

Peña, Arthur, "Jessica Dickinson at James Fuentes," *Patron*, April 2020

## JESSICA DICKINSON AT JAMES FUENTES

To get to Jessica Dickinson's studio is a bit of journey. It is located in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, within the massively sprawling Brooklyn Army Terminal, which nonprofit ArtBuilt, working with the city, developed to provide affordable mixed-use studio spaces. Along with private investors, civic support, and multiple artists, Dickinson helped to organize the pioneering development, the largest of its kind in New York's recent history.

Dickinson's own studio is ideal in striking the perfect balance of a comfy second home and rigorous workspace. Freshly finished paintings along with works in progress line the walls, including two new pieces that Lower East Side fixture James Fuentes will present at the Dallas Art Fair this fall. Both are large wooden panels with roughed-up and carved-into surfaces. Dickinson hammers into the wood with a mallet and a huge paint scraper, marking the site with jagged punctures which she then fills and covers with paint or plaster.

Sections are sanded and the process is intuitively repeated over many days and months. The end results are richly layered surfaces with aggressive patience embedded in the material; these are slow paintings, not just in their making, but also in their revealing. "There's something very specific I'm after in terms of poetics, and a lot of that has to do with how something changes through time," Dickinson explains. "These different moments build on top of each other and create an understanding, which becomes a painting."

Beginning in 2010 with *Towards*, which will also be presented in the James Fuentes booth, Dickinson began to chart the topographical shifts of her work with rubbings of them on paper, capturing the dynamic tactility of each panel's iteration. Titled *Remainders*, this series is made analogous to the paintings and helps her make sense of all the moments that are lost and added during the process. "I want there to be a stillness for the work, allowing for things to emerge. It's about acknowledging a life span; with the *Remainders* you see the life span of the painting," Dickinson says. A room full of her *Remainders* were exhibited at Cindy and Howard Rachofsky's The Warehouse in 2014.

For panels so substantially physical, Dickinson's work is birthed from ephemeral inspirations, such as the shape of raking sunlight across a wall. While I was in her studio, a similar moment lit the surface of a work, accenting the excavated terrain of the painting. Dickinson spoke of writing personal prose after noticing dust collecting on a shelf and gestured towards pieces of paper taped to a concrete column. Each sheet contained stanzas made of starkly paired words, a process Dickinson uses to title and come to terms with the essence of the work. Her daily drawing practice uses similar instances as a starting point, helping to build a map for each work's elusive journey. "I like to work through the unknown—that's what making art is about. In the end, the paintings become something I could have never imagined." —Arthur Peña



Top: Jessica Dickinson, *Always-Also*, 2010–2011, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 54.25 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes. Bottom: Jessica Dickinson, *Towards*, 2009–2010, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 50 x 48 in. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes.

## Art in America

Westfall, Stephen, "Slow Painting," *Art in America*, February 2018, pp. 62-69

# SLOW PAINTING

**The deliberate pace at which a painting demands to be viewed is key to its contemporary relevance.**

by Stephen Westfall

Jessica Dickinson:  
*At: For*, 2016-17,  
oil on limestone  
polymer on panel,  
56¼ by 52¼ inches.  
Courtesy James  
Fuentes, New York.

THE LARGE PAINTINGS Suzan Frecon recently exhibited at David Zwirner Gallery in New York revealed themselves slowly. The works were illuminated primarily by the gallery's skylights, and the quality of light changed with the weather and time of day. To experience the color contrasts between Frecon's seemingly simple shapes and the fields of color upon which they rested or floated required patience, and even a willingness to return at different times. It seemed nearly sacrilegious to check one's cellphone under the circumstances, though visitors couldn't really be prevented from doing so. The exhibition demanded a certain kind of attentiveness, one that could be at odds with modes of behavior common in contemporary life. To be fully present with Frecon's paintings, one had to adjust one's sense of being in time. Upon making such an adjustment, visitors were rewarded by the revelation of a layer of meaning that subtends the merely retinal: the fullness of Frecon's paintings could be said to emerge from their illumination rather than to be laid bare by it, and that sense of emergence is something that must be felt in time.

