

JOSHUA ABELOW AND NATHAN DILWORTH IN CONVERSATION

On the occasion of both artists' solo shows, Joshua Abelow and Nathan Dilworth sat down in July 2021 for a conversation about their current exhibitions and past work. Abelow's exhibitions, *Leaky Abstractions* and *Leaky Abstractions 2.0*, were on view at Magenta Plains from May 29, 2021 to July 30, 2021. Dilworth's exhibition, *Deluge*, was on view at Launch F18 from May 20, 2021 to July 10, 2021.

Nathan Dilworth: I saw *Leaky Abstractions 2.0* yesterday. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to see it before we had this conversation, but I was super happy that I had a chance to. It's great! They were both great. I saw the first version at the opening, which was a lot of fun - it was my first post-pandemic opening, other than my own show. However, because it was the reception, I didn't get a lot of time to really take the paintings in. Being able to see 2.0 by myself and have a chance to spend time with the work was rewarding.

Joshua Abelow: Thanks, Nathan! I hadn't been to an opening since Gene Beery's opening at Bodega on March 6th, 2020. During the pandemic, I pretty much took a year off from even entering a gallery. Of course, before the pandemic, I was in and out of the city all the time, so taking a year off from that was a big shift. For the last year and a half, I've just been completely still, hunkered down in my studio. Because my life has been still, I wanted to metaphorically travel in the paintings. With the *Leaky Abstractions*, I began each painting in a similar way (with a grid or partial grid) and then I painted over them, getting intentionally lost in the process.

ND: I think that really comes across in the paintings. They feel like a pretty big departure from your previous work. Clearly they grew out of what came before, and are related, but these new works seem much more contemplative and much broader in terms of the possibilities of what can happen in each painting, what each painting is about, and how the parts of the painting relate to one another. They're surprisingly expansive. Did this entire body of work, the *Leaky Abstractions*, come about after the beginning of the pandemic?



Joshua Abelow, *Untitled*, 2020, oil on linen, 40 x 24 inches

JA: Yes. Almost immediately. I'd say that 70% of the paintings in the first iteration [of *Leaky Abstractions*] started emerging as early as April 2020. In those paintings, the forms are a little more erratic and less crystalized. [Later on] the color palette gets keyed up and there's more geometry. The paintings are primarily made with little bits of Bounty paper towels that I use like brushes. I think it's funny given that paper towels are typically used to clean up.

ND: It's what's left after you've cleaned up the leak!

Another thought that I had about these paintings, which was part of the way that they seemed so different, is that there have always been, for me, two sides of your practice. The simplest way to say it would be the drawings and paintings, but maybe more accurately, the figures and the geometric abstraction. Until now, I've always felt that those two parts of your work were very separate. The geometric paintings were tight and rigorous in the sense that they frequently involved repeating the same pattern again and again, to the point that it almost becomes about the process of making the paintings. Whereas the figurative work, especially the drawings, has a wild freedom and sense of improvisation. Even in instances where a figure would be painted on top of a geometric background the two felt very separate. These new paintings really begin to feel like a synthesis of those two parts of your work, not only because they break out of the grid, but because there is a humorous, figurative quality to them. Do you feel like you're combining different parts of your work?



Joshua Abelow, *Untitled (Abstraction "FGG")*, 2010, oil on linen, 12 x 9 inches



Joshua Abelow, *FIGURATIVE PAINTER*, 2010, pencil on paper, 30 x 22 inches

JA: I think that's a perceptive observation. During the last year, since I began making these paintings, I haven't been drawing a lot. In the past, I needed a release from repeating the same composition in the paintings and making drawings provided that release. It's like a rubber band; you wind and wind and wind, and then BAM! With these new paintings, I don't have the need [for that release] because I'm getting it out in the paintings themselves.

ND: Yeah, for sure. The new paintings are contemplative, but also incredibly agile. And I also noticed a few moments of overt humor. For instance, there was a small painting in both iterations of the show that has a Barnett Newman zip down the middle. When it's mixed in with these Bounty paper towel Leaky Abstraction paintings, it has that kind of humor that's so consistent in your work.

JA: The painting that you're talking about from the first show is titled "Barnett Abelow." About a year ago or so, I read the *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews* book. Even as an object, it has levity. Until recently, when it came to the Abstract Expressionists, Barnett Newman was not one that I gravitated toward. Newman is a difficult artist. Reading the book confirmed that assumption. But, he won me over.

ND: There's a real love hate relationship with that kind of rigor that I feel has always been there in your work. Even in the tighter geometric work, where the grids utilize tape, there were always leaks that went under the tape, and imperfections. You seem to have always maintained a real conflicted relationship to the purity of art.

Didn't Barnett Newman run for mayor of New York at some point?

JA: Yea, he ran for major in 1933. At the time, Newman was 27, working as an art teacher in a junior high school in Queens. His ticket provided an alternative to the other candidates. In his own words, ‘...the artist, the musician, the writer, the actor, the teacher, the scientist, the thinker, and the man of culture generally have nothing to hope for from any of the candidates. We must spread culture through society. Only a society entirely composed of artists would be really worth living in. That’s our aim...’ He suggested free music and art schools in every district. Needless to say, he didn’t win the election...



Joshua Abelow, *Barnett Abelow*, 2021, oil on linen, 16 x10 inches

ND: It's easy to be dismissive of Newman because on some level he was such a caricature of a serious artist. But at the same time he can be very inspiring. The idea that every time the painter gets in front of the canvas it's an existential confrontation with themselves... I think you have to take yourself pretty seriously to say that out loud, but if you aren't willing to walk the line where seriousness becomes absurd, then on some level you are just staying within norms. He had to be that serious in order to make those paintings.

JA: The other thing I learned was that for a long time he was more known as a critic/curator and it wasn't until later that he started to exhibit his paintings. And the public's response for the most part was negative. He only had nine solo exhibitions in his lifetime. He wasn't terribly prolific.

ND: They were difficult paintings. They are difficult paintings even now.

JA: I think one of the things I like about them so much and strive for in my own work, to a degree, is the deadpan surface quality. His work represents the opposite of anything too sensual, atmospheric, or "beautiful." Everything is plain and flat. That's why he became a hero to the generation of artists that succeeded him - I know Donald Judd was a huge fan and Frank Stella. It was an anti-decorative stance.

ND: It's not even like an Ad Reinhardt, which is also monochrome, but in a Reinhardt the subtle differences in hue and surface create a lot of visual space. Newman's colors are frequently utterly flat.

JA: Yes, yes, not bombarding the viewer with too much 'impressive skill,' letting there be room for the viewer to become a part of it somehow. I think that's really important.

ND: I completely agree.

It's interesting you saying that he's an inspiration for your work, because sometimes the color in your work is flat, and other times it's incredibly deep. You have a very layered approach to painting, even if you have a flat-footed way of applying the paint.

JA: I like my surfaces to be matte and I also don't create illusionistic space. I typically like there to be some kind of conflict between looking at the finished painting and seeing the cues as to how the thing was made. You see a bleed so you know tape was used, or you see that blue went on top of the green. There is such specificity to it, you know it's not quite as simple as it appears to be.

ND: I feel like you accomplish a lot with very simple means. The way you use transparency vs. opacity can be very deceptive. As I got closer to the paintings in this show I began to see how each painting was built. The complexity is startling because from a distance, or online, they appear to be more flat and structural. That is something you totally miss by not going to galleries. Something that is missed in jpeg images. You kind of forget after looking at things online for a year how much information is in an artwork, how much there is to take in. That sort of stuff sneaks up on you.

JA: You're hitting the nail on the head in terms of the paintings and the title of the show. A 'leaky abstraction' is a computer science term. I'm probably going to butcher the explanation, but on your computer an icon can be referred to as a leaky abstraction because it is an abstraction that has the potential to fail like if the computer program glitches or freezes. Because we are so used to looking at art on our phones and laptops we may be failing to see the full scope of the work by failing to see it in person.

ND: It is in fact a failing abstraction. The image we are looking at is a failing abstraction of the real work.

JA: Exactly. And I think that's a funny conceptual point of reference. Not that the work is meant to be a joke, but it's a kind of humor that's built into it.

ND: Yes, it's a pun in the best sense. *Leaky Abstractions* refers both to the runny paintings that you are looking at, and also the extremely complicated situation of how we view art.

JA: Not just how we view art but also how we experience the world nowadays. During the pandemic I had a chance to read a bunch of art theory and some books influenced the show. This book *In the Flow* by Boris Groys. Have you read it?

ND: I've read excerpts.

JA: I think what's happening now, in the past couple of years, collectively as a culture, is that we have gotten over our blind enthusiasm for technological devices. There's more disillusionment and skepticism. We're learning more about the infrastructure of these companies and these technologies and how addictive and manipulative these things are. I was thinking a lot about that stuff.

ND: There is another book that touches on that, Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* - that's a great one. Talk about ahead of its time in terms of really understanding how the power structure and flow of information is going to function in our digital world- the idea that all of the excitement that comes from being able to share your life with everyone, and being able to consume everything from everywhere, essentially turns everyone into a receptacle. In the end it takes away more agency than it gives.

JA: Exactly, in terms of thinking about the *Leaky Abstractions*, I wanted to infer that the paintings could have, at one time, been hard-edged structures, but they are dissolving. The system is failing. Instagram is not making us happier.

ND: In addition, the "reality" that you consume through those channels (Facebook, Instagram, etc), whether we are talking about a painting or about the world in general, is a false reality. It's a compressed version in which the things that make life real are absent. One of the great things about painting is that it is able to convey a tremendous amount of non-verbal information, and the breadth and complexity of that information sort of approximates the complexity of

life and what it is like to exist in the world with all of its contradictions and ambiguities. But a compressed image loses almost all of that. It's kind of like the Instagram influencer pretending to be on vacation in the Bahamas, but actually they are dog sitting at someone's house, and just hanging out by the pool for 15 minutes and geotagging the Bahamas. It's the absence of reality.

JA: I think it's Boris Groys who talks a little bit about how the documentation of art is really just drawing attention to the absence of art. I agree with him, I think that's really interesting to think about. But regardless of whether a person agrees or not, it's an interesting concept because we typically think of art documentation, especially in today's world, as the art itself. That's why art documentation is considered to be so important. If somebody has a show and there are no pictures taken, no documentation, then it begs the question: did the show even happen? It's like the tree falling in the woods metaphor.

ND: There might have been a time where the answer was yes, but I think nowadays artists might feel like it didn't happen. Now it's just a part of existing, you must have some kind of digital presence.

I really like that idea, of the documentation drawing attention to the absence of art... Sometimes I like to think of what I'm trying to do as getting beyond information. What I mean by that is, we experience world through our senses, and some of that information, probably a relatively small amount of it, is actually intelligible and understandable to us in a way that we can verbalize. A lot of technology is about communicating that portion of our understanding to other people. The thing we can put into words. So much of the technology of the past 100 years serves the purpose of communicating information. So, to me the relevance and the purpose of art, of any kind not just painting, is that it helps communicate what's beyond information. The more ambiguous part of our sense experience that we relate to emotionally or intuitively. Documentation, by filtering an object through a certain medium and perspective, attempts to make it intelligible in a way that is beside the point.

JA: That's really interesting. 'Beyond Information' is a great exhibition title.

To get into your work a little bit, because I did see your show in person, I don't think the paintings can be seen or appreciated *just* as jpegs. I think the scale of your paintings and your touch was important to see IRL. You could really see things happening in the room that you don't get when you're just looking at a reproduction. I know that's true with most art, but I think your work in particular...there was a sensitivity...



Installation View, Nathan Dilworth, *Deluge*, Launch F18, New York, NY 2021

ND: The thing that I enjoy about painting, and the way that I approach it, has to do with a subtle sensory experience. A mixture of touch and seeing that hopefully can give a glimmer of a direct interaction with the world. That's not to say that it's a formal exercise, but it's a relatively simple means of trying to capture something complex. Our senses are, so to speak, the house we live in, and everything we experience is inside of that house—our imagination, the way we

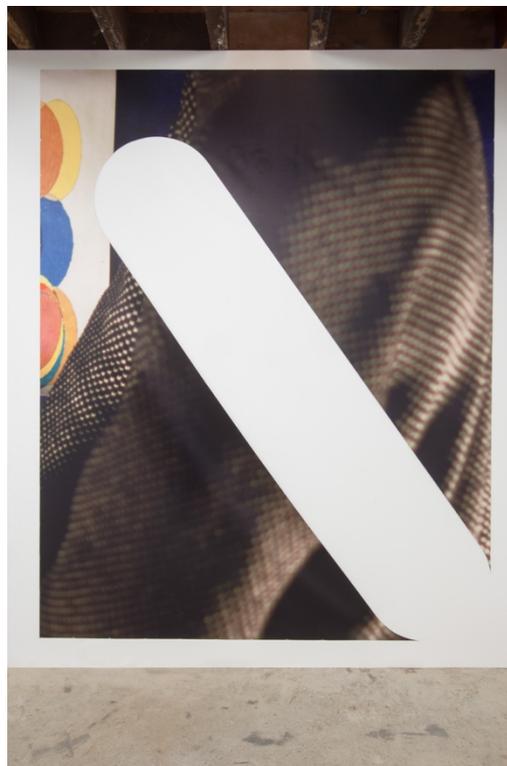
feel about ourselves, society, the world, our memories. To try to communicate some small part of that to other people is a delicate thing. For me that's what is interesting about seeing other people's work and attempting to make my own. So, needless to say, trying to photograph my own paintings drives me crazy. I'm trying to give something, and it's always failing.

JA: I know in years past you've experimented with large format photography, and sculpture in different media, and even installation arrangement. I'm wondering if all of those things I just mentioned are still at play in your imagination and/or if you feel you've moved into a new direction and want to focus exclusively on oil painting.

ND: Well, I can't say for certain what I'll do in the future, but you're right. This show is the first I've had of just paintings... You know, painting always played a major role in my work. I've always painted even if I wasn't showing paintings and frequently the large photos that were printed on vinyl and then cut into shapes or layed on the floor; a painting would be in the photo somewhere, hanging in the background, leaning against a wall. Those are actually relevant to this conversation because they were, in some ways, a riff on documentation and the idea of making an object and then never seeing the object. The documentation became the work and then the documentation became sculptural and architectural in the way it was presented. The documentation of an object then had a life of its own.

JA: It had a meta quality.

ND: A little bit, yes. I mean that was in my mind when I was making it. It was partially about trying to make the documentation as ambiguous as the original work.



Nathan Dilworth, *Untitled*, 2015, UV print on vinyl, 98 x 76 inches

JA: That's really interesting because even though the work obviously looks different, I was thinking about a very similar type of scenario with my *Running Witch* paintings. I knew the figure would be running around the gallery but I was also really into the idea of the witch running in the dream space of the internet 24 hours a day. I'm glad you're talking about this because it wasn't something I thought of before in terms of the relationship between what you and I do, but that's pretty connected.

ND: Yeah absolutely, I think there are connections, though you're right they aren't obvious. ...That's funny, I love the idea of the witch haunting the internet!

But yeah, painting has always played a large role in my studio. Also, at one point I was making floor arrangements that were frequently the detritus cast off from making paintings- pieces of fabric, blocks of wood, plastic, etc. So everything was always revolving around paintings, but the paintings themselves ended up being thrown out or destroyed in the process. That way of working began when I was living in Amsterdam. I wasn't happy with the paintings that I was making, they seemed too limited. I wanted to expand them, to somehow get more of the world into them. So I started taking photos of myself and whatever else was happening in the studio, with the paintings in the background. Eventually they turned into the large vinyl photoprints. But in the last 5 to 7 years, roughly, the things I was concerned with in those other objects became more painterly. For instance, the photos started to be mostly about shape and color. The ideas I was interested in transitioned to things that I could actually talk about more effectively with painting. Though it's an old medium, painting is still one of the best ways of dealing with color in an immediate way. When you make an inkjet print on vinyl you spend most of your time on the phone with the person at the print lab, waiting for it to be done, going and proofing it, and then figuring out how you're going to get it to the gallery and how you're going to hang it. Painting happens right there, in the moment.

JA: I agree with that, and of course, some paintings don't have the human touch. I'm interested in the humanness of oil painting; you know the hand, the passing of time, marking time like writing in a journal. I don't think there is any medium more effective than painting for the human poetic element to take form.

ND: There is something particularly philosophical about it. The act of painting lends itself to basic questions: What is around me? What do I perceive? How is meaning created? And it's physical, a language related directly to the physical world. So until we aren't living in the real world, walking around, seeing things... it'll remain relevant.

JA: That may happen, but not during our lifetime! I think we have the green light to continue making paintings for a while.