

PAINTER'S BREAD

VISUAL SUSTENANCE

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 2013

Johnny Cash & Buttered Toast, an Interview with Robert Janitz



I'd rather go blind, 2012, oil and wax on linen, 54 x 42 inches; *Untitled*, 2011, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches

Paint on canvas and its affect on a viewer are what painting is all about. I can't help but admire an artist who uses those materials in a bold matter-of-fact way, and the paintings of Robert Janitz are exactly what I mean. There's no wondering about how they were

made and there's no oohing & aahing over them to be done. They're tough and visceral, with paint that's honestly, truthfully applied—just workmanlike, and a resulting grace that transcends the means of its application.

While some painters have gone off the picture plane in order to push forward (a move which I also admire), Janitz has stuck with the stretched canvas, and I'm thankful he did. He's a well-informed painter, digging deep into art history and pulling in references from far enough back that the resulting work is spiced and nuanced as if it were from some old lost recipe newly found.

Janitz's use of titles such as, *Glue Raspberry*—things every viewer should be familiar with—lend the paintings an instantly relatable air, while the portrait formatted works have a cooled-down anonymity with the reality of the paint as the real subject. In the pieces that Janitz has used the darkest colors, especially black—he hits the hardest. His most somber, moody works hold their place on a wall like a bouncer standing in a club; no invitation to look, just a presence. Visually, they emanate the truth and foreboding of Goya, and I can't help but imagine that if paintings are allowed to have an auditory afterlife, the work of Robert Janitz would sound like Johnny Cash.

PB: I have only two questions: how do you go about making your work and what influences it?

RJ: First, some general remarks, then more information about the *Shoe That Fits Various Feet* show and the *How I Learned to Love the F* exhibit, along with some specific reflections on the different series since 2011.

The ratio of the paintings is very important. Quelle taille exacte. I have a strong preference for "portrait formats."

I use very simple materials. Paintbrushes from the hardware store; plastic plates to mix colors.



Studio, March 2013.

I don't think of my paintings as minimalist at all. I think of my painting as highly romantic. A quest for the sublime, the ridicule of the heroic. The twisted dandy finding content, despite the pose he is adopting.

They are, if you want, very theatrical—in the sense that I “stage” the process. I become an actor in a way that, through imagination, impersonates the event that will become a painting.

Not sure how to say it, but there's something French in the way I develop my work, the clash of styles, the punk elegance, the screaming and dissonance that can coexist and create an artificial field of tension, its own intelligent space.

There is certainly something German (romantic, expressionist). The scope of painting is the scope of the world.

Then I find a lot in American culture that allows me pull everything together. For example, the American notion that vintage furniture is about chipped paint coats on a chair from the Seventies. Also the courage to be.

I conceal painting with painting to show painting.

The layers and the corners are always left "open" to access the layers hidden underneath.

Incarnation of life. I don't believe in systems anymore.

The gesture is more a "hardware store" gesture, like someone who cleans a window or spreads butter on a piece of toast.





Rimbaud, hatless, 2012, oil and tempera on linen, 24 x 20 inches (60 x 50 cm)

The brown green portrait? I wanted a super flat surface yes, but with relief. It's not sanded but I mixed gesso with oil. All the portraits have that "finish."

Let me elaborate on your other question.

In 2010/11 I was more interested in urban surface echoes of inner

surfaces / textures of memories.

Urban surfaces like facades, weathered paint, etc., that became projections for emotional textures **(like the feel of a camping air mattress I had when I was a kid).**

I'm interested in surfaces as specific locations. Weathering facades, cardboard, oxidized metal, paint as in American vintage paint, or the way an entire building is painted in bright blue or yellow or red; walls, windows, everything (the idea of coating something with paint).

I developed the series I was doing in 2010-11 on specific surfaces. Those paintings were strictly 60 x 50 cm. I explored with muted colors questions of layers, gesture, light, presence. Call it topography of memory, because they are personal references for me, surfaces that are part of my life, or my youth etc. They are almost erased. Negation is used as a source of power.





Nymphs, 2011, mixed media on linen, 24 x 20 inches (60 x 50 cm)

In the Brussels series that shifts from those harder surfaces to what I clumsily called "concrete temporary human," (concrete painting was a term in Germany), the material quality of the paint becomes the content of the painting.

I wanted to say that I got interested in surfaces that appear when you eat for example. the spread of butter on a piece of toast. The smear of ketchup on a plate, mayonnaise, icing...



