

# Meliksetian MB Briggs

## *Apophenia*

Alex Heilbron's new body of work is anchored in one of the most controversial historical events of the twentieth century: the assassination of John F. Kennedy. In her exhibition, *Apophenicat* Meliksetian | Briggs, Heilbron invites us to reflect on the ephemera surrounding this event, ranging from public documents to witness statements. Through this reflection, she utilizes painting's subversive power in depicting and questioning historical truths.

From the outset, the paintings' scale places us face-to-face with the assassination. In the gap between pattern and reason, *Apophenia* crystallizes a perceptual disorder which makes us attribute meaning to random things. The paintings place the viewer beyond images, somewhere between momentum and monumentum: *inchaotio formarum*. The paintings sit at the junction of a critical moment, the seesawing, the loss of balance and momentum, depicting a man whose body is collapsing under bullets. The assassination marks the end of an era which left us a blurred, televised trace. The real moment is replaced by a collective memory mediated by a televised screen.

How can painting thwart the command of image representation and mediation today? Paintings are both a backdrop and a backstage for historical events whose meaning we reenact.

### WE CAN'T SEE ANYTHING: FACING THE PAINTING

On first glance, we survey the painting's open spaces and capture snippets of shapes that compose various elements of a scene. The horizontal planes and repetition of gesture create lapses and periods of latency, from which a semblance of an image forms. The work's aim is neither to retrace the steps of what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963 nor to paint a portrait of fleetingness. The act of painting suspends our belief in images since it is a break with skepticism, with the desire to see everything, to know everything, to observe everything. Much like the way a traumatic historical event may become peripheral, so does the intimate and shared record of it becomes less legible.

### TAKING AN IMAGE, MAKING A PAINTING, BREAKING FLATNESS

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Confronted with the series *Flag I - V*, we are immediately presented by a perceptual and physical disturbance. In *Flag I*, a grid is omnipresent. Colors are strident and flat, overlap, without shading or gradation. The texture of the surfaces creates a vibrato through its minuscule relief. Glitches introduce discrepancies and create slight distortions in iconic perfection. A game of masking and unmasking replays in ghost traces of grid and stencils. This visual play creates shifts, breaches and breaks which cause the overall structure to deconstruct and disintegrate. The interstitial moments and elements are equally as important as each concrete form.

In *Flag II* we must confront questions about what makes a "figure." The opaque black rectangle, punctuating many canvases, brings Abraham Zapruder's film to mind. In the 486 frames, a black rectangle blocks the motorcade just before the first bullet: a partial blackout, a blind spot. A complete vision is almost impossible, and meaning can only be discerned in fragments on the periphery, by zooming in and zooming out. A black square becomes and is the figure.

Alex Heilbron's paintings also challenge our perceptions of what is a screen. She paints in a moment and context where screens are omni-prevalent, Google images are always a click away and Los Angeles' pervasive movie industry production is inescapable.

## MAKING FACES: IMAGES

Movie stars and icons are surfaces to project on. People talked about John and Jackie Kennedy's faces; which were constructions of rehearsed and expected expressions. The gunman's second shot shatters this smooth image, Kennedy's skull explodes, Jackie's expression panicked. This rupture brings us face to face with reality. Heilbron goes beyond re-enactment or newsreel: she transforms, literally before our eyes, the fleeting images into a threshold to something else. This something else, which takes form on the canvas, is painting in action; moving and oscillating.

## CONSTRUCTION, ALTERATION: PAINTING AS A SCORE

Alex Heilbron cuts into and subtracts from the official narrative. When the work utilizes and embeds a photograph from Jean Hill, a vocal anti-official narrative assassination witness, and places a structure of stylized flowers on it, she introduces doubt into the system. The pattern of Jackie Kennedy's pink skirt-suit serves as a main motif for two works. Stained with John's blood in 1963 and splattered by pattern in *Depository* and *Expectations and results*, the drops of blood on her outfit transform into dots, assuming the form of a modern stigmata. The skirt is a piece of contact evidence. The handbag and

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the blood-stained skirt-suit have been deposited in the National Archives and will remain untouchable, like relics, until 2103<sup>1</sup>

From afar we see a bright red bloodstain on wallpaper. Up close we recognize a face whose eyes and mouth have slipped away, flattened. We read contradictory meanings depending on how close we stand to the painting. From a distance we see blood dripping and splattering, but up close, we see straight pink vertical lines, linked by points. The red lines symbolize the lineage, the heritage transmitted by blood.

This notion of the 'end of a dynasty' and the 'end of representation' is common to apocalyptic and modernist discourse. Both narratives combine the concept of linearity and the end. Alex Heilbron's paintings make this linearity explode and create a subtle interruption, a shift and a density on the surface. In this way, she makes a painting by splitting the image, and induces doubt in its continuity. She breaks the official narrative on both fronts.

Marie de Brugerolle, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Deed of Jackie Kennedy's suit and accessories to the National Archives and Records Administration, 2003.