The title of poet and critic John Yau's September 24 review of Frecon's exhibition in the online publication *Hyperallergic*, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings," got me thinking that Slow Painting was an actual stance, an intention and practice shared by other contemporary painters who, without constituting a movement, collectively insist on a phenomenological experience over a connotative one. Since so much contemporary discussion of painting is understandably focused on signification (urgent narratives of identity being an obvious example), the phenomenological aspects of painting by hand are in need of renewed focus. Without resorting to nostalgia, it is necessary to understand how and why a single body working patiently in the studio might achieve moving results that have a distinctly contemporary relevance.

The slowness of painting—both in its creation and in its apprehension by viewers—is routinely overlooked because it is so often taken for granted. Compared to digital media, painting is always slow. When painters seek to speed up the medium—offering quickly rendered "fast takes"—they are often doing so to self-reflexively critique art's commodification. In Richard Prince's work, for example, this fast take can be read as a deliberate strategy to reveal the problematic nature of viewing painting under the deadening realities of contemporary capitalism—a realization that supposedly prompts further thought. But it feels deflationary with respect to the multiple levels of the experience of time that painting may address.

There are notable painters who can knock out a profoundly elegant painting in a day. I'm thinking especially of wet-into-wet figure painters such as Alex Katz, Luc Tuymans, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, with their careful preparation and constant skill-building subsumed into a concentrated daily performance of painting that registers as an autographic style. And it would be misleading to regard Slow Painting as antithetical to the gestural Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, or Joan Mitchell, all of whom could take months to complete a canvas, mixing bouts of swift maneuvers with hours to weeks of simply looking.

The Slow Painter openly courts time as a partner in the process of distributing paint on a surface and as an arbiter of style. For the purposes of this essay, I'd like to focus on six artists: Frecon, Jessica Dickinson, John Zurier, McArthur Binion, Vija Celmins, and Catherine Murphy. While each of these artists works with different material densities of paint (Zurier's paintings are nearly evanescent) and takes up different positions in the spectrum between abstraction and representation, all are

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## Slow Painting imbeds a premonition of something potentially enormous held in reserve that can only be revealed slowly.



Dickinson: *Knows*, 2013–15, oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56¼ by 53¾ inches. Courtesy James Fuentes.

preoccupied with setting the stage for time unfolding slowly in the viewer's perception. Their work takes time to make and the time it takes conditions how we view it.

Such an equation may not be as self-evident as it first seems. A work executed quickly may reveal itself slowly in terms of understanding the painter's preparation and training before the strike, the way we appreciate the training of an athlete's or dancer's movements. But within the first take the Slow Painting imbeds a premonition of something potentially enormous held in reserve that can only be revealed slowly. I believe it has something to do with a willingness, perhaps even a desire, to lose oneself in process beyond the point where an autographic mark remains legible. This may require either building up or paring down actual material density: both can be self-effacing forms of labor.

SLOW PAINTING IS NOT anti-gestural, but Slow Painters for the most part avoid flourishes, emulating a relatively anonymous sense of touch that seeks transparency to material and process. Thus, Jessica Dickinson, the youngest and perhaps the most physically forward painter among these artists (if we understand "physical" to denote mass) begins her paintings by building a spackled (limestone polymer) surface on

panel into the density of a wall, recalling painting's atavistic origins. Her colors are layered into her surfaces in near monochromes tinted by the surface material: fluctuating shades of grayish blue, algae green, carmine, a yellowing white. As she is working her surface she will gouge small pockets here and there and score it like a drypoint etching. These marks don't constellate nor do they appear to represent an anxious emotion—but neither are they disinterested. They are there partly as markers of time expressed in the layers of material.

In her essay on Dickinson, "Up Close / Moving Back," curator Debra Singer cites the artist's viewing the New Testament frescoes by Cimabue at the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi as a touchstone. Cimabue's frescoes have been altered by oxidation that has reversed the original effects of light and dark, turning the paintings into near negatives of themselves; the devastation of the 1997 earthquake has cracked off whole sections of his images. Singer writes:

