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Patti Jordan – Artist Interview with Sable Elyse Smith

Your art practice is two-fold: there is a meditation on drawing and the process of 2D image making – and an almost archival impulse to annotate “scientific phenomena.” There is much discussion in the art world about medium specific work, for example the painting is dead debate... For you how does drawing as a medium fit into the conversation of contemporary art practice today, where there is a strong and encouraged shift toward conceptual and more performative work?

It's a very slow process coming to determine the production of my images. Approaching from the conceptual often feels like an appendage. Struggling, amputating, I often come back to the body. There may be doubts as to its current relevance, yet I consider this bodily approach to be a viable art practice rife with possibilities. The performative is also inherent in the work and is two-fold; in the act of creation, and as a form of forensic evidence left on the paper's surface, conflating performative action with the realm of depiction. The sweeping and reticulation of ink leaves residue on the paper's surface and tends to bring to the forefront the question of how the drawings are made, granting some primacy to the medium; however, the naming system and classifications I assign to the works are associative and offer additional framework both formally and conceptually, if not merely in the act of recording. Reconstituting traditional mediums and pulling them across the surface functions as a means to develop my own visual lexicon, and engages me in expanded notions of the concept of drawing.

Can you talk about the performative gesture in your work? Thinking about the way you pull the poured ink across your substrate first, then start to implement traditional or familiar markmaking to the surface...Do you find this to be more performative or process orientated?

I view the performative component, based in gesture, as an extension of the body and as an act of transformation. The back and forth motion I employ with the metal squeegee is cathartic, potentially releasing levels of stored personal trauma. Based on this unconscious need to unlock personal histories, the action also creates a conversation between systems of order and intuitive knowledge. The drawings also correlate to these implementations since the imagery is linked to biomorphic abstraction, and to some degree to Surrealism and concerns for spontaneity and unlocking the unconscious through accident. When dry, I then revisit the drawings and enhance them with ink pens, graphite pencil and powder, re-establishing the relationship to traditional art practices.

What is the relationship to the chance or possible randomness of the poured ink to the more methodical implementation of specific marks and drawings? I find this relationship quite poetic in your work.

I find that working with simple dichotomies, such as mind and body, and chance and determinism, act as a means to somewhat contain or temper content. It addresses the realm of organic process and the resulting pictorial occurrences on the surface, as though the mind is revealed in the methods of making. Initially, this drawing method came from exploring gestural pours to paper in both dry and wet mediums. De-skilling with a large metal squeegee quickly led to the pursuit of precision in the act of mark making. I grant a level of autonomy to the material since the images “emerge” on paper.

You describe your practice as challenging traditional art practices can you unpack this a bit more... Specifically I'm interested in your relationship with printmaking. I see the processes you describe as almost a deconstruction of sorts.... printmaking being this process based, very technical, innovative endeavor, where as the way you are using it is more emotive and organic yet the content you are exploring with this process is pseudo-scientific and systematic. I would like to hear more of your thoughts on the use and disuse of printmaking as a necessary process to interrogate your content?

I'm very interested in experimentation and the use of destruction for purposes of creation. When printer's ink is reconstituted to high levels of viscosity with solvent, it augments fluidity. In emphasizing this, I feel than I'm bastardizing the printmaking process in a way by ramping ink up to such levels so as to produce languid, languorous form. I like the fact that this approach is out of the boundary of its craft – a sort of printmaking on the Down Low. For me, these phase states where the ink and solvents create pictorial occurrences are part of the alchemical experiment and correlate to printmaking's alchemical tendencies. In regards to your question as to the use and disuse of printmaking as a necessary process to interrogate content, I'd like to investigate in detail inks that react to other inks – to somewhat explode that a bit by introducing other printmaking chemicals and solvents. In referencing the genre of printmaking, I'm intrigued by the retinal play that exists within Early Renaissance printmaking: the variations of black and white, positive and negative

and the primacy of line, all which closely relate to the discipline of drawing. I think about the most extreme aspects of the prints of Durer, Schongauer, and Grunewald as well as Dutch anatomical art, then shifting further from representation into compositions that are potentially more disruptive. It links to the idea of exploring phase states as a formal device and then testing their visual capacity.

The scientific method is described as “a body of techniques for investigating phenomena, acquiring new knowledge, or correcting and integrating previous knowledge.” I’m curious if you see the scientific method playing a role in the work?

I apply science as a framework to create more context and to build associations. It’s vital to keep subverting the work to avoid stagnation, to keep it from ossifying. Science also functions as a subtext to cloak themes of desire and deception residing in the expressive aspects of the imagery. Inversely, it could be said that the scientific, methodical aspect of naming and classifying is in itself highly expressive. Recurring objects in my drawings are evocative but not recognizable, and classifying lends some clarity. I equate the reducing of my process and my forms down to their most remedial to Occam’s Razor – the hypothesis of economy that simpler models may capture the underlying essence of structures and have better predictive performance than more complex models. Sweeping a metal rule across the substrate to make each drawing is a way of continually “testing the razor.” It applies to both the naming and making of the works – an economy of speech and data. The simple one to two-word naming system correlates to the primordial aspect of my forms. In titling each piece, I’m attempting to describe a simple, guttural translation of form, similar to the origins of speech.

I see these works as topologies of experiential histories or an inherited or invisible history. For me these works reference the function or contents of dark matter. I reference Dark Matter for multiple reasons: The use of black and white, light and the absence of light, inverse, etc. Dark matter is used to account for certain discrepancies in cosmology, to reduce this concept down to its most remedial. But it also represents some philosophical mysteries. For me your practice functions as an archiving of dark matter of sorts... and then the drawings themselves act as a record, a palimpsest of viscera. I would love to hear your thoughts on this idea.

At a certain point in my process, matter mingles on my substrate in a state of flux. Like photographs, the images then rapidly darken and appear to “develop” on the paper, rendering the invisible visible. The inverts, or versos of my completed drawings, resemble emulsive prints such as cyanotypes and albumen prints and other 19th century photographic processes. I see the inverts as referencing the past and functioning as “shadows” of the original drawings. A certain mystic component in this mirroring process may lie in an implied transition from the corporeal to the spiritual, between the conscious and unconscious worlds, in an effort to elucidate these “experiential, inherited or invisible histories.” In this way, referencing dark matter may be an impulse to seek this liminal space – this absence – and illuminate it.