Media culture is our best friend, and quite possibly, our worst nightmare. Thankfully, though, we live in a society that does not have a problem with this apparent contradiction. Most of us American folks, in one way or another, are media junkies; we imbibe various forms of spectacle, and it matters little whether or not this is considered by some to be a toxic habit. Our parents instructed us not to watch television, but then they never really practiced what they preached; the same applied to parental prohibitions upon sweetened cereals, cigarettes, drugs, and other things. We were hooked on the reassuring glow of the cathode ray at an early age, and yet today we don’t even think twice about this as a habit – in fact, our addiction to image-producing mechanisms has moved far beyond a self conscious condition, having now assumed an intrinsic, almost molecular genetic grip upon our corporeal selves. Are we what we watch?
We move through the culture's array of pictures, and those pictures move through us, like x-rays: we produce the images that image us, and then we have to contend with how these images have pictured the world. There is a "space," alternately symbolic and material, that exists in between the picture and its representational subject, a territory evoked in the work of Troy Brauntuch. Fusing the visual looks of photography, film, painting and printing, Brauntuch's exquisitely drawn works vibrate with the inward luminescence of a world on the brink of visibility: in a sense, the eviscerated after-image of media culture's glaring pictorial literalness.

Imagine looking at a Vermeer with the lights dimmed, and you may have procured an initial sense of the special quality of Brauntuch's day-for night, night-for-day pictures, where subject-matter appears to emanate from the inside-out.

Imagine watching television late at night as the picture-tube burns out, and as you burn out of consciousness — the after-images in your brain emerge like dancing ghosts — and perhaps you've begun to understand the quietly disturbing grace of Brauntuch's work. Stealing moments from a culture that has already converted itself into an unchecked system of freely floating images and signs, Brauntuch's work reticently offers to remake the banality of such realities into rarefied pleasures. For Brauntuch, image selection always involves an editorial relationship to the cultural inventory of pictures, and editing necessarily produces a special
focus upon the question of subject matter: mysteriously threatening figures populate a scene reminiscent of some ancient 20th Century war that has passed into an abstract province of memory; a bed sitting in what could be a hospital room that reverberates with the commonest condition of emptiness and loss; the epitome of an suburban house, bleak in its profound ordinariness; or, a train window through which we see a person's head, leaned back upon a chair - mouth agape, as if in a frozen reminder of that last exhaled invisible gram of life. What are these images? From where do they originate? Where is their "reality?" Or are they the pictorial signs of Brauntuch's invented relationship to actual situations? And why do they reek of death? Photographs represent things that have a corresponding "life" in our perception of the world; the photographic picture of the world is a representation of a prior representation, and Brauntuch's pictures are representations of a prior representation that have found their pictorial equivalent in memory. Mediation, obviously, is the key here, and Brauntuch has always understood the intimate relationship between the mediating function of pictures in contemporary life, and the construction/loss of a surrogate for historical, cultural and personal memory.

That great mystical materialist, Walter Benjamin, spoke of the power of mediation in his famous 1936 essay that analyzed the transformed condition of art and aesthetics - and human consciousness itself - in the era of reproduction, photography and cinema. Television, of course, would eventually become the most
influential extension of the aforementioned earlier reproductive technologies which Benjamin identified as having denuded art of its traditional aura and ritual value. He argued that the logic of reproduction so thoroughly mediated our relationship to the material thing-in-itself that we became more intimate with the simulacrum; this observation is still pertinent in regard to contemporary media culture with its emphasis upon confusing the conceptual and material space between “reality” and “representation.” Contemporary visual culture is also the result of an evolution of communication technologies; after all, as Benjamin argued, the invention of photography and the advent of cinema were the logical next steps following the history of the printing press, lithography, and other early modern forms of reproduction. Photography and the cinema revolutionized our conception of history and historical time, collapsing time and space into a new framework of representations – making fiction seem factual, while transforming reality into a wonderful fiction. Television, transporting the magic of cinema into the domestic space, serves up reality as if it were a banal drama, and promotes fiction as if it were the gospel truth.

“When everything that was directly lived had moved away into a representation, there was no real life, yet no other life seemed real.”

– Greil Marcus

How could art, and in particular painting, ever hope to compete for our attentions in a society devoted to the sensational visuality
of spectacle that Guy Debord happily evoked for us in the 1960s – or the “faked” sensations that a more skeptical Jean-Francois Lyotard complained about in the early 1980s? Well, this had been the dilemma for painting and the visual arts that Benjamin originally broached, and which was re-visited in Clement Greenberg’s seminal 1939 essay “Avant Garde and Kitsch.” And, when Lawrence Alloway (credited with having coined the phrase “pop art”) responded somewhat belatedly to Greenberg’s brilliantly articulated elitism in the 1958 essay, “The Arts and Mass Media,” the heated debates were once again rekindled; the lines had been drawn between those who favored a dialectical understanding of the relationship between visual art and general culture, and those who demanded a suite for life in the Hotel Ivory Tower.

