

## 8 Questions as a brief enlarging of the understanding of Joseph Montgomery's works. By Edwin Jacobs

When looking at the works of Joseph Montgomery I think of poisoned lips. I honestly don't know why, but his paintings are like candy or a sweet kiss; you simply are attracted to them, but at the same time, you do not know exactly what is happening. When looking at the colours or experiencing the composition what are you exactly feeling or tasting? You are as mesmerized as when longing for a sweet kiss, when thinking of or confronted by lips which like to be kissed. In other words, Montgomery's remarkable visual effects conjure up emotions and you are smitten by them when taking time to look. As I have to make myself clear, when I say 'poisoned' it is not meant negatively, it is what happens when you get seduced by Montgomery's works. I think in relation to this emotion – let me put it that way – art never fails to remember anyone of any kind of emotion. Mainly, because all art is about emotions, but differently intended ones. The artworks that Joseph Montgomery brings into our world, are not main art changers or big statements, why should they? No, they softly present the need to be aware that you are looking at art and aware of your emotions involved. And that is in an artworld of big, bigger, biggest, a statement. You could say, his art is a sensitive statement of art making.

This is an important reason why the following eight questions need to be presented to the artist and his answers represent a key contribution to the understanding of his art.

1.

Edwin Jacobs: The history of painting is long. And many times, painting was declared dead. However, painting always had a responsive audience and was considered to be the artform per se, and managed to go on. I mean, painting is identified with art, so that is why it so strong too. Do you agree with this? And when yes, what are your thoughts as an artist acting within the realm of painting?

Joseph Montgomery: The position of painting within art is a function of time. History has not only conscripted painting to be a recording device, but it has also relied on it as a tool. Presently painting has lost its ability to tell the truth (or trust to do so) yet is a reliable language for communication, still a device, a verb, but without the burden of responsibility. Loosened from that expectation I pursue painting as a moral activity, by which I mean a structure I respect through use of its existing vocabulary. To paint is to construct a scenario, given these parameters, in which I achieve an object I desire.

2.

EJ: How is it possible that painting can be experienced again and again despite a contemporary art context that has produced so much and intense new developments, reviews, discourse, and such a diverse artworld?

JM: I wonder if by experienced you mean painted. Are you asking about the construction or the consumption? Either way painting is now a word for a kind of labour put to many different ends. It is useful, and I think always will be. I use it in this exhibition to reflect myself with mirrors, a geometric, at-hand ground, a need in this moment for a kind of order and reflection through the shim painting.

3.

EJ: The collage is a being in painting since Picasso and Kurt Schwitters. Could you say with the collage you are in between them using structure? I mean, it is not about measuring your work with them, but where do you stand? Using structure is something I notice in all your works, one time more upfront, another moment more layered and soft.

JM: I like how you call collage a 'being'. But I am perhaps less sure of its vivified nature than you. I think of the painters of the 19th and 20th century as hunters pursuing painting and, once caught and slain, dismembering it. Painting was cornered by Courbet, caught by Manet. Picasso and Braque glued a version of it back together, Schwitters too. We painters today can choose to relive this hunt and/or remake something from the limbs. That's my play, the innumerable possibilities for re-assembly of the parts of painting. In pursuing this enormous volume of options, painting is rendered. Collage simply displays the architecture of the game.

4.

EJ: During the course of Modern Art, art more and more became something delicate. I mean, the way it is appreciated, respected, recognized and documented, by buying, by collecting. How do you feel about this?

JM: I don't particularly think of the delicacy of art but from the way you ask it I think of the inevitability of commodification and professionalization of art and the need to resist these pressures.

5.

EJ: The aesthetic is so important in the way an artpiece is appreciated. At the same time, you could talk about the un-aesthetic. Not that the artist keeps it away or ignores it, or the painter with concentration produces bad painting – I think of Baselitz. No, I mean more in a sense of sensitivity towards interconnected feelings while making the art work, or related to you, while painting. Do you recognize this?

JM: I do recognize this. For example, the work in this exhibition appears to have a decorative arts aesthetic because of the use of mirrors and repetitive geometry. It is one of many structural possibilities in building a painting, just as 'bad painting' is or 'figurative painting'. My work is making choices, decisions, and in the choosing I see and feel most clearly the interconnectedness because I could choose any number of aesthetic assemblies for the pieces of painting at my disposal.

6.

EJ: Could you talk about the aesthetic as an emergence of the appreciation of painting? Do you silently think about it when you compose your works? Or do you totally ignore it?

JM: Are you asking about my aesthetic in particular? If so, yes. I try to exhibit my thoughts on the notion of aesthetic by making and showing multiple bodies of work, as you say painting constructed with structure up front or softly layered as well as other positions: animation, trompe l'oeil, monochrome, etc. It is important for me to re-emphasise the studio as a place where choices are made, and each choice can have a different result or maintain a kind of consistency. As aesthetic relates to others, I find consistency suspicious in an era of increased professionalization of the art. The painting becomes a reproducible product as well as a brand. I have seen the psychological damage that wreaks on the artist responsible for repeating themselves and think the work lacks the morality I mentioned earlier.

7.

EJ: How close does your work go to your inner self? Could you say something about this? In a way every artwork, maybe painting in its tradition close to music, the fare most, gets as close as possible to the person of the artist.

JM: I had someone in the studio recently who did bring up an aesthetic consistency, that the works all achieve a level of finish or consideration, not really something quantifiable but something along the lines of an

accent in spoken language, a voice. On the other hand, I've received criticism that this constancy removes me too much from connection. My intention is that when artworks leave the studio, they reflect my decisions there and that my inner self is represented in the traces of those decisions. I built this show at Dürst Britt & Mayhew to reflect myself. Five works have mirrors in them which while not showing my or the viewer's whole body represent a portion of perspective, fragmenting both the audience and the participation of it to complete the image.

8.

EJ: When I let my personal emotions go, and express my personal associations towards your paintings, I unwillingly think about the painter Chagall and his work 'Time is a River without Banks', from the 1930's. It is a symbol to me, the phrase itself, it is so open. The way you include styles and visions of composition from mathematical structure to interaction with materials, as you refer to flowering, as to traditions in painting from still life to landscape, all so cross-intellectual. I think about the artist Theo van Doesburg (the reason why I collected your works for the Centraal Museum in Utrecht), who is the inventor of the construction of a new artworld. He did that by experimenting with styles to find his own. As you do by not ignoring what the history of painting brought us, but paint with the understanding of it.

JM: The endgame is not to find a style. This would be as pointless a search as to try and find the riverbank where we can rest from Time. The intersectionality is the point, building from what floats along with us. That kind of resourcefulness, recycling, economy, is the moral dimension of painting that I believe in. It is representative of my mind which sees, structures, and desires the already drifting dismembered pieces of painting floating into the 21st century.

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Edwin Jacobs (1960) is director of Dortmunder U in Dortmund and chair of the Ruhr Kunstmuseen and NRW Museen, Nordrhein Westfalen in Germany. From 2009 to 2016 he was director of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht. Previously he worked as director of De Lakenhal in Leiden and of the Museum Jan Cunen in Oss. He has collaborated with Iniva London, Jüdisches Museum Tarnov, Musee de l'Elysee, Lausanne, Tate Modern, London and curated exhibitions with Taryn Simon (2002), Robert Walker (2005), Theo van Doesburg (2010), Craigie Horsfield (2016).