

HYPERALLERGIC: Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Flawed Diamonds: Recent Painting at Exit Art

by Daniel Larkin on February 3, 2010



Jesse Chapman, "The Lens" (2009) (courtesy Exit Art)

Jesse Chapman's painting of the struggle to stick a contact into an eye, "The Lens" (2009), strikes me as an apt allegory for recent painting. It is one of the gems from Exit Art's shining survey of contemporary painting, *New Mirrors: Painting in a Transparent World*, that is set to close this weekend.

Much like this uncomfortable morning ritual, painting is caught in an awkward moment. Like the nearsighted allegory looking in the mirror, it is keenly self-aware of its need for a new way of seeing and a new lens through which to gaze. With scowling lips, it begrudgingly prepares for the many vain attempts it takes on a rough morning (or try a rough decade) to get that lens in properly.

An ambiguous pink splotch lies on the contact's surface. Whether it's a glimmer of light or a menacing protein particle on the verge of irritating the eye is open to speculation. In a theoretical twist, let's assume that the allegory actually knows it's a protein particle and fantasizes that the blotched vision and searing pain will actually inspire and revitalize its creativity.

Just as our allegory emerges as a glutton for punishment, this theme of embracing what looks mistaken and flawed for its untapped vibrancy jumps out in every painting on view at Exit Art's painting show.

For example, In Benin Ford's "Frame of a Middle Passage" (2009), the sea rolls back and forth beneath a cloudy sky. But the seascape is depicted in an imperfect

pointillist idiom. Some of the dots are not completely full – like a third grader who quit before filling in the entire answer bubble on a standardized test. Spacing between the dots oscillates between tightly packed phalanxes and looser clusters where the gaps open up wider. The total effect of these subtle inconsistencies is a blanket of mist across the picture plane. Such ocean spray could never be conveyed in a rigidly classical pointillism.

Kadar Brock's silhouettes are on the brink of dissolving back into a jumble of lines and neon accidents. In his portrait of Delacroix, "Eugene Delacroix, Dante and Virgil Crossing the River Styx" (2009), every swathe of paint possesses its own kind of texture and facture, which really alienates these elements from each other. And yet a resemblance to Delacroix still somehow coalesces. There is such an intense tug of war between the desire to perceive the painting as an assortment of unrelated and accidental brush strokes on the one hand and as a portrait on the other. This intense back-and-forth charges the picture with an electricity that fluorescent colors can accentuate.

Andy Piedilato's paintings take bricks to formal places they don't normally reach in painting. Bricks recur in his works as these unstable and wobbly grids. It's like some strange alternate version of the *Three Little Pigs*, where the wolf actually managed to compromise the brick house. "Yellow Tube" (2008) has bricks contorting, bending and collapsing in a rich clutter of activity. It is so clever to bend something predictably rigid and to expose the hidden appeal of flawed geometry.

Confucius once said, "Better a diamond with a flaw than a pebble without." Modern art's preoccupation with perfectionism climaxed with minimalist works that feel about as imaginative as pebbles. The tide has turned and this show demonstrates how contemporary painters are milking the flawed, the mistaken, the wobbly, and the accidental for all its potential. Inelegance deserves more credit. Just as you might catch yourself spouting off obscenities in the same exact sequence as your father, craving your grandmother's signature mediocre side dish, or giggling at the same three typos your boss repeats over and over again, the imperfections of the human satire can earn a precious place in our hearts. On the visual level, flaws can likewise strike our eyes as mesmerizing and uncanny. The coolest mirrors are always cracked.

<http://hyperallergic.com/2858/>