

‘Painting is a recording of choices not of uniqueness’

Edo Dijksterhuis: Critics have likened your works to architectural models and devotional objects. They exude a strong sculptural quality and have a presence beyond the flat surface. On top of that, you don't use brushes. Still, you call yourself a painter. Why's that?

Joseph Montgomery: ‘I did start off using brushes. Right after graduating from grad school in 2007 I travelled a lot and made abstract paintings. They were small and on panels, almost like icons, so I could easily take them along with me. I would think about them, dabble with them – it's the slow, traditional painting process. I made quite a few of those works. They are reminiscent of Frank Auerbach's work, with nothing recognizable in them and little hierarchy, just patches of paint side by side.

When I returned to New York I started looking at these paintings differently. I wasn't exactly embarrassed about them but dissatisfied with the way they were so earnestly abstract. Every mark was purposely placed. In my eye, nothing remained hidden. My first reaction was to cover them up, paint them over and turn them into monochromes. Then I thought of putting something on top of them in order to create a lie, a fib. I would use clay material to imitate paint, for example making it look like a ribbon coming straight from the tube. So I ended up fabricating works, which spoke to me about painting, but in a slightly subverted way, without using paint. They still embody the painting

process: they're about looking, deciding, looking again, deciding and inching towards the moment you're satisfied with the work.'

ED: The mainstay of your output consists of two very different types of work. There are the colourful and complex collages on the one hand and the mini-minimalist, monochromatic shims on the other. How do these relate to each other?

JM: 'They represent different kinds of labour. The shims I use to keep me focused, to keep me in the studio. They are composed of a generative, readymade material, the 16 inches long, tapered wedges you can find in the lumber section of any American DIY store. Rearranging them, assembling them, is another way of representing painting. Painting is not the pursuit of one ultimate masterpiece but rather a collection of choices, starting from the ground up, to reach an image-like quality. With the shims the process is fundamentally different from the collages but the work I do on the shims does feed into the collages.'

ED: When do you decide to move from shims to collage?

JM: 'My working process is such that paintings are not made in one go, but in a constant back and forth. The shift from shims to collage and back is very active and conscious. I want that shift. For me, it's like exercising different parts of the body.'

ED: Your collages are reminiscent of Dadaist works from the 1930s, for example Kurt Schwitters' collages, while the shims echo hardcore 1970s abstraction. When you shift from one type of work to the other does that historical framework follow suit?

JM: 'I'm not in a one-on-one relationship with the movements you mentioned, but as a contemporary painter I do know the painters who were part of them and I have to deal with them. I feel that all images are pre-destined. What a painting can look like is bound by history and precedent. The time of innovation is over.'

What I'm doing is recording a series of choices leading up to a painting. I'm aware that this diminishes the idea of authorship. And it's probably even more so the case with the shims; they are mechanical reproductions of what a minimalist painting can look like.'

ED: What exactly do you mean by 'pre-destined'? Are you referring to the fact that in the early 21st century, beyond post-modernism, everything has already been invented and done and we're bound to merely repeat and recycle?

JM: 'That might be perceived as a cynical statement, but yes, that's my belief. Still, there's plenty of choice left. There's nothing unique about the outcome,

though. The unique painting as such does not exist. Every painting can be created by making certain choices. So I rather view painting as a verb, an action, a recording of choices and not a recording of uniqueness.

The fact that I create more than one type of work makes it harder to pin down the “me”, the author. I like that space where definition is postponed. Also using the word “painter” to describe myself is a fib in itself and feeds into the conversation about authorship.’

ED: Why do you work on a small, intimate scale?

JM: ‘It came out of the early work, the paintings I travelled with. But it has remained like that ever since. I’m basically attracted to the portrait format. I build portraits in a way, but they are representations of faces or muzzles in which only I can see the noses, eyes and ears. This smaller format keeps me fully engaged.

I sometimes work in larger formats, though. My show at Peter Blum Gallery last fall included three meters tall shims made out of cardboard and mdf. I shifted scale in order to suit the exhibition and the architecture of the space.

ED: You said your paintings are documentation of a series of choices leading up to a satisfactory result. When do you know the result is satisfactory, when is a painting done?

JM: ‘It’s a matter of time. Painting is a contemplative activity; it takes a lot of looking at the work, living with it. A painting I considered finished three months ago can look unfinished today and I’ll take it apart again to reassemble. It’s only finished when I send it out into the world and even then I can still alter it in my mind, change it back from painting to material.’

ED: For this current show, Rules for Coyote, you’ve limited your colour scheme to the nine colours used in the Roadrunner cartoons. Why is that?

JM: ‘I wanted to see how I’d function within a strict set of rules. I’ve always been interested in combinatorial possibilities, the options within a set of parameters. This group of paintings began with different combinations of those nine colours and I’ve worked on top of that.

The Roadrunner cartoons interest me mostly because of the coyote. I think of him in the context of the Indigenous American trickster. He plays tricks on you, shape-shifts for ambiguously beneficial ends. He’s an interesting touchstone for me as a painter. I lead people into a painting, which isn’t a painting in the traditional romantic sense. It’s some sort of trap. Paintings usually hold forth the promise of beauty and interaction, and that can be highly satisfying. Paintings can be dangerous in that way. You can be seduced into thinking about the work in terms of “good” and “not good”.’

ED: You make it sound like you want to strip painting of all personal traits, of anything that might even come close to sentimentality.

JM: 'Painting is a whirlpool. You can easily be sucked into a romantic notion of it and of the personality of the painter. I know from experience that if I go down that path, the results are not good. Therefore I attempt to battle my romanticism with a more pragmatic approach.

I'm always cautious, though. Before I used recycled painting as the basis for my collages. The current ones were started by transferring pigment onto canvas, mostly in two layers. The result was extremely seductive. It's immediate, beautiful and satisfying. But I reached that point so quickly that I became distrustful and I had to cover it up, renegotiate it. I guess it's a form of deliberate sabotage. In earlier collages I've done it by making them as deep as they were wide, negotiating with gravity up to the point where the construction would fail and everything come crashing down.

A lot of painting nowadays follows a formula or system for seduction. A good – or rather: commercially successful - painting makes for a great jpeg so it can be shared on Instagram. It doesn't work that way for my collages. They always need to be photographed from at least two vantage points, front and side, in order to be understood.'

ED: And still, they are not straightforward to 'read'. Quite often I don't know what I'm looking at exactly.

JM: 'That's what I like about the collages. You never know whether an element is on top or behind, whether it's paper or plastic. Sometimes things are recognizable but mostly not.

In this new series I've used a lot of pastels for the first time. Pastels offer a way to record colour immediately. They have a tactility and almost disappear as they're being applied. The material falls apart, fragments. It leaves a trace rather than something opaque.'

ED: Besides shims and collages you also do work in other media, like animation. How does this factor into your practice?

JM: 'I make dolls out of the same wedges I use for the shims. These figures return in my videos and on the wallpaper I make. They are like avatars. For me they represent an anthropomorphized image of labour. The first doll I made I put in my studio, kind of like a companion who was reproducing what I was doing. In the animations the character repeats simple tasks over and over. That represents painting for me: a repetition of style, motive and dealing with history that brings forth material.'

Edo Dijksterhuis is a freelance journalist and art writer. He contributes regularly to Het Financieele Dagblad, De Witte Raaf, ArtSlant, Museumtijdschrift and De Filmkrant.