

Foreword by Carolina Ongaro

Drifting, daily

Dream Divider before and after.

Can paintings act as fields of conflicting and harmonic forces? On and within their surfaces is the accumulation of sensations, territories of encounters, meshes of moments - movements in sequence, fissures revealing and activating diverse temporalities. And more broadly, how can an artwork perform that liveliness which is embedded in its form, this movement which constitutes it? Where does the performance start, and where does it end?

Nick Jeffrey belongs to a generation of artists bound less than ever to one specific discipline; a generation that instead delves into an ongoing interweaving of forms and materials. Taking painting as practice, it is indeed the blending of elements that charges the painting-object with a transformative process, devoid of an immobile configuration. Where you see a flat surface hung on a wall, it is hard not to think of that layering of paint, matter and textile as a temporal process of overlapping moments, experiences, and emotions. 'Here is my definition of modern painting's specificity: it marks, stores, scores, and speculates on time'¹ wrote David Joselit. I've been following with a curious eye the provocative approach Nick Jeffrey's work carries toward medium specificity, embodying the ambition of disregarding borders and increasing mobility throughout his practice - by penetrating surfaces, searching for depth in flatness; playing with the rhythms enclosed in techniques that, placed in dialogue, open each other up.

Jeffrey works primarily with painting. This is treated as a territory, the space he relates to on a daily basis, conceived and exercised as an ongoing process of becoming. Painting is for Jeffrey accumulation, an unraveling potentiality beginning from a raw mark, followed by assemble of signs as percussive, repetitive motions.

¹ Joselit, D., *Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (on Time)* in 'Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition', Edited by Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. Stenberg Press, 2016, p. 20

Time is central to his work: past actions converge with future speculations, colliding into a series of stamps, stains – records - that punctuate time in a non-linear, but startling and almost spiraling course. By refusing to see painting as a finished material object, Jeffrey instead considers its objectivity to bear the same weight and materiality of the context supporting its presence. Above all the studio as a private, intimate dimension, pulsating with the environment surrounding it; the exhibition space, secondly, and the social reality the works' presence triggers within, and without. The continuous metamorphoses of materials unfolding throughout the process of making, and remaking, characterize Jeffrey's paintings in a constant state of suspension: intuition meets with impulse, meeting with improvisation.

In a similar fashion, his films follow a process of collaging and collating time lapses, where personal and found footage is slowed down, pixelated; then accelerated and abstracted. They take up the narrative and almost un-representative strategies of his paintings. The colors get altered and twisted, trembling with a new life. Jeffrey's video works are constant drifts, they spawn a hefty process of distortion in representation; the moving images implicated in a choreographic combination, silently rebuilding scenarios that had come to forge a meaningful narrative in the memory of the artist.

This book is conceived as a continuation of *Dream Divider*, a project myself and Nick Jeffrey have worked on for some time, which had a first iteration at Horse ad Pony Fine Arts, Berlin, in June 2016. *Dream Divider* emerged from a desire of expanding the boundaries circumscribing an art practice, especially those of painting and film, and of navigating the specificity of certain languages by overlapping, over-layering them. These languages morphed into sheer surfaces that would rub against one another: the paintings on canvas and polyester sheets entered a polymorphic dialogue with the film works, encountering the moving images that flashed through their thicknesses, colliding against the walls of the space. We wished to observe techniques spilling into one another, and understand the exhibition context as facilitating a rehearsal of sorts. The space was this way activated by a layering of different elements, originally conceived isolated, yet here finding ground for new associations

and arrangements. *Dream Divider* represented for me the meeting point of explored and foreign paths, where safe combinations encountered uncertain guises, stimulating a process of on-going research and constant revelation.

The process unfolding has naturally drawn in a web of relationships not only between the mediums, namely those of painting, film and sound: but also and especially amongst a range of practitioners that have co-participated in the making. This develops a grammar of relational networks, as art critic Jan Verwoert calls it². Whilst the paintings carry a personal and intimate relation with the artist's gesture and daily drifts, the films and sound pieces result as a communion of skills and ideas conveyed over time. Jeffrey puts indeed himself in dialogue with peer artists and musicians, and the work is often charged with the dynamicity of the exchange. For *Dream Divider*, the open arrangement of mobile elements engendered in the space – veiled canvases becoming projection screens as surfaces delicately touching one another – interacted with a sound piece composed by artist Ogen Doge, marking a further stage in their ongoing collaboration.

