

Notes on Strangers

Sets

7 Eyes	Three Mouths, Three Trash Cans
7 Eyes (3 Green)	One Mouth, One Trash Can
7 Eyes (4 Green)	Three Brick Sections (White)/
7 Mouths	Three Brick Sections (Black)
7 Noses	Three Mouths, Three Brick Sections
9 Trash Cans	One Mouth, One Trash Can (White)

Overpasses

Overpass Reflections One
Overpass Reflections One (Three Mouths, Three Noses)
Overpass Reflection Studies One
Overpass with Background
Overpass with Three Mouths

Night Fence

Night Fence (Backgrounds)
Night Fence (Sediments)
Night Fence (Reflections)

The first eyes crept into the paintings in 2006. I applied the image of a single eye and eye lid drawn in black outline as a means of disrupting what I decided was an overly harmonious painting of clouds. Initially I considered this a beneficially self destructive act. Staleness had set into my repeated use of the cloud motif. These clouds had held a central position in the small collection of icons that I was painting repeatedly at the time. Though it had begun its life in my work as a very purely symbolic and lone image of impending upheaval and pejorative uncertainty, its versatility had led me to experiment with it as smoke, thought bubbles and in multiple arrangements. Drawing the cloud, or what I had opened into essentially a lumpy closed line indicating by context what it represented, became repetitive. I attributed this to overuse and to a sense of compositional safety, hence the disruption of the eye. But the reason I begin a discussion of the sets with a comparison of the eye and the cloud is that I believe the problem I began to have with the cloud was not overuse but misuse. In multiplying the identity of the line that constructed the cloud, saying the same line deployed in different configurations would have different meanings, divorced the cloud from the specificity that had given the early shaped work meaning. On the other hand, the eye is complex, though repeatable, its line cannot be manipulated to mean another thing, what I'm interested in is an anchor, an immutable fact with which to steady the increasingly expressionist and abstract elements of my paintings.

The Image if Unreconstructable...

Walking through the Modern I stopped in front of one of de Kooning's black paintings. They are unique in their attempt to banish the figure, the armature of most de Koonings I can think of. This absence led me to a specific thought, I knew for myself that I considered this a great painting, yet I also knew that when I turned away I would lose its image almost entirely. Meaning I must be in front of this painting to understand it compositionally, to know what it looks like. This was contrasted in the later galleries by many paintings but explicitly by "The Marriage of Reason and Squalor" Stella's, also black, monumental milestone painting.

Considering these extremes is essential. I choose de Kooning rather than Pollock though the drip paintings are possibly more important to experience physically. That physicality points to Pollock's contribution to the idea that paintings are both constructed and viewed as an experience, that the viewer can connect to the body doing the work. Pollock led the way out of painting. He created a line which is meaningful when it happens, meaningful for the moment in which it happens. Afterwards it is a record, a footprint, sometimes literally. De Kooning's line is considered, and made forward. It is something he does for us to look at after it is painted. It feels crucial in determining what de Kooning's composition means that his mark finds meaning after it is made, while Pollock's finds meaning during its creation. De Kooning is attempting to make a painting without compositional signposts. It has repeated forms, but no foreground or background, no anchored moment, yet it lacks the repetitiveness of a true "all over painting." Most importantly, it is made by a classically trained artist who is intuitively aware of the value scale of reality, a person trained to paint real places and real things.

Stella presents a counter argument to de Kooning's black paintings, even while attempting to forward the cause of true abstract painting. Stella's black paintings are not as unique in his oeuvre as the older artist's are; these black striped paintings led Stella all the way to the protractor paintings, spanning nearly half his career. It is not the modernist lineage, the march towards flatness, that holds my interest. It is what can be understood philosophically from these differing compositions. These black paintings define the concept of a reconstructable painting. Stella creates a painting whose image is contained in a few explainable details; black enamel on linen/canvas, the width of a chip brush, concentric rectangles with their bottom side missing. This is a painting whose image can be held in the mind and considered independently of its viewing, it is a painting that can be said. Its description is itself.