Cimabue's partially destroyed and decaying surfaces paradoxically possess both a heaviness of material and ethereality of atmosphere, as they reveal and obscure identifiable elements of their earlier incarnations. As such, the works actually embody and project a tactile sense of time.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by the Assisi frescoes, Dickinson wants her paintings to be "made with both intention and the accident of time."<sup>3</sup> More recent antecedents to her painting can be found in the aggressive physicality of Lucio Fontana's sliced and punctured canvases, but in its density her work is closer to Alberto Burri's large "Crack" paintings that monumentalize the effects of oil painting's craquelure into monochrome (white, black, or gold) invocations of sun-dried earth. Closer to home we might recall some of Jay DeFeo's bulkier paintings, particularly *The Rose* (1958–66), which was famously rediscovered walled up like Poe's black cat for twenty years at the San Francisco Art Institute and is now in the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The role of time in the years it took DeFeo to paint *The Rose* is self-evident in its patched and faceted surface, but it has also become part of the lore surrounding the painting's reemergence into the world as a veritable time capsule. It takes time to reveal time.

Suzan Frecon also builds up her paintings slowly, from drawings and watercolors to small graph compositions for images she's particularly interested in expanding into large paintings. Since she introduced an arcing shape into her pictorial vocabulary in the late 1990s, her paintings have shifted from earlier layered monochromes to compositions featuring arched and elliptical planar shapes that seem to drift, rest, and hover inside the larger shape of the painting's carefully calibrated rectangular format. Each shape is of a single hue of remarkable depth and inner variation, partly due to the pigment being suspended in rich concentrations of oil mediums that can vary from glossy to matte. She can occasionally





Suzan Frecon: *book of paint, version 3*, 2017, oil on linen, two panels, 108 by 87½ inches overall. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

work on the painting vertically, but much of the time she has to lay the painting flat, un-keying the stretchers and letting the painting dry for days and sometimes weeks, then re-keying the linen so the surface is taut. Many of her larger paintings are diptychs, and when a color crosses from one side to another it maintains an exquisite material consistency that isn't driven by a signature mark, but instead by what Yau, in his *Hyperallergic* article, called a kind of anonymity, where the artist disappears into the form and process of art-making. Frecon identifies with the "slowness" of oil painting, at least with respect to her own processes.<sup>4</sup>

Some of her recent diptychs may have only two shapes, an ellipsoid and a rectangular field and, therefore, two colors.

Others have as many as five, with the ground also functioning as shape. In *book of paint, version 3* (2017), one orange curved arch and one peaked yellow ochre arch rest on the bottom horizontal of the top panel embraced by a red ochre ground. In the lower panel a green half ellipsoid sets on, or rises from, the bottom horizontal surrounded by a deep ultramarine field. The forms are collectively reminiscent of domes, gallerias, mountains, rising suns, and bodies of water, but Frecon, while allowing that all art comes from nature, also insists that her forms aren't meant to conjure landscape. She has said that, like the anonymously created Tantric art she admires, "They are paintings you experience, there is no story."<sup>5</sup>





John Zurier: *Hvaast*, 2017, glue-size tempera and oil on linen, 27½ by 19½ inches. Courtesy Peter Blum, New York.

John Zurier, like Dickinson and Frecon, is an abstract painter whose works emphasize the phenomenology of surface and color through the visible traces of the painter's labor, though his touch is by comparison almost shockingly light and simultaneously visible. In contrast to Frecon and Dickinson, Zurier applies his paint in the consistency of a thin wash that registers every stroke and pat of the brush. Sometimes it's a wash upon a wash. The diaphanous veils Zurier patiently creates appear equally dry and plush. Over the last twenty years, Zurier has shifted from working exclusively in oil paint that has had the oil largely blotted away to working largely with distemper, which involves mixing pigments with rabbit skin glue. Here and there a rectangle, a wedge shape, or a line may hold a composition, but these elements are the most refined of architectural members, meant to hold the veil or trembling membrane of color that is each painting's keynote.