Horse and Pony Fine Arts played a crucial role in hosting and developing such a dynamic and multi-layered installation as a communion of voices. The space is run by artists Carrick Bell and Michael Rocco Ruglio-Misurell, who retrieved and recovered the site – a former butcher shop and döner factory – to become home to a studio community of artists and a project space, though maintaining the original architectural patchwork and style. The founders' desire to maintain the space as incubator of artistic experimentation and dialogue enthusiastically received our ideas of exchange, rehearsal, and of exhibition space as testing ground. *Dream Divider* became therefore a platform for artists, musicians and writers to converge, and - in two occasions - to present and perform their work, marking Nick's - and mine - interest to test out new

² See Essay by Jan Verwoert, *For the Future of Painting* (2015) published in the exhibition catalogue for Mary Heilmann & David Reed: Two by Two, edited by Udo Kittelmann and Sophie Mattheus.

collaborations, creating a stratification of experiences and points of view. For ‘an evening of readings and encounters’ (29th June 2016) I invited William Kherbek, Bitsy Knox, Matilda Tjader and Alex Turgeon to gather in and amongst Jeffrey’s work and read some of their ‘works-in-progress’: this moment engendered an informal situation of meeting and talking, happening in a moment of extreme fragility incited by a globally defeating Brexit. Later, in line with the aforementioned enthusiasm for musical experimentation and its open dialogue with the practice of painting, Nick and I organized for the closing event a line up of Berlin-based musicians to play and improvise amongst and around his works, featuring No Frills, Beathaven/Ancien† Youth and Lil Internet.

(image)

As a natural continuation of *Dream Divider*, this book was conceived as an expansion of that precise territory of unforeseen exchanges and hazardous compounds firstly explored through the exhibition. Rather than a simple illustration of Nick Jeffrey’s work, it offers the space for different practices to meet again, gather and find a way of coming and being together. This purpose also resonates in great deal of my curatorial trajectory, through which I seek to explore paths and produce attempts to open up new, unknown possibilities via facilitating unexpected encounters, and dialogue across contexts and disciplines. The narrative threads embedded in Nick’s work figure in an extensive repertoire of images, accompanied by three texts written in response to and in conversation with him.

Critic and writer Alex Bacon opens with a meditative essay on the roles and aptitudes of painting practice of the now, drawing a parallelism between Jeffrey’s gestural approaches as cycles of ‘attention and distraction’ and our relationships to the accelerated flows of digital material. Bacon ponders upon the aftermath of painting’s enactment in its formulation of different levels of spectatorship, emerging from processes of internalization and externalization as they are activated in today’s engagement with digital culture, as well as embedded in the process of making the painting-object.

Artist and writer Anna Szaflarski presents an episode of psychoanalytic fiction that narrates a protagonist's therapy session, enunciating daydreaming states constantly blurring reality with imagination. The text flows indeed as a stream of sensorial features triggered by dream images and overlapping temporalities, traversing the wake and materializing in circumstances of the present. Subliminal, hidden messages emerge with the perpetual imaginary of a water flood. The episode is somehow reminiscent of the pulsating energy and inward-outward motions emanating from Jeffrey's surfaces, emerging occasionally as stains of paint on the canvas or distorted figures materializing in the films as alloys of pixels.

Katharina Weinstock brings into the narrative a personal encounter with the work, attempting a collocation of Jeffrey's work within an art historical timeline, questioning the legacy of Abstract Art in the 21st Century amongst the recent proliferation of post-medium, post-Internet practices. Her essay picks up on the processual nature of Jeffrey's paintings, treated as multiple surfaces: what I briefly referred to as 'accumulation' rather than 'preconceived compositions'.

Designer Céline Strolz, finally, has intuitively and carefully conceived a form for containing this work in progress, devising a structure for the collected material that naturally creates a continuation with Jeffrey's assemblage of layers as a process. By selecting images from Jeffrey's vast archive, she has turned the activity of designing and systematizing into a mode of narrating drawn from a personal encounter with the elements of the book, that she treated as fragments pieced together for a new composition.

Where the term *liveliness* – as art historian Isabelle Graw refers to it³ – indicates the painting's embodiment of life through the painterly gesture – and consequent abstraction - of the artist, I instead think of Nick Jeffrey's work as constantly engrossing and performing the webs of relationships and events that have come to its formation. And this points to a certain vitality that I find always echoing in his work, at various degrees of intensity. An inward-outward movement that absorbs and

³ See Isabelle Graw, *The Value of Liveliness. Painting as an Index of Agency in the New Economy*, in 'Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition', Edited by Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth. Stenberg Press, 2016.

releases - this is in my opinion the performance played out by Jeffrey's works: one that is not regularly punctuated by strict notions of time and space, but instead fluctuates.

I shall now conclude my foreword, and invite this range of narratives to unfold and interweave in the book, to let the performance continue.