This is not important for painting's formal implications. What this formal divergence says about the artists philosophies is. I'm reminded of the abstract expressionists term for a finished painting: "resolved." This term was passed on to me pedagogically, unexamined I always found it to mean simply "done." But there is a way in which the de Kooning can never be resolved, its meaning is within its many meanings. The Stella on the other hand is clearly resolved, and meant to be so. This distinction is philosophical, Stella believes there is an answer, de Kooning, in these works, does not. So when the de Kooning piece is resolved it is resolved to be forever moving, he has found a work that doesn't lay down anywhere or give our eyes a home. It is profoundly pessimistic, and wonderfully generous to give us such beauty out of that pessimism.

An Other Not To Be Found...

De Kooning's pessimism, his paintings without resolution, his expressionism with no fixed meaning is more important to painters working now than the legacy of Stella. The unreconstructable image is active, current. It always implies the present tense, in that way always explaining never concluding.

The evolution of painting into a practice concerned with its own image and its relationship to its support has isolated the medium from other disciplines. Painting's rivalry with photography has risen from an honest consideration of the critical implications of reproduction to an out-and-out feud with technology. No chance on this one for any of us. Camera's got it all over painting in questions of seriality and mimesis. There is no better tool for those investigations, the camera intercepts all modern forms of mechanical reproduction. Even its ancestors lithography and printmaking, once exclusive means of reproduction have been altered by the implications of the fidelity of the lens. In order to breathe painting cannot define itself in terms of these developments, and it cannot define itself in terms of painting. It has to ask itself to be art, simply.

Painting should not turn to another medium or technology to define itself by contrast, painting has to look at reality. de Kooning's classical training, not totally unique amongst abstract expressionists, was at least, uniquely rigorous. Consider what it means for an abstract painting to hold itself to the physical standard of reality. That standard is the standard of what the eye can see. This is the limitless area of painting. A complex painting's ability to mimic the visual world, to provide the range of information and the physical clues that make up the seen world, give it the ability to advance any unreal reality. The veracity of a photograph may be undermined by digital manipulation, or older darkroom techniques, but the components will always be visible and the components will always obey the rules of our physical world. Uniquely, painting can construct any world, place, or set of things giving it the authority of the real through execution but leaving its logic and implications to be determined by thought, no constraints. Painting is thought manifested as a reality--not the thing but the act of recognizing the thing and its relation to ourselves.

Clues or visual cues construct these real spaces. The key to this slip, the unreal into the real, is the shorthand by which we simplify our visual lives. We won't ask the de Kooning painting to obey perspective, or to show a clear vase full of water holding a flower as if it were tangibly before us. The de Kooning will, however, push one plane of black in front of another. It will show us something we know from experience. It will show a highlight that is feasibly balanced elsewhere by a shadow. These are the cues we use to locate specificity, to grab the plate we would like to grab, to judge one glass on the table from another. This concentration on the specific is how we observe and obey the yellow lines on the road and not the trees, grass, deer, houses, mailboxes and clouds that are within our field of vision. This is the same logic by which an impressionist painting of a man in a room might really seem to be a man in a room. Just none that we've seen before. And in my experience this explains the brittle efficacy of photo realist painting. The higher the detail in some ways causes the eye to search for the reassurance that it is just paint, where the lesser attempt towards photographic detail the quicker one might know that it is paint and spend their time trying to see what the paint is doing.

The Anchor and Notes on Strangers...

The problem is application, as usual. The effort to find an anchor for the expressionism in my work would appear totally counter to my understanding and enthusiasm for de Kooning's restless composition. I feel committed to the idea that the world is too complex to attempt to represent one image at a time. The slippage of any whole sign into various meanings falls short too. I would just be left with four or five different "answers" or definitive statements and just set about comparing them. This isn't what I see--I see no answers at all.

So I'm back to the eye and the sets. Either seems to be an example of a break with the unanswerable, the uncertain. But, there is a parallel between the eye and the space it creates through its significance as an image and the space of the abstract composition. To locate the eye, nose, mouth or ear within the language of signs or at least fix it in any place of meaning, you have to address the presence of the possible person attached to the feature. In my usage the feature can stand for the whole of an other being and then by extension an other consciousness. I try to avoid the certainty of a whole, or accurate set of features. When a set of features could possibly coalesce into a single person meaning is instantly specified. We, as 'someones', interrogate this format as a someone and try and guess who it is, what they are thinking. The part or inaccurate set of features attempts to create a multiplied other, or an unfixed consciousness.