There is a faraway echo of Diebenkorn's "Ocean Park" paintings in the sparest introduction of a vertical or a horizontal, but Zurier's near monochromes are not only more decisively reductive, they are also influenced by a different light. Though based in Berkeley, California, the artist has been spending half the year in

Iceland for more than a decade, and that country's exposed geologic landscape and northern light has clearly influenced whatever other place the mind goes when almost all attention is directed to studio contingencies. In an essay on Zurier, art historian Robert Storr identifies how singularly unhurried the artist is in realizing his wide range of effects with means that would appear to fuse reductivism with Expressionism:

... he has arrived at his own way of working, by closely studying his means and their capacities and then deploying them with maximum efficiency in gradual stages that permit him to scrutinize the consequences of every move before making another. To that extent Zurier counts among the deftest of contemporary anti-expressionists without ever sacrificing the surprises and pleasures of the hand to the requirements of an idea or design. For if Expressionism, Neo- or old-school, has signified anything, it is impetuosity, the sense that paintings are the sum of sudden insights and urgent responses.<sup>6</sup>

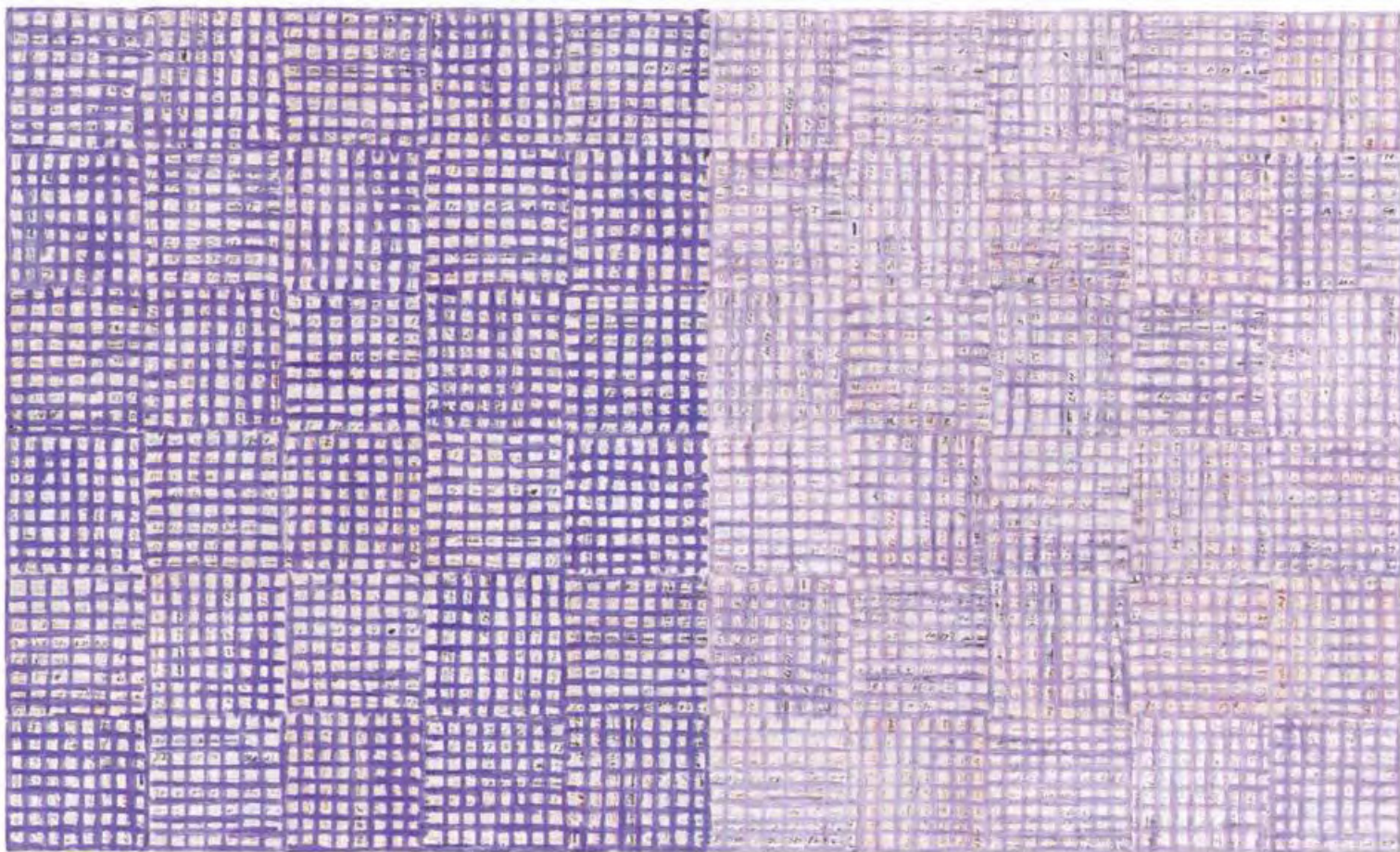
This passage strikes me as insightful and even-handed. Sudden insights and urgent responses have earned their position in art-making, as they have in rhetoric. The slow painters may even have used them in the course of their own practice, but their attention remains focused on a slow emergence. And yet that emergence can indeed arrive by design, as it does in the paintings of McArthur Binion, whose rich crosshatched grids, velvety from a distance and furiously energetic close up, reveal a distinct substrate through their checkered basketlike mesh. Binion's substrates comprise a grid of 4-inch-square "tiles" of photocopied images. In one painting, the image might be negatives of his birth certificate; in another, photos of the rural Mississippi home where he was born; and photo documentation of a lynching in yet another.

