



ELASTIC FIELD

JAN 29 – FEB 20

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Vibrations from the Elastic Field

The Ether

Every now and then I make promises with myself to limit the technologies that start to obsess me. Not to bed, not past a certain hour, not for the next twenty minutes. Inside those devices, screens and social media everything is happening all of the time. There's lots of chatting and sharing of files and images. There are slick galleries from the New-York-LA-London art galaxy with grey floors and lines of oversized paintings. There are wildernesses too extreme to visit. Body enhancements, memes and green smoothie recipes thrown in the mix with theory, fiction, politics and economics. It's a cyclonic state. I am in there, and so are most of the people I know. The ones that aren't—my grandmother, those without phone reception, people sleeping in parallel time zones—seem to have escaped this dizziness. They are rebels living in a fantastical real-time where (I imagine) food is always cooked slowly, plants live in deep garden beds and people talk face to face or not at all. Douglas Rushkoff recently compiled a list of traits he attributed to contemporary culture that accumulated in a fever he described as "presentism."¹ Responding to Alvin Toffler's 1970s prediction of an impending inability to cope with fast-moving times,¹ Rushkoff says we have lost our grasp on the future as a result of living inside it. According to him, this current moment is defined by a sense that all things seem to be happening at once: narratives have collapsed; technology encourages us to exist in many places simultaneously; huge commitments are compressed into small time frames; and, projections are apocalyptic.² These could be seen as some of the mannerisms of an anxious, collapsible and over-stimulated culture.

Slow Bonds

Painting, on the other hand, is in a deep and private relationship with slowness. They are two great rebel-lovers, up all night, drinking on the back deck of a raised house. There are stars in the sky, light rain intermissions, and an endless supply of epiphanies and disappointments to pass back and forth. They chat about culture and life and stuff they don't understand. The sun goes down and comes up. They notice all the things the light does. They see the garden turn from flowers into dark space and then back into flowers. Painting needs slowness. It's into its own processes, and requires time to sort things out and open things up. Some practices are all about the meditative laying-down of a million marks to translate momentum. Others add and subtract to make meaning, layer to evoke depth, or scrape back to uncover earlier forms. A fast painting takes time too, because, of course, as Josh Smith said in a recent seminar: "the shorter you spend on it the longer you have to look at it"; and, "I always try all these things, and most of them don't work."³ So, many paintings are sacrificed, with the unsuccessful ones being the kernels of something so interesting that they propel an artist forward. In these ways, painting needs to hang out alone, to build things up, to fail, and to know that somehow that failure is, or is leading to, something momentous (within the intimate schema of the rectangle). This spectacular thing is, as artist Chris Martin concluded in an article about abstract practice, the imperative to paint something that has never been seen before.⁴ Not a new idea, but a new *thing*—a fresh pictorial event. It's like: when that colour and those images conflated and something happened and it was like fireworks or the hailing of a unicorn. Experimentation keeps on trucking and altering an artist's work, feeding the moment where all the processes comes back to the centre and compose themselves as a vital projection of the time, or labour, gifted to it by its author.⁵ As a good slow thing, the promises to refuse painting—as in: it's taking over my life, perhaps I should check that—are never kept.

1 Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock*, Random House: 1970.

2 Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*, Penguin: 2013.

3 "Josh Smith, Graduate Seminar", Vimeo video, 27 January, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/118191548>

4 Chris Martin, "Everything is Finished Nothing is Dead: An Article About Abstract Painting", The Brooklyn Rail, April 1, 2003. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2003/04/art/everything-is-finished-nothing-is-dead-an-article-about-abstract-painting>

5 Isabelle Graw, *The Economy of Painting - Notes on the Vitality of a Success-Medium*, YouTube video, The Jewish Museum, July 20, 2015.

Timelessness

How then does painting think about the described hyperactive cultural moment? Despite being criticised for its backwardness, painting doesn't ignore the past, present or the future (although it can be a great escape tactic). It has a long history, is current, and is threatened every now and again with banishment. In turn, it is inside all of these phases, and refers to them quite naturally. Currently, as we know, painting is orbited by an accelerated flow of information and images, pushed along by abhuman communication streams (as in: smart phones, social media and the Internet). This condition has been on the minds of curators, turning up in their books and exhibitions. Bob Nickas suggested that contemporary painting comes to reflect "a world more unstable and fugitive, even more epic in scale and tragic as well."¹ Laura Hoptman also considered instability, or unanchoredness, when curating MoMA's recent mega painting survey, *The Forever Now*. She locates a common trait in contemporary painting as its "atemporality," one she characterises by an "inability or refusal to define the times in which we live."² For Hoptman, current practices contain traces of history but are not historical. Unlike the appropriation and ironic usage of references in the 1980s and 1990s, she argues that painters today are engaged with a "super-branched-out-questioning... closest to a connoisseurship of boundless information, a picking or choosing of elements of the past to resolve a problem or task at hand."³ In one pastiche-like effect, high and low cultural cues can be tested, their values made defunct, in an aggregate-mode similar to Jörg Heiser's favourite musical mash-up from a few years ago: one that "includes lots of samples yet is analogue in feel... a seamless flow of music, made up of seams."⁴ In turn, the sum of sources that appear in contemporary painting might be seen to disclose a "post-era era" or "eternal present."

