

THE NOSE JOB

An interview with Joseph Montgomery

By Sam Steverlynck

New York-based artist Joseph Montgomery is best known for his collages and shims. The collages are a form of painting without using brushes, which he builds up in various layers that include painted scraps of material like cardboard, clay and wire. The shims are made by rearranging, assembling and painting 16 inch-long, wooden wedges from DIY-stores into various compositions. Whereas these were initially black or white, Montgomery later also started using colour adding another layer of texture. But the wedges also return in other series and media, hence becoming a painterly motif that keeps on popping up in his varied but at the same time coherent oeuvre.

Though your work encompasses various series, you mostly work around the shims and collages. How do they relate and influence each other?
The two bodies of work are two different representations of painting labour, one fast and one slow. Each type of labour researches paths to satisfaction with an image, an image being another name for a finished painting in my vocabulary. Therefore, a finished painting is one that I am satisfied with. The two types of labour produce satisfaction differently. The shim construction labour produces a painting that contains straightforward figure/ground relationships, repetition, and textural/material attractiveness. The collage labour produces a painting in which spatial assembly is revealed over time, materials slip between associations, and textures attract and repel through difference or sublimation.

Why did you decide to work with a form as specific as a shim and not with other geometrical elements?

The cedar shim is a readymade object available in American hardware stores. Workers use it in construction as a levelling device. Their simple form allows me to forefront the labour of formal choice (layout, decoration, scale, repetition) as well as the content of the image.

Your work is very process-based. The process is present in the final work and seems to be as important as the result. When do you consider a work finished? And when do you decide to stop? Do you sometimes return to a work you earlier considered finished?

I consider the process of making paintings a recording of decisions and

a description of the labours of my studio. As a painting begins and progresses, these labours often have to do with the formal process of finding a composition and a level of attractiveness that I find erotic. In the shim work, the path to being finished is quite direct and the monochromatic painting on the surface of the shims becomes a skin to which I am attracted. In the collage work, I am looking for a certain feature, however, and that tends to be a portion of a bust, usually a nose. Once I see the nose in combination with the erotic attraction to the materials and textures, a psychological bond precipitates and the construction processes narrow toward building that relationship. There are certainly works that I was attracted to but no longer turn me on. They are subsequently cannibalized if they are within my reach.

You call yourself a painter in the first place. Wouldn't the term sculptor be more accurate, as your work cleverly plays with physicality, volume and perspective – an effect that unfortunately gets a bit lost in photographic reproductions?

Finding satisfaction with and attraction to the skins of paintings but not constructing them as inert, dead compositions is an interesting job. Is there a way to represent painting as a living lung inhaling and exhaling while labouring to be attractive? That question has caused my representation of painting to stray into three dimensions for sure. But pursuit of it is my interest, not sculpture, not reproductions.

For your shim series, you paint on objects, while for your collage/paintings you stack elements onto the painted composition. You could say that in both series, you twist around the medium's characteristics: tackling sculpture as painting and painting as sculpture?

I could say that. But I never think about it in those terms. The whole purpose of what I do is finding an erotic, psychological and contemplative relationship to labour. That pursuit involves colour, texture, form, light, sitting, looking, eating, listening, cutting, gluing, etc. in a space dedicated to the chase. That said, the evolution of the studio and the fact that nearly everything hangs on the wall occurred because these scenarios brought me closer to that tripartite relationship.

Your work is abstract. You want to ban all personal anecdotes, yet, one could recognize elements from your daily life: you integrate waste from your studio in the collages or oatmeal you had for breakfast.

Did I once say I wanted to ban all personal anecdotes? If so, I don't really believe that anymore. I like that there are sometimes personal

things in my work. And while the work is abstract, I think about it as a representation of abstraction. That qualification allows a narrative of how and in what order work is made in the studio as well as clear changes to the work, evolutions of materials, and generative off-shoots of aesthetic pursuits.

It is intriguing that, despite its highly abstract character, your work is built up around an element of the bust. Perhaps one could call your collages portraits in disguise?

Yes, there is an element of portraiture but less of someone else and more of me in disguise. As representations of the labours of the studio, the paintings inherently reflect the author. I am in control of that self-portraiture and pursue it serially and diversely. I have been thinking of images of androgyny and ambidextrousness. I pursue a Janus character in the drawings of a large nose and long hair that begin the paintings, in the marriage of mechanical transfer technology and painterly mark making, and the shim painting exhibited adjacent to the collage painting.

You often work in the same format, 61 by 46 cm. Why is that?

I don't always but much of the new work is that size. There are technical and aesthetic reasons for this. One of them is printing the image to be transferred to the support slightly smaller so that there is a frame involved as well as a provisional aspect to the transferred image's presence. In addition, I believe this size is near the limit of how large a work can be that incorporates collage, painting, and transfer; where the actions and materials have the ability to visually transform/slip from themselves into adjacent or new actions and materials.

The notion of repetition, theme and variation is very important in your practice. You are not constantly painting the Mont-Sainte-Victoire like Cézanne did, but the approach is somehow comparable.

I pursue description and not self-expression. This manifests itself as recording decisions in the pursuit of the erotic, psychological, and contemplative relationship to labour. Sometimes I edit that record, other times I record my approaches more than once.

Your work is very postmodern. You know everything has been done before so you don't hide the influence of other artists (Kurt Schwitters, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Ben Nicholson...). What makes you get you up in the morning to produce new work?

My twist on that is that the images are predestined rather than already

made. The ingredients are the same, so there must be a set of options but all of the options haven't been made yet. Finding those options is one of the reasons. The other is my multivalent pursuit of work itself – finding desire, companionship, contemplation through it.

You often set yourself limitations, like for example in the exhibition 'Rules for Coyote' at Dürst Britt & Mayhew, where you only used the colours of the famous 'Roadrunner' cartoons. Is there a specific concept for the series you will present during Independent?

The group of paintings for Independent does not really have a set of rules other than they all began with a transferred image of a nose. It was then my job to either retain the nose while pursuing an erotic, contemplative, and psychological connection with the painting or obscure it and find something else with which to create a connection. The palette in this series has developed over the past six months while pursuing the above-mentioned relationship.

In some of your recent shim works you integrate floral elements, which contrasts with your usual choice for industrial material or waste. Is that a new development you are going to continue in the future?

Yes, I will continue that in the future. I do search for materials local to my studio and try to incorporate them. The first thistle I put into a work was while I was working in Holland toward my exhibition there. It was growing near my studio and I developed an attraction to it and so found a way to incorporate it. Recent uses of dried vegetation come from Vermont where I have a strong relationship to the landscape.

Is that landscape also slipping into your work in other ways?

Not the representation of the landscape, but pieces of my neighbourhood and environments do work their way into the compositions. A broken coat hanger or demolished linoleum flooring, if attractive to me, will end up in the compositions of all of the surfaces I have in front of me at the moment. That catalysing series of moments brought on by a scavenged texture or object is very exciting to me. I think about those as colour or light tinting a room at a certain time of day.

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Sam Steverlyncx is a Brussels-based art critic. He writes for various publications including De Standaard, <h>ART and Art Review. In 2014, he curated the group exhibition 'A Simple Plan' in Ruiselede, Belgium, with work by Pierre Bismuth, Honoré d'O, Willy de Sauter a.o.