This separation of strata is itself a metaphor for slowed time: a visual delay, then a burst of meaning. The miniaturized photographic detail of the substrate introduces representation and a narrative facticity in contrast to the measurable labor of Binion's mark-making with oil pastels that is both in the service of abstraction and an overt, nearly expressionistically concrete record of the artist's bodily presence. The photo documentation is of a past, but the mark-maker is *here*. He chooses colors that embellish a grisaille field with additional earth reds and yellows, so the overall palette of his last two shows at Galerie Lelong in New York was of something akin to early Cubism and some of Jasper Johns's muted chords of gray and mixed-down colors. Every mark of the oil pastel in one color is gone over at least once with another color. Even as Binion's patterns organize into Minimalist geometries of alternating warm and cool, or light and dark tonalities, haloes of ambient color flicker from within.

The cohabitation in Binion's work of personal and political narrative with a covering abstraction is difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile except as what it is, the way two forms as contextually different as an apple and a shotgun can sit together on a table in the same light. Binion, the abstract artist, insists on disclosing, in the echoing language of the grid, evidentiary facts about his life before art, like a body moving under ice. The



## The separation of strata is itself a metaphor for slowed time: a visual delay, then a burst of meaning.



light and ice are the unifying, holistic optical binder to what fragments upon close inspection into one kind of wrenching visual discrepancy or another.

If photographic representation complicates Binion's abstraction, it serves as a visual trope for Vija Celmins's ostensibly realist paintings that push back into meditative realms that have for the last few decades been reserved for abstract painting. Certainly, most of Celmins's imagery has its origin in photographs either taken by the artist or cut from magazines and journals. The mostly small to mid-size scale of her paintings coupled with their depth of field means that unlike the other artists being discussed, Celmins requires the viewer to establish and maintain nearly the same proximate distance in relation to her paintings as the artist had while painting them. On close inspection, one sees the startling range of measurable space and time in what she has chosen to paint.

Most of the images that Celmins created from the mid-to late sixties depict discrete objects: an ominously glowing heater in her studio, World War II airplanes (Celmins arrived as a child from Latvia, which her immediate family

fled in 1944 as the Russians were pushing west), a hand firing a pistol, cars on a freeway (from a photo Celmins took balancing the camera on her dashboard).

How these objects fill her paintings is not about verisimilitude in rendering the surfaces of things, but about the artist's uncanny ability to give painterly body to her renderings of the surfaces of photographic reproductions. The explosion from a pistol shot can't be observed by the naked eye in real time, but it can be photographed and that photograph painted. At the time she was making these drawings and paintings, the ubiquity of black-and-white reproduction coincided with her desire (partly inspired by Ad Reinhardt's *12 Rules for a New Academy*) to purge her work of its already faint blush of color.

During this period, Celmins was living in California and had access to the ocean and the desert, which suggest an entirely different relation to scale and spatial field than one finds in her paintings of objects, providing vistas of what might be described as pure field. A horizonless photograph of the ocean she took from a pier in Venice, California, became the basis for an alternate kind of pictorial meditation that has continued into the present, one that

McArthur Binion:  
*Looking for Seasons  
XVI*, 2016, oil paint  
stick and paper on  
board, 24 by 40  
inches. Courtesy  
Galerie Lelong,  
New York and Paris.