Aggregates

It could be seen that painting has the ability to rebel against, and reflect upon, the hyper-flux of our current moment through a reduced tempo, playfulness and connectedness to material. It doesn't need to be about the Internet or contain modish imagery (in fact, most of the practices in this exhibition don't focus on this), but these contextual factors can offer stimulation and friction. Like in Heiser's mash-up, everything-all-of-the-time can be combined using tangible matter and simple human methods. And as with this picking and choosing, the varied practices in *Elastic Field* are connected by an aggregational approach, where painting's frame acts as a responsive structure that attracts forms, materials and subject matter. Although these practices both do, and do not, seek to consciously reflect on the speed-fetish of contemporary life, they all use painting to conjure space in flux. In this exhibition, the ways these methods are used to construct images is diverse. Some of the paintings have a collage quality, where images are borrowed from disparate sources. Others are purely abstract fields with forms are captured en route to somewhere unidentified. Materials are stitched, mixed, built, bothered and glued together. Natures and technologies collapse. Patterns invert and repel. Hardedges are softened through positive-error. Therefore, it might be more valuable to think about how these artists' practices share a way of thinking, where elements are combined, both formally and playfully, in energetic formation. From these described methodologies, play and experimentation is encouraged, taking representation to a place that is perpetually, in some way, unknown. In turn, a vibrant field is activated where closed forms are substituted for open structures in favor of "dynamic and expanding polycentrism."⁵

1 Bob Nickas, *Painting Abstraction: new elements in abstract painting*, London; New York: Phaidon, 2014: 7.

2 Laura Hoptman, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014:13.

3 Hoptman, 14.

4 Jörg Heiser, "Pick & Mix" *Frieze*, September 1 (2010).

5 Atsuhide Ito, "The promise of painting: Spectres of the Baroque in contemporary painting," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 12, 1 (2013): 68.

Ways and Means

Alongside an aggregational approach to making images, the artists in this exhibition have practices that connect strongly to process. Some are intuitive and centred around chance, while others have deeply followed rituals. They all use painting as a regenerative activity that requires play and experimentation to keep evolving. One example of this is the development of a system of making. For a painting, an algorithm can be set up to trick, activate or limit a work in order to increase its potential. In other words, rules are followed so that not too much is let in; so that something usual is obscured; so that the restricted material being used can stretch out and expand to find its extremes. Some examples might be: use your other arm; play a new song in the studio; fill in all areas that cast their shadow to the left; only use blue; draw a grid, cut out shapes using pieces of scrap paper, jigsaw them around; do what you just did, but with an opposing media. These practical directions are some of the ways that the artists in this exhibition describe the process of making their work. They are formulae for opening up a field, not rules for shutting things down or knowing the answer before exploring the question: as Martin described of the work of Richard Tuttle, "This is the mystery and freedom of serious play."¹ A few of the artists have also taken departures from their usual practices to explore how the ingredients of their painting might be combined in a considerably different manner. In turn, there is elasticity here, where constantly evolving processes encourage something unknown to occur. This thinking-through-making means that the outcome is not staunchly set, it's not right or correct, but active. In this way, painting needs itself and its imperfections to conjure spaces in a state of becoming, connecting forms and meanings as revitalised phenomena.

Elasticity

From these reflections, the painting in this exhibition could be seen to occupy an elastic field: not necessarily expanded as to reach out and become other mediums, and not referential as to speak only of its own history, but instead, stretchy. It draws shapes, forms, languages and signs into the rectangle to build aggregate phenomena. In this way, painting, as a kind of rhizomatic thinking through tangible media, can push beyond concrete definitions and toward openness: it stretches outside itself, has conversations that wander tangentially, and creates its own systems (however personal) that bring pictorial elements to a manifold point. In considering a question posed by Isabelle Graw—of how to determine a practice that renders impossible the rigorous distinction between what is intrinsic and what is extrinsic to it—the works in *Elastic Field* use various aggregate methodologies to make pliable spaces where external and intimate energies exchange forces. In this way, painting can be seen to both reflect upon, and act as an antidote to, the often-overwhelming contemporary condition, bouncing off its own rhythms and potentials to make its vibrations visible.

Laura Skerlj, 2016

Cover image: Michael Georgetti, *NOCI- GNOCCHI* 2016, 2500 x 1840 mm, acrylic paint, spray paint, thermal blanket, mylar plastic sheeting, stickers, hologram stickers, poster paper, pva glue on canvas

1 Chris Martin, "Buddhism, Landscape, and the Absolute Truth about Abstract Painting", *The Brooklyn Rail: Critical Perspectives on Arts, Politics and Culture*. April 1, 2005. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2005/04/art/buddhism-landscape-and-the-absolute-trut>