I'm pointing in two directions at once--first towards an understanding of the blank or simplified eye, nose, mouth or ear as indicative of a multiple. Its repetition and lack of illustrative detail prevents it from resting on any particular personality, or coming to stand for any particular individual. I relate this to the abstract composition. We will never look at the black paintings and say this is such and such and that is this or that, the same way we will never look at a simple rendering of a nose or an eye and say oh this must be the postman or our friend. (Ourselves projected into the field, bouncing against the surface.) Within this lies the second direction, perhaps just further down the same road.--an understanding that this other consciousness itself is, even when specific, inaccessible.

Here is the intertwining of the abstract pessimism and psychological pessimism. I don't understand what comfort one could take from understanding that the other is inaccessible. The finality of that thought is very much against any natural urge to work at relationships and moments of interaction or really to hope to seize control within those moments. But relief at relieving oneself of an impossible task is liberating. To say I will never really exist in co-thought with another is more of an intention to recognize that I may have been concentrating in the wrong space. Understanding is not reached across and into the mind of another, it is reached in the space between one and another. This space is the one of whirling uncertainty where projection happens, hopes and fears land all over the surface of everything we interact with. They bounce off and around and are interpreted sympathetically or according to an agreement made in the shared space. Signed or unsigned, written or spoken or implied, these are the grounds for interpretation. The moments when an agreement are absent are the most traumatic or disorienting. These are the moments of fear and anger which hold us in confrontations, and supply our distrust of others. This is guessed at information. This is supposing you know another's mind and the shock and disappointment of the fact that you don't.

What does it mean to anchor a chaotic space with an image that has a decisively untethered meaning. I think it is anchoring the space of the world with the attempt to understand its components, and the acceptance of the impossibility of success in such a regard.

Finally I can say that this is the space of the paintings. A mixture of complexity and uncertainty. Compositionally an attempt to represent a between space, the space between objects and people, and people and people.

Night Fence

If its possible to see/understand a psychological space then I want to understand and underline the exit(s).

The Night Fence is a triptych made to hang opposite windows which allow eastern light. Divided into three panels the work represents three moments in the passage from sleep/semi-consciousness to sunrise and full awakening. Correlated to a walk, a night walk, the piece takes place in reflections and markings along a fence/wall as the sunrise is reflected in it. The fence itself is divided into three sections, Backgrounds, Sediments and Reflections, each corresponding to a group of pieces within the last few years of my work. The Backgrounds have existed as surfaces which receive the marks of the passage of time, as paintings they grab the transient marks of time and fix them in order to make them available for contemplation. The Sediments have always been an examination of the way language operates within the system of the Backgrounds. The Sediments are the moments when actual symbols and signs break through the rough stains and smudges of the Background surface and assert an interpretation of events on a person scale. The Reflections are an attempt at a true surface, reliant on the honesty of the mirror image.

“Till human voices wake us and we drown.” Eliot.

Night Fence (Backgrounds) is a black painting, only three pigments are used, each a type of black. Its space is unfixed, full of fragments that refer to the drowsy moment of awakening. A moment before comprehension when shadowed shapes can take on any form in the mind. Unmediated thoughts and desires alight on the surroundings. As in a night walk, the permission granted by occupying the unused part of our hours, frees the mind towards an associative state. (Backgrounds) contains shapes attempting to round into focus never fully arriving.

“The names of things accost us as we wake.” Lauterbach.

Night Fence (Sediments) comes along as perception awakes and the names of things start to register and align the visual field. The composition is dominated by a staggered brick within brick pattern, a wall that pins the space in shallow depth and arrests the lateral movement of the shapes as well. The evolving focus of the (Backgrounds) is abruptly halted by the arrival of illustrative forms, the associative states of night diffused by rising light.

“Yes I said yes I will yes.” Ulysses

Night Fence (Reflections) concludes and questions this progression. It fore goes any solidity in an attempt to represent a third state, suggesting the sunrise and its light as somehow revelatory, a moment when the restriction of the named thing, the dawning of perception may be overcome. But tempering this reading is a sense that there is still a light being shown, a space being grasped, that the focus might simply have shifted into the more indefinite space between the thing and us.

This is a culmination of an examination of things and surfaces in the paintings. There are paintings where a thing stares blankly back at us from the surface. Stacks of things sit hiding their insides and their thoughts, while only their surroundings reveal what may be described as an attitude towards or of their interior. I believe the paintings are everything else but the thing. I have shifted my focus from in the insides to the space between the insides and the surfaces that there are, there is nothing else we can know.