Glue Raspberry, 2012, oil and wax on canvas, 54 x 42 inches (137 x 106 cm)

So those paintings bring butter, mayonnaise, glue, or grease, or molding paste from a dental lab to mind.

The size to me is like a zoom-in on those ordinary soft surfaces that deal with the hand in a different way. The enactment (like in an actor's imagination) takes over and makes the painting action the toast buttering action—in that it doubly embodies the thing. Through material and through application style.



Untitled, 2012, oil and wax on canvas, 54 x 42 inches (137 x 106 cm)

In the “Buttered Toast” one, it makes you become the slice of bread and what the painting in front has is the butter and then the ham - turning away maybe more in the sense of turning around—turning a soft surface around.

The “Buttered Toast” is not a formalist abstraction.

(Der Butter Dirigent -) the materiality of butter is imitated with the paint itself and then applied in the way butter would be spread on toast. Casual, overall, intuitive, not exactly like the same gesture as a guy who cleans a window but just like a guy that butters his toast, or applies glue on the back of a tile - without pictorial ambition.

I am not painting a representation of buttered toast. The sensuality of my approach speaks to the viewer.

I'm treating both series (the soft surfaces and the portraits) similar in that when you step in each room the paintings in there look like they show their "real" surface on the other side of the wall in an imaginary room. And you find yourself in the anti-chamber. I feel this is a valid possibility to show painting without it being an installation or another, let's say, formalist way of "extending" painting.

Though to me, I approach painting again from another place which is, well, my sensibility. And figurative and abstract is not a concern for me, really. Both "styles" are very immediate, almost hyper-impressionist / pop-romantic.

Those faces that are all turned away. They create a room of absence that becomes a room of presence. My take on, “la condition humaine.”

So from that series I conceived for Brussels, several larger pieces 137 x 106 cm (note that those larger stretchers are all thin, something that I find very important, as I find the sides of the paintings very important) you can always see the raw fabric—and *gesso* and *paint* are only layered on the front part. This is in regard to the layering, which I think of as sculptural. Thicker stretcher bars would make them too much so.

The “Buttered Toast” paintings are also very much about surface, but now I've shifted from more permanent surfaces to soft

surfaces, that bring butter, mayonnaise, glue, or grease, or molding paste from a dental lab to mind, as I've mentioned earlier.

With the translucency of those pieces comes a weird light effect. If you look at the framboise one on the opposite end of the ground floor of the "F" exhibition, one has the impression of a bluish grayish light that is somewhere in between the framboise background and the white yellowish top layer (this one makes me think of glue for tiles).

The Portraits.

The turning away in the portraits is a possibility for the painting to turn themselves toward the viewer.

You can think of it as a third person narrative in literature or a Brechtian distantiation as the ultimate position of the Dandy.





Le Prince Russe, 2012, oil on canvas, 54 x 42 inches (137 x 106 cm)

In the process of painting, my imagination allows the real presence of the person in the painting. In contradiction to the simplicity and utter flatness which is almost a negation, it brings out the full presence of it being a painting.



Wasabi Painting, 2012, oil and egg on linen, 14 x 12 inches (35 x 30 cm)

The Wasabi paintings.

The doubling up of a very simple and fitting couple of brushstrokes in shiny spring green on a white surface.

Made with egg yolk and oil (= mayonnaise). Stabilized with damar resin. The matte white gesso layer is an independent pictorial

element contrasting the rough linen fabric. Nine translucent very shiny spring green brushstrokes inhabit the painting.



Machaco, 2012, oil and encaustic on linen, 54 x 42 inches (137 x 108 cm)

HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE THE F : Sept 2012, builds on the

notions explored earlier and develop the space more as a stage set. Bridging Artaudian intensity with Brechtian coolness. The plant that was real in the Brussels show is now a fake. As to put in perspective the “realness” of the paintings, the big blue painting reiterates ideas on pop, along with Chinese landscape of the Northern Song period (12th century).

A fusion between classic Chinese painting and pop art - **Shitao et Warhol.**

Pop art takes the banality of the surface as the only qualifying element of a thing.

The classic Chinese approach is to not refer to the surface of things, but the inner essence and to convey that in a painting, and that the painted essence is not only a representation of the thing painted, but the thing—the life of the thing itself.





Untitled, 2012, oil and encaustic on canvas, 84 x 72 inches (215 x 182 cm)