On historical terms, there have been numerous dilemmas for painting, including Frank Stella’s clinical fade to black in 1958/59 as an attempt to avoid the operatic emotional implications of Abstract Expressionism, or Donald Judd’s more ideologically-based rejection of abstract painting as something which could never overcome its relational/compositional basis to become “purely” non-relational/unitary geometry – for instance, stacked aluminum rectilinear structures. But the rise of both American and European versions of Pop Art in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as its emergent commercial success in the 1970s, galvanized diverse and often antithetical critical responses. Alloway, of course, not only called for a new definition of culture that would eradicate the symbolic and political boundaries between
high and low, but also strenuously defended the right of artists to incorporate materials from any cultural source into their visual practices. Ironically, a number of critics in the early 1960s argued that the Pop painters had resurrected the great 19th Realist tradition, while still others claimed that painters such as Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and even Sigmar Polke were merely repeating the debased languages of kitsch culture. The "truth," as we now know, lies somewhere in between. The Pop Artists re-invented the terms of representational language, so that models of representation once again became viable for artists in the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

Over the past 30 years, certain evangelical ideologues of modernism got down on their hands and knees, hoping and praying that abstract painting would "save" us (the putative executors of high culture) from the demons of popular culture, but we know what happened: nobody listened to their inappropriate confusion of morality, cultural ideology and artmaking. In actuality, it was all over for the evangelical ideologues of modernism when one of their (anti)heroes, Jackson Pollock, the splatter-king of the 1940s and 50s New York art scene, became the poster boy for progressive culture for Life Magazine. The popularization of Pollock and his work in a lengthy photo-spread – in what was then the most widely-read magazine in America – exploded the argument that abstract painting did not belong to everyday culture, putting the lie to the suggestion that abstraction belonged merely to the exclusive historical unfolding of artistic modernism. But there
were other, perhaps more significant effects: the moment reproductions of those drip-paintings were incorporated into the pages of Life Magazine, they became iconographic threads comprising the fabric of popular American culture, and Pollock himself was elevated, uneasily, to the level of an art folk-hero – a rebel with an avant-garde cause. Here, in a weird sort of cultural convergence, Abstract Expressionist painting momentarily became a pictorial and design element of the mainstream print media, even though it was resolutely abstract in its visual condition. After this point, even the most “difficult” kind of abstract or representational painting would also have to be understood within the context of a larger social frame, and not only on the terms of specialized art culture. In a sense, the Pollock situation can be understood as a model for how popular culture takes hold of the intrinsic visual conditions of art in order to “represent” the society’s progressive relationship to vanguard culture – and, how, conversely, the visual arts inevitably spill their formal contents and ideas back into the realm of mass media.

There's no question that Pollock's “infiltration” had a profound impact upon how younger visual artists would begin to (re)define themselves in relation to the larger culture. For instance, it undoubtedly provided the groundwork – after Duchamp – for an artist such as Rauschenberg to begin using materials from “everyday” culture as the basis for his combine-paintings. Didn't Rauschenberg, after all, desire to work in that hypothetical – or “real” – space between “art and life”? And wasn't he the one who
introduced photo-silkscreen process to the realm of painting, in
order to facilitate incorporating the already always reproduced
images – i.e., banal pictures – of American society into the
pictorial syntax of post Abstract Expressionism? Rauschenberg,
then, demanded a symbolic entry into media culture, knocking
hard on the door of everyday social experience.

Devouring images & information from television, cinema, adver-
tising and the Internet like parched animals at a watering hole, we
actually drink up our own images as they are reflected back to
us on the gleaming surface of a grand cultural reservoir. Surface,
of course, is still everything today in media culture, because, after
all, there’s very little time for depth. Depth, oddly enough, has
become an effect of surface, and so absorption occurs on the level
of surface, as with television. The space of cinema is more
complex, but it too reveals the collapse of depth into surface,
in the very way that cinema replaces the traditional theater’s
“real” space with a fully illusionistic (i.e., purely imagistic/ rep-
resentational) space that displaces stage onto screen. Everything
about the space of movies feels more real, until you wake from the
dream in which you’ve been suspending “reality,” and find your
body within just as artificial space as a traditional theater. In
Brauntuch’s work, there is the suggestion that the illusion of
depth itself – i.e., a quality of space – has been folded back into
or onto the surface, so that the viewer becomes absorbed into a
kind of negative space that threatens to attenuate into sheer sur-
face – but never superficiality. Constructing pictorial “presence”
in order to break it down, the spatial complexity and iconographic "virtuality" of Brauntuch's art signifies the flip-side of media culture's need to reproduce itself as incontrovertibly existent, even though his pictorial language is thoroughly based in that flowing river of photographic signs. However, rather than floating downstream, Brauntuch's art endeavors to suspend the continuous flux just long enough so that a focused, selective, recognition can emerge. For what purpose? Simply, to extract a depth of meaning from the sheer artifice of visual proliferation.

