

ANNUAL

Magazine



The Un-Painter of Modern Life, Age 45, Has Died

The notion of an artist who serves as « the painter of modern life, » a figure upon whom befalls the task of representing, or even mirroring, our ephemeral passage in the world comes to us from Charles Baudelaire in the 1860s. Such reflection, the fixing of an image in time, would not always be welcome, for realism could easily serve the ends of allegory. As Baudelaire well knew, language is not alone as a symbolic realm, for so too is its painted counterpart. In less than a century's time this formulation—the painter of modern life—would have been set aside, or at least seemingly so, supplanted at first by abstraction and the camera, and eventually by all things un-painted. By the end of the

1960s, with conceptual, process and immaterial art, with earthworks, performance, film and video being practiced by nomadic and post-studio artists, the writing, and not painting, was on the wall. In many ways the wall had been dispensed with almost entirely. Taking 1968 as both a historical and poetical-political reference point, we identify this as the charged moment in which the un-painter of modern life was born. Writing now, in the first week of May, the announcement of this death is made with neither regret nor any irony intended, nearly 45 years to the day. Too young to have passed, though perhaps not soon enough.

The un-painter of modern life arrived, in a perverse coincidence, when that original task might have been revived, rather than remaining to be seen as yet another bourgeois relic. Where painted ephemera was concerned, perhaps piled upon the barricades, it may have served at least some purpose to the battle at hand. Though for this figure to be on the front lines would have appeared merely ridiculous. To paint *en plein air* would, in any case, would have been nearly impossible, with tear gas wafting over the hazy streets, while the vantage from an upper balcony would have only afforded a greater sense of distance. An omniscient view from the misty mountaintops, as it were. The camera, though not yet the obedient and ubiquitous instrument of the leisure class, would prevail in that moment as document and eyewitness.

While the un-painter may have availed him- or herself of the actual viscous material, the conflicted circumstances of that time, whether reflexively or not, called for the negation or refusal of an image. At the very least the painted image would be reduced to a single color, evenly applied to the surface of the canvas, to the systematic imprint of a paintbrush, to the repetition of stripes, which might refer to the awning that shaded the terrace bar, and to an endless circulation of rings, to what stood for painting's « zero degree. » The canvas itself would be burned, punctured or violated in various ways. In the end, what was represented, rather than a face brushed tenderly by hand or a landscape manicured with a palette knife, was the sense of anger, violence and indifference that was palpably felt. If representation was somehow an open « window on the world, » then the tradition of painting would be subjected to summary defenestration. And if the veracity of those painted fictions was expected to serve as counter-reflection, why then deny that shattered image?

BENJAMIN DEGEN

For a while I've been thinking about pictures as compositions of elements. Elements that range on a spectrum from representational—people, places, things—to abstract—pattern, text, diagram. Each individual element has its own discrete properties and when you put them together they act upon each other. They begin to function together in a co-defined condition like gears in a machine or birds in a flock, and energy transferred through the aggregated whole. It is set in motion. You get to see it all start to move as you work on it.

When you look at paintings, the motion of the picture can make an image build before your eyes. You can watch the picture make itself, or watch yourself making the picture. I was thinking in terms of abstract expressionists—of passage and gesture—the way we read a composition and our visual expectation in the encounter. How we move through a picture. How a picture can either satisfy or subvert our expectations, and how this movement of our eye and mind through a picture can make the image coalesce and dissipate. The big Jackson Pollock canvases do that as you look at them, build a very structured form and then dissipate into formlessness over and over again in a figure-eight shaped cycle.

I had been thinking about these seemingly super-fast compositions, but recently was struck by paintings that have a stillness that is so large that their movement becomes perpetual—bigger than gesture or the marks of process, more a movement of perceptual becoming, like a rock or glacier. A movement that is sublimated and becomes not physical but metaphysical movement, as with Bellini's or Titian's paintings. I saw some for the first time when I went to Italy last January. The way that Titian's *Venus of Urbino* is balanced on the edge. Something is happening and something is about to happen. It's been about to happen for almost 500 years. You can feel it and it is immense. I've always loved paintings that have that feeling. Like the pictures of the hall of the bulls of Lascaux and the way they are running, or the train that is arriving behind the wall in DeChirico.

I've been focusing on that idea, of turning towards or away, turning into something—that idea of potential energy. The beautiful thing about a painting is its power to harness this energy. You have the proposition of a narrative arc, or more abstractly an arc of "movement" that can never be fulfilled. You have, in essence, a perpetual motion machine. As much as I love movies, video art and video games, I'm usually dissatisfied by the way that in temporally-based media the movement or narrative can actually be allowed to run through its arc. It's usually not as circular as a painting, which stays contained in its plane and exists in a contained/uncontainable perpetual moment.

When I think of the perfect movie I think of Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*, which works exactly like a painting. In the end, he sits down at the piano again, and you are back at the beginning. I love that movie in the way that I love a painting. That idea of instability and possibility. The hovering that only settles for a moment. Maybe in my life I'm terrified of it, but when you realize that it's happening everywhere and forever... What had felt like chaos starts to feel like a warm buzz of everything turning—a comforting impermanence.

—Benjamin Degen
from email to BN, May 2013