Catherine Murphy:  
*In the Grass*, 2011,  
oil on canvas,  
48¼ by 75¼ inches.  
Courtesy Peter  
Freeman, Inc.,  
New York.



spreads an observed topography across the surface of the paper or canvas. Even the deep space of the astronomical star fields she paints is still a surface in reproduction. And yet in her meticulous and sometimes exasperated patience she's giving us something much more than surfaces. In his essay for the catalogue of her exhibition last winter at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, critic Bob Nickas writes:

... we come to understand in retrospect that she has been abstracting representation all along, that what her paintings represent is the act of painting, her drawings the act of drawing... Although the hand of the artist may or may not be discernable in marks, her touch is unmistakably evident.<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-1980s in a career that began in the 1970s, Catherine Murphy was clearly also "abstracting representation" in her paintings and drawings, but photography is less a bridge to her observational inclusiveness than it is a challenge that she meets with brio by rendering everything from direct observation. Murphy is a relentless recorder of what she sees with a hand that has long outstripped doggedness (she asserts there were far more talented draftsmen in art school than she) to achieve a mastery that, in the spirit of the other artists mentioned in this essay, disappears into her forms in the spirit of anonymity.

Born and raised in a working-class Massachusetts town, she favors subject matter that hews to the ordinary and close

at hand, if a taxonomy can be called "subject matter": a child's helium party balloon; plastic trash bags in the snow; herself and her husband (the artist Harry Roseman) in their Hyde Park, New York, home; hair floating in a bathroom sink; and often, a window or a screen with something attached like a cut paper snowflake (with blurred snow falling in the night outside). Other depictions include the still explosion of a resting Polyphemus moth on a black window screen, Christmas lights limning a window at night, and a daytime view of a frosty pane with the name CATHY finger-scrawled from the outside so that it reads backward from the inside. Murphy's codex is the length of a life lived but it would probably be smaller if she didn't work ceaselessly. It took her more than three years to finish a painting of a garden hose looped in a heap on a lawn with a garter snake wriggling off toward the upper left-hand corner, and the hose couldn't be moved. Her graphite drawings, like those of Celmins, can take as long to complete as her paintings.

The uncanny seeps into Murphy's meticulous, yet self-effacing realism through the freedom she exerts to draw on her own dreams for visual ideas along with the myriad visual "accidents" the quotidian world provides when it is closely examined. Murphy's world is constantly set teetering by the odd detail and scale relation. The uncanny further presents itself in the way her compositions fill, rhyme with, or pun the picture plane. The ground plane of turf or hardwood floor is tilted up to demolish the horizon (the same horizon that was so important to her





Vija Celmins:  
*Untitled (Ochre)*,  
 2016, oil on canvas,  
 18 by 13½ inches.  
 Courtesy Matthew  
 Marks Gallery,  
 New York.

'70s views across rooftops to New York from an earlier home in New Jersey). The parallel form of the screen or clear window dissolves into the picture plane itself. There is an off-kilter, often geometric monumentality to these compositions, hinting at another order that may provide a consolation in the face of the dissolution she documents: a close-up of Harry's face on the driveway, a dug-up pile of turf, the snake in the grass. Murphy's calculated correspondences seem momentary, almost instantaneous, but are sunk into time and emerging out of it through the painting process.

Recently I showed a beginning painting class Petrus Christus's *Portrait of a Young Girl* (1465–70) in a discussion of the evolution of subject matter away from theocratic hegemony. For a moment I forgot what I was talking about because even in projected reproduction the uncanny aspects of the painting were overwhelming. The combination of modeled sensuality in the rendering of the young girl's face (aided by a 130-year premonition of Caravaggio's dramatic chiaroscuro) and her cool regard emerging like a small moon out of the shadowed room conveyed love and loss across more than five centuries. The painting is impossible to restore, but somehow its craquelure enhances the beauty of the image rather

than obscures it, as though time itself were lending the artist a hand to achieve something greater than what was intended. I wondered for an instant whether painting could bear that weight anymore.

The painters discussed here provide an affirmative answer to such concerns. There are many others, of course. The element of time has never ceased to be there to collaborate with the painter in pushing the image to its emergent, troubled, and sometimes resiliently beautiful stillness. ○

1. John Yau, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings," *Hyperallergic*, September 24, 2017. [hyperallergic.com](http://hyperallergic.com). Yau doesn't elaborate on the idea of Slow Painting versus any other practice in his review. His purpose is to resonate with a quote from Frecon describing her paintings as "slow" and stay on the topic of her work.
2. Debra Singer, "Up Close / Moving Back," in *Under / Press. / With-This / Hold- / Of-Also / Of / How / Of-More / Of-Know*, Inventory Press, New York, 2015, p. 7.
3. Dickinson quoted in *ibid.*
4. Yau, "The Pleasures of Slow Paintings."
5. Suzan Frecon, "text and related work," in *Suzan Frecon: oil Paintings and sun*, New York, David Zwirner Books, 2015, p. 63.
6. Robert Storr, "John Zurier: Painting Between Autumn and Spring," in *John Zurier—Paintings, 1981–2014*, New York, Peter Blum Editions, 2015, p. 10.
7. Bob Nickas, "Mapping Fields of Vision," as yet unpublished essay, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



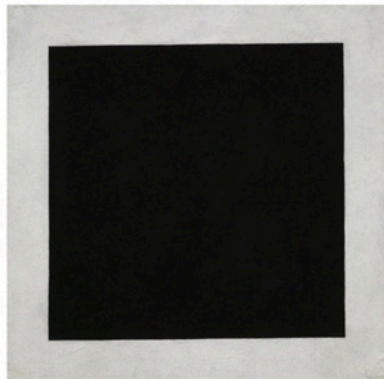
ART SY

Cohen, Alina, "What Makes a Monochrome Painting Good," *Artsy*, March 5, 2018

Art

## What Makes a Monochrome Painting Good

• By Alina Cohen Mar 5, 2018 1:01 pm



Kasimir Severinovich Malevich *Black Square*, 1923  
Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



Ad Reinhardt *Abstract Painting*, 1955  
Phillips

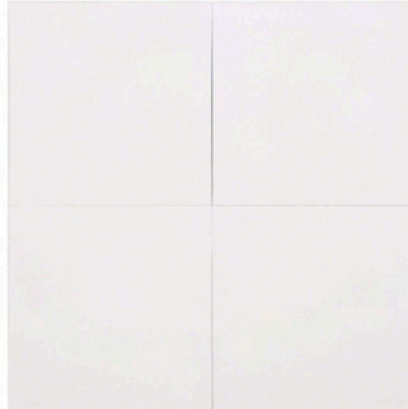
It's easy for museumgoers to make fun of monochrome paintings, since they offer the quintessential response to modern and contemporary art: "Couldn't *anyone* do that?" To some viewers, the works simply require one paint can and lots of brushstrokes. Artist Richard Prince turned the genre into an actual joke when, in the late 1980s and early '90s, he silkscreened humorous text against single-hued backdrops. The artist's "Monochromatic Jokes" made monochromatic paintings truly readable to any literate viewer.

In this vein, the value of monochrome paintings often lies more in the ideas they suggest than in their manifestation of an artist's technical skill. According to Leah Dickerman, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, a monochrome painting is "only as good as the question it asks." She helped curate a 1998 exhibition of work by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who made the first non-figurative monochromes in 1921: *Pure Red Color*; *Pure Blue Color*; and *Pure Yellow Color*. By painting solid blocks of primary colors, he reduced painting to its most essential element: a single, pure paint hue. Rodchenko, says Dickerman, was asking, "In what ways can we understand a painting as just making a thing like any other?" And the monochrome makes that question, and the material of making a painting, very visible." If these concepts may seem academic or erudite, Rodchenko intended just the opposite. He sought to demystify painting, suggesting it was as basic and mundane as any other act of creation.





Robert Ryman *Untitled*, 1958  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
(SFMOMA)



Robert Rauschenberg *White Painting (four panels)*, 1951  
Robert Rauschenberg  
Foundation

Rodchenko found inspiration in the work of Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, who introduced his *Black Square* painting in 1915. (100 years later, researchers discovered that underneath the composition, Malevich scrawled a reference to a 1882 work by Paul Bilhaud, the first-ever documented monochrome: “Battle of negroes in a dark cave.” This incited controversy over Malevich’s similarly racist starