

*& Now I've Said the Opposite of What I Mean*

Claire Bendiner, Emma McMillan, and Sofya Shpurova

In the poem “February 25” Bernadette Mayer speaks of possession, fear, desire, and entanglement. This piece swirls with descriptions of losing oneself in the act of writing, how the words of others get caught up in mind while pursuing something that is, at its core, intangible. Mayer implements her penchants for seeking patterns, exploding conventions, and direct expression, building up a scenario, only to undo it in the next line. This tangled web of linguistic abstraction filters into the poet’s aptitude for painting moving images in the reader’s mind. The fragmentary style lends itself to the gestures of each painter here. Whether conceptually or formally, Claire Bendiner, Emma McMillan, and Sofya Shpurova express patchworked ideas without puritanical rendering.

Frictions between what is said and what is meant spotlight the problem of perspective. Abstract painting deals with the power of suggestion, contours alluding to concrete structures without submitting to representational forms. The act of *noticing* filters into referential composition, as artists build upon their own catalogs of sights and sounds. Prunella Clough collected bits and bobs from daily life, regarding them as “burrs stuck in the brain,” which she lodged into renderings of urban tumult and abstract expanses. She thus saw painting as an effort to “say a small thing edgily.”

By pursuing these fragments of life, one is met with the challenge of articulation. As Gerhard Richter notes, “Painting is the making of an analogy for something non-visual and incomprehensible – giving it form and bringing it within reach.” A construction site is thus the venue in which a painter must toil, he “sees the semblance of things and repeats it [...] without fabricating the things himself.”

In keeping with such proclamations of sight and its elaboration, Claire Bendiner zones in on their immediate surroundings, released into flowstate, producing work sans method. Taking stock of the world and then dealing with it in paint, they surrender to a subconscious state of Each composition is a midpoint between process and finality, resolved yet open to non-completion. Bendiner is aligned with the provisional painting method, exposing themselves to what Raphael Rubinstein outlines as a “finished product disguised as a preliminary stage.” He further clarifies the concept asserting that “provisional painting is major painting masquerading as minor painting” as a result of an artist’s “foundational skepticism” around the medium’s history. This is Bendiner’s ecosystem, one that engenders precarious manifestations of line and color.

Working on several paintings at the same time, Bendiner claims that “distinct pieces” often “leak” into multiple paintings, each consigned to their particular “abstract vocabulary.” Tactically bent, they reach for miscellaneous objects like cardboard and scraps of paper as tools to apply and daub and build paint. Bendiner effectively queers the AbEx lineage, formulating their ambiguous zones with scattershot gestures. Working primarily in large scale, they bring together Mary Heilmann’s non-rigid spatiality and the dubious compositions of Raoul De Keyser.

*Designer Croutons* appears as a perfect example of Bendiner's participation in this lineage, as the sandstone canvas boasts the tripartite suggestions of shape in tomato red, deep aqua, and confounding pear. The sketch-like gestures form a slapdash loop, partial bell, and what appears to be a bicycle seat at the painting's bottom left corner. These are, however, unstable objects – ultimately at odds with definition.

Summer 2020. Swarms of red spotted moths descend on the city. Under government direction, anyone who came into contact with the invasive species was instructed to immediately squash the pest, or else report it via phone call to 1-888-4BADFLY. Prescribed violence directed at a beautiful thing was at once a laugh and a tragedy, spurring dead bodies scattered about the city.

The needle of Emma McMillan's semiabstract compass was bent toward the spotted lanternfly. The artist zeroed in on the subject due to its strange allure and attachment to a particular time and place: New York City, Covid's heyday. Since the inception of this series, she has tangled up, splayed out, and folded the bug into an array of situations. One such painting, *Invasive*, sees the subject ripped apart, a smattering of golden yellow, burnt umber, and rust red exploding from its body. The central colors pulsate against a periwinkle wash, suggestions of sienna trapped beyond. This illustrates McMillan's consistent treatment of paint, her work extending from a core understanding of formal structures, which she takes to task, splintering representational modes.

Left fields are exciting. The portrait of a Batman stands against a background that fuses creamy eggshell with a slight electric green. This work emanates the sentimental care of portraiture, stylistically aligned with the clear-cut figures of Alex Katz. The hero hangs near the wall's edge, manning the space in congruence with Sofya Shpurova's strange depiction of her ghostly visage floating above a discontinuous male subject. This lower figure recalls Martin Kippenberger's crestfallen man in *The Perfect Storm*, albeit younger and without body.

Shpurova occupies a self-conscious state of production, her peopled images largely extending from portraiture, herself as primary subject. She is the main character, contending that "I know myself best, and I like how my figure lives in the painting and 'becomes' the painting," implicating the "painful awareness of being human." An overwhelming sense of weirdness permeates the work, as conventions struggle against her penchant for disturbed space. *I am a Beautiful Angel in the Room of Artificial Light Sitting* sees a brunette Sofia toiling in a jewel-toned mass of color, her back dressed in a pair of shimmering wings.

The infernal dimension is Shpurova's playground, though she consistently imposes chatoyant thoroughfares amidst the grime and grit. *Brave Astigmatic Person Who Could Have Been a Hero. There is No Reason To.* brings together the mosaically oriented world of Gustav Klimt and Odilon Redon's *Young Girl in a Blue Bonnet*. The latter painting is flipped and perverted under the direction of Shpurova. Her characteristically strange self depiction is exhibited here in profile, a deluge of knotted pigments acting as veil for the oversized head. The texture and erudite palette recapitulate Shpurova's archeological process, as she examines the annals of history and stirs the drama of identification.

One can pursue trains of thought in a painter's work, where the edges of perception filter into the production of sensations on a surface. The artist takes in the world and spits it back out, with some divination in the process. Clough, in working through "the cloudy courage of a vain attempt," was resigned to material constraints, which serve as the foundation to any studio practice. What one does with the tools is where things get interesting... Clough professed: "Well it's just paint, in the end, and you push it round 'til it works – that's all."