves confronted with paintings that explore their own surfaces as accumulations of pigment, lines tracing the movement of their own becoming under brush and stain. Yet, simultaneously, while continuing to explore these paintings, we find ourselves arrested by references to startlingly recognizable objects. Reading the titles of the works as we come into the gallery we enter a threshold we cannot leave throughout our tour of the exhibition: a space in which the contours of the name (such as Camera II, Glass Clock, or Cuff) no longer define their object.

According to their titles, the exhibition circulates three exemplary objects for the act of painting to confront: the camera, the clock, and the blouse. But, as paintings, they depict the process of painting and repainting far more than they delineate objects in an external reality. Realizing the extent to which the figure of the camera, the clock, and the blouse return in the 12 paintings comprising this exhibition, the word "repetition" comes to mind. But one should not mistake "repetition" as the referent of these works, confusing the paintings for the serially produced products their names

evoke. Rather these compositions resemble themselves, insisting upon the intervals between themselves as physical objects, and as acts of depiction. To insist upon the interval, rather than the ostensible object repeated in each representation means, for Patricia Treib, to expand the gap between observation and representation to the point where both lose the definition circumscribed by habit.

For example, the three paintings entitled Device, Devices, and Camera II, deal with the photographic apparatus in nine variations of a shape that, tightly and, more often, loosely, corresponds to the noun “camera.” Thinking of this name, a sound-image that plays in our mind as we approach the surfaces of these three paintings, we can make out a single-lens reflex camera with jutting telephoto lens, and two smaller point-and-shoots protected by their leather cases. Yet to call what one sees on the surface of these paintings “cameras”"— simply, and finally-would be a grave mistake. The calligraphic lines that would represent the camera’s neck- straps, unfurl according to their own physics, dividing the space of each of these three camera- compositions into planes of nearly flat color, painted with a nimble hand that playfully echoes the the lines of the straps that border them. Following the direction of the liquid brushstrokes, the viewer’s eye moves to the upper left corner

of the painting where attention has been drawn to its material condition as suspended pigment. At this point it becomes quite difficult to say we look at anything but a painting;

its sensorial actuality bears no relation to an accurate repeating mechanism or a digital quantification. To make this point even stronger the painting invites usinto an extremely ambiguous space around the extended lens of the camera in the top left side of the painting. In the three compositions of cameras this shape appears simultaneously as “negative” space falling behind the camera lens, and a kind of cut-out rising to the very top of the painted surface. This shape draws attention to itself as a sudden emergence of contrast: in a midtone gray against ink black in one composition, as neutral white against warm gray in a second composition, and bright red against blue in the third composition. But volumes. receding in space, rendered by easy default in the light-tight chambers of photographic devices, become impossible in this composition. Does this shape mark tight curves of a focus ring on the outer edge of the photographic lens? If so, why would this photographic lens denoted in the painting (and perhaps the most recognizable object in any of Treib’s paintings to date), confront the viewer with such damaged symmetry? The optical elements of this lens would prove themselves utterly incapable of focusing light to a sharp point to create a clear image. This point of contrast that draws our attention to painting's ability to show near and far simultaneously, carries over into the experience of comparing the compositions among themselves. Each painting depicts this ambiguous space differently. The lens projects out far more “realistically” in one, whereas in another, a cloud-like negative space floats over and “distorts” the shape of the lens. The paintings show, with disconcerting simultaneity, the interval between the cameras, the painter's rlegard, and the composition which organizes their forms.

Device, Devices, and Camera II summon the prized mechanism of monocular vision (just think for a moment of the words single-lens-reflex). But by making paintings based within the limits of the camera as a product of industrial design, Treib’s group of three compositions reject the logic o!f camera vision, and the sequentiality of images as numbered frames recorded in linear time. *

The simultaneity of multiple views in a single picture-plane demands an understanding

of time at odds with the sequence traced in repeated circles by the clock's hands. This is why the presence of a clock appearing in another set of repeated compositions proves

so striking: without its hands, it cannot strike. With her series of paintings based on the time-reckoner, Treib has returned to an earlier composition based on an art deco clock first shown at Golden Gallery in 2010. Common to the visual description of the clock in each

of these paintings are two planes of glass that frame the clock's dial. By their cropping, these paintings render that dial invisible, or rather simultaneously transparent and reflective-so much so that the viewer cannot tell reflected light from refracted light. In this way the particular clock painted continues to "tell time," as the fleeting reflection of the objects and bodies around it. Therefore, the paintings of the clock carry out a similar task to the paintings confronting the camera as a contra-photographic-

vision of ambiguous intervals and collapsed spaces. The clock calls upon the figure par excellence of the model of temporality Treib's paintings question most: chronometric time. If the clock (as referent) marks its seconds with an invariable repetition, Treib's paintings of this clock mark the time of each painting's making with a variability of line weight, color, and perspective that render the clock as a face of transient intervals.

Treib's paintings have the unique ability to conjure a figure for a way of seeing and model of time in order to confront this figure with its own failure to follow out its proposed mission. Once time and sight have dislodged themselves from the normative model of vision (called monocular) and the dominant model of time (called chronometric), Treib's paintings rehearse an alternate model of time and vision in which visual documents and ordered recordings of the past give way to an alternate form of remembrance. Each of the figures, or "exemplary objects" returning throughout the present exhibition represent organa of remembrance: the photographic film on which past-time is voluntarily memorized; an art deco clock recalling an earlier period but also the standard medium of remembrance; and a blouse from the era of our parents' youth, which, like all clothes, carries even its color the smell of the person who might once have worn it.

The last example, that of the radiance of past-time through details of clothing, stands

out as the best template for the alternate model of remembrance promised by Treib's paintings. Time resides in fashion (and all clothes are touched by fashion as a signifying system), in the cut, the pattern, the fabric, and above all the color of garments. Fashion constantly cites its earlier moments, so much so that to say that a blouse is "very now" is generally to say a blouse perfectly merges 1949 and 1994 to anticipate the "look" that will become mainstream in 2014. Treib's paintings reach further. The garment sleeves that one critic rightfully described as —simply—-refreshingly—pleasant to look at," attach themselves simultaneously to the dark shoulder of forgotten forms, which are not always refreshing or pleasant. In Blouse, Guise, Cuff and Drape, Treib has repainted an isolated sleeve from

a fading photocopy of Saint Pareskevi, first painted by an anonymous hand during the early 15th century in Novgorod.! ! In Treib's paintings, color too becomes citational; though color may start from observation and can still be found as traces. Two paintings in Treib's show cite the palette of

historical paintings outright. Blouse cites the color relationships in Matisse’s Blouse Roumaine, fond rouge et bleu, 1937, while Devices cites Milton Avery's Greenwich Village Couple from 1946. Color offers an appropriate place to end these reflections on the current exhibition at Wallspace, for, in it painting retains its ability to evoke a definite past while mistrusting, at every step, history's privileged discourses and devices.

—The paintings carry out this rejection of sequential time by showing three repeating compositions in spatial arrangements that could not possibly all define the same volume. In this way the camera, with its one eye that has come to stand-in for the human creature's two eyes, finds its appropriate composition of three cameras pointing in different directions, their straps linking them as if to say the multiplicity of “perspectives” inheres simultaneously in vision.

Jeffrey Stuker