Ironically, the ideologues of modernist painting claimed that abstraction was the key to constructing a depthless or space-free picture – in other words, an anti-pictorial space. In a sense, that's what painting has never really been able to accomplish: the collapse however, flirt with this paradoxical condition: they exist somewhere in between photography's intrinsic depthlessness or pictorial hyper-superficiality (a residual effect of the photographic negative, the substrate of representation), and the space of the canvas itself – a physical plane that can never completely defeat the claims of illusionism. In Warhol, a marriage had been consummated between the "abstract" space of the canvas (as blank slate, tabula rasa to be filled-up with pictorial information), and the "representational" apparatus of photography. And, since the late 1960s, Gerhard Richter's practice has dwelled upon the question of how the immediacy of photographic representation can find adequate re-representation within – or translation into – the space of painting. As his recent "Atlas" project revealed,
Richter is not so much concerned with the representational "veracity" of photography for its own sake, since he understands the camera to be an instrument of recording pictorial information that will find eventual translation into either an abstract or representational code.

Whereas Richter shows a predilection for triggering conceptual/formal confusions between the mimetic capacities of painting and photography, and also defers from making a profound conceptual distinction between abstraction and representation, Brauntuch subsumes these apparent distinctions by evaporating the image to such a degree that it begins to disassemble into its abstracted after-image. Brauntuch creates a world that seems to have been already always reproduced in the guise of pictures, and thereby mediated into virtual visual obscurity. From the moment he emerged on the pluralist New York scene of the late 1970s with generational peers such as David Salle, Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein and Robert Longo, Brauntuch cleverly avoided the problem of being pigeonholed as a particular type of artist by working with a number of closely related media: lithography, silk-screening, photography, and pencil & crayon drawing. Braun-tuch, like a number of his contemporaries, articulated a keen preoccupation with the status of pictures: how pictures make meaning, how they indicate political and social power (and how political and social power accrues to them), and why they hold such tremendous fascination for American culture in particular. And while the Pop Artists laid the foundation for this kind of
cultural discussion, it was Brauntuch and his cohorts who sparked the second important wave of critical debate by making work that was as visually sensuous as it was conceptually analytical. Brauntuch, in particular, has always subjected the image-world to rigorous scrutiny on the way towards making those final formal decisions; he sifts through the morass of visual information before selecting particular images that will eventually undergo transformation, to be re-invented as gleaming gems. Brauntuch is anything but your run-of-the-mill appropriationist, incorporating the visual products of media culture in an entirely egalitarian manner. Rather, he often seems drawn to a particular genre of picture: images that are ominous, scenes pregnant with an imminent moment of violent resolution, or filled with the residue of some recently passed traumatic episode.

The source-material for his iconography, however, remains virtually cloaked, eloquently mystified. Recognition is not impossible, but delayed to the point where the act of recognition itself begins to lose value for us: the scent of recognition is Brauntuch's gift to the viewer. In this way, the literal iconic-representational source of that scent fades into a darkness that signifies a certain kind of semiotic suspension, where meaning hangs in the balance. Brauntuch is not interested in giving it all away to the viewer at first – or at last – glance. And while this artist's imagination is fed by a world already mirrored in its own images, his works seem to present the un-presentable: that which lies behind the clarity of the mirror-image, or exists on the other
side of media culture's tendency to emphasize the information-based power of pictures. What is the velocity of a photograph compared with the velocity of a painting? Brauntuch answers this question by making drawings that appear to conflate painting and photography into a hybrid that operates at a unique speed, allowing recognition to unfold, simultaneously, at different rates. If you close your eyes immediately after looking at a Brauntuch, the after-image will be sharper than the original itself, which suggests that the latent pictorial matter of his images catches fire in the brain, finding an enhanced enunciation through the conduits of visual memory. Oddly enough, it's almost the inverse of the optical effect that occurs after you watch television for hours, and then shut your eyes to watch the image ghosts that dance about like fireflies, gradually fading out of view. Most significantly, though, Brauntuch is always speaking about how the present is articulated through the past, and how history is rendered through the present. He transports the putative "truth" of the photographic image into the fantasy-based realm of pictorial invention, revealing history and historical time to be extensions of the narrative structure of memory.

Media culture turns us on the moment we turn it on, and then it occasionally turns us against ourselves, as we become creatures ravenously seeking more and more spectacle and cognitive oversaturation – to the point where we begin consuming our own self-images. Yes, we are certainly able to distinguish between the representation of the thing and the thing itself, but we are more
apt to inadvertently conflate the two. Nothing exists outside of
the real, but life may indeed exist beyond or before the condition
of representation. Or perhaps not. Formerly pictures, now oblique
signs that tip-toe along the periphery of visibility; here today,
gone tomorrow, and then here today again. Brauntuch looks at
the world as if it were shrouded in the darkest of mists, and then
generously sheds just a sufficient quantity of light upon those
situations that we might have ordinarily missed, or that we’ve
allowed to pass us by. We know that photography gave us the
means to slow down the world by capturing distinct moments, but
we also understand that this same apparatus accelerated our vision
– sending our eyes speeding through the world like a locomotive.
Photography speeds things up by slowing things down, and slows
things down with alacrity – that’s one of photography’s great
paradoxes. Re-creating the representational conditions of
photography by hand, through the instrument of drawing, Braun-
tuch injects a kind of nominal, corporeal physicality into the
picture-plane, thereby putting the breaks on the everyday velocity
of photographic images.

Light – as Rembrandt revealed to us like no other artist before him
– gives form, physicality, and plasticity to the things that hide in
the dusk of representational luminescence. Light, it was once said,
gives life to everything that is antithetical to existence. It’s an
abstract, immaterial stuff that endows the semblance of materiality
upon objects that only “exist” – or appear to take form – within
the realm of representation. Light is representation in a nascent
stage of revealing. Deprive film of the touch of light, and the image will not come. Brauntuch extracts light from the photographic subjects he selects for re-representation, thereby creating a picture on the verge of perceptual extinction.

“What these pictures show, present, depict, picture is only what is always already another picture.”

— Douglas Crimp

Television, the global computer network, the cinema, print media: these increasingly interconnected apparatuses promise to bring everything into view, translating the fragments of the world into a grand image-text inventory. What can’t be translated into an image—a non-image? And what is a non-image? Merely an abstraction of mind. Contemporary Americans, a defiantly diverse social (anti)group, do share one profound thing: an appetite for clarity. We seek clarity in all things, in all human affairs, and we generally want this clarity in a hurry. This is one of the reasons that violence has such a strong appeal to the already voyeuristic tendencies of folks in the U. S. — violence has an immediacy unlike anything else. We heard the news today, oh boy—commuters on a train were shot and killed by a derailed gunman. We saw the images on the covers of a hundred newspapers and magazines, transmitted through a million television screens, and we became numbed, as usual. The violent incident had been mediated—i.e., sensationalized—into oblivion; reproduced to the point of abject banality. The disseminated pictures which index any violent act
transform all of us into voyeurs hungry for more vicarious pleasure, and Brauntuch's art suggests that voyeurism is also a means of establishing a more intimate, even sensuous, relationship to the "reality" that precedes — or exists somewhere behind — an image, or the "real" even itself. Using widely publicized crime-scene images of a New York train shooting incident as the basis for his recent pictures, Brauntuch reaches inside the banality of the appropriated image, penetrating beyond the surface to capture the emptiness at the heart of these pictures: death. Not merely physical death, but death at the hands of media culture's promiscuous attachment to image-reproduction.

Clarity promises something alluring that it can deliver: it engenders quickness of cognition, perception, interaction. Perhaps it's a residue of the pragmatism associated with the Protestant (work)-ethic, maybe it's simply about the hyperactive nature of American culture generally: a culture of speed, that understands itself to be operating, moving, at a higher velocity. Apparently, there can be no clarity in sloth, in listless physical gestures, in things that verge on the abstract. Very little can remain oblique in a culture that knows itself through the surfeit of information and pure matter that it can feed back, in circular fashion, back into itself. The absence of clarity suggests ambiguity, and many people feel as if they don't have enough time in life for ambiguity. It's clarity, or nothing. Too bad, but that's the way things are. Well, there's time for the sort of split-second ambiguity experienced in that moment when you're changing television channels with a remote control.
Everything is transitory, and distraction is the basis of our collective cultural perception of the world: there seems to be an implicit prohibition upon silences, pauses, authentic recognitions and prolonged absorption. In the depthless depth of a Brauntuch work, everything happens just behind the surface of appearance, and those prohibitions are broken.