

Alongside the pleasures of submerging oneself in the ceaseless flow of imagery and the other forms of information that we are saturated with in today's digital world there exists a counter impulse. At moments, sometimes only fleeting, where we wish to disengage we reach for some kind of life raft. For some people this impulse manifests in the form of yoga retreats, or even just a stolen moment with a cup of coffee and one's phone turned off. This act of disengagement is thus not, in itself, revolutionary, or even resistant. Indeed, it is necessary to rest and recharge so that we can hook back up to our various feeds and streams. Fundamental to Marx's critique of capitalism is the idea that the worker must be provided with leisure time so as to operate at maximum productivity. In the past century or so it has been the role of the culture industry to in turn commodify this so-called "free time."

Painting can function as a life raft in this way as well, offering a resting place for the senses or, as Matisse famously put it, "an armchair for the weary businessman." This is one reason for the latest in the seemingly endless "returns" of the medium to both critical and commercial appraisal. It is also a reason for the way that this return has quickly devolved to a listless parroting of the most hackneyed apologies for the medium— such as its purported connection to the soul of the artist and its supposed evocation of timeless humanistic values. Today painting operates as something static and fixed and thus counter, in some ways at least, to the flow of the digital, which constantly offers us back our time in a spectacularized way, as is most evident in social media, where we are willing participants as both content creators and consumers. Its forms of resistance, as

well as complicity, are consequently located in the very particular kind of network or economy that the artist creates in the act of making the work; this act of making amounts to an ethical position relative to the medium of painting, which then extends to the viewer's position as spectator. The question we must ask ourselves is whether a given work, and the studio practice it emerges from, indulges or subverts these regressive mythologies of painting, and by extension the retrograde cultural and social forces they endorse.

In line with this Nick Jeffrey's approach to painting is not limited to the production of singular, auratic works of art. Rather his studio is an alchemical site where various canvases, as well as other objects and materials, circulate, acting to ensnare moments of attention, being subjected to activities (which may or may not be those traditional to painting) before being cast aside for the next canvas, and before being possibly returned to, or not, relegated to the bottom of a pile where they may reside and in doing so achieve the status of being "finished" simply by surviving out of sight for a certain amount of time. The cycle of attention and distraction thus activated by Jeffrey in his studio practice is analogous in many ways to our engagement with digital culture.

What then of these products of his attention and inattention? As Katharina Weinstock suggests elsewhere in this volume, it is almost as if Jeffrey uses the canvas as a space of externalization, rather than the internalization that we typically associate with painting. This is in keeping with our contemporary predicament, where both the most casual and

the most considered gestures are inevitably caught up in a pre-established matrix of possible expressions, rather than capable of amounting to a signature style. This is also the gambit of Josh Smith's palette paintings, Michael Krebber's absent-minded scrawls, or Christopher Wool's painterly monumentalization of everything from graffiti to wallpaper patterns. Their so-called "provisional painting" is the legacy out of which Jeffrey emerges, and accounts for why cartoon characters, the tarp from his studio floor, and abstract gestural compositions, some of them forms sprayed through stencils, all appear regularly, and almost indiscriminately, in his works.

The art historian Michael Fried has famously advocated for works of art premised on absorption over those that embrace theatricality.¹ At the base of his argument is the idea that the all-at-once availability to the eye of the formal terms of an optically oriented work of art—whether it is a brightly painted, welded steel sculpture by Anthony Caro, or an enveloping color field painting by Morris Louis—allows for an aspect of what he calls "presentness." This quality enables the viewer to transcend the quotidian aspects of their everyday life by submerging him or herself in the fundamental otherness of aesthetic experience. Meanwhile, the work that Fried dubs "theatrical," and which he applies to the minimal forms of Donald Judd and Robert Morris, among others, requires the viewer to activate a situation that is not complete without his or her presence. Such works refuse to let the viewer go, as it were, in their insistence on activating his or her body, an activation, the nature of which becomes the subject of the work.

¹ See Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* V:10 (Summer 1967): 12-23.

Caro and Louis's works act, in Fried's account, as spaces of respite for the viewer where he or she can temporarily exit the banality of daily existence, transported on a transformative vector of optical experience. Such a transcendent space has long been revealed to be inevitably compromised by the gradual, and now essentially complete, erasure of any space of privacy or internalization. In the digital age it is as if there is nothing internal to the subject, including his or her identity, without its being located and meaningfully anchored by acts of externalization, such as our posts on social media platforms of feelings, activities, etc. that would traditionally be private.

Nick Jeffrey's work is not theatrical, in Fried's sense, in that it does not require the presence of the viewer to complete it. But nor is it present or absorptive in the sense he attributes to certain abstract painting either. It more so requires simply the maker as it is the result, and thus the record, of an essentially a personal act that has been externalized in the act of making (even if that act may comprise more of selection and framing than of actual applications of paint to canvas). In being so it represents not just an act of making, but an ethics of externalization, the ramifications of which are left open for the viewer who then encounters this personal, but also in the same measure essentially public, manifestation. The two have become one and the same in Jeffrey's work.

No painting (or other kind of artwork for that matter) can make a final, definitive statement on our contemporary situation. This is by virtue of it being contemporary,

which is to say still in progress and something we are too close to be able to fully process. Instead the role of the artist is to assess its logics and embed them in works, which are then left for future viewers and historians to decode, as it were. As such, Jeffrey's paintings, in their great formal diversity, are linked together by the studio practice from which they emerge. This practice amounts to a meditation on contemporary issues of circulation, which is thus encoded in the works. Yet Jeffrey's works are not proscriptive: our intellectual assessment of them can be as open-ended as the paintings themselves.

- Alex Bacon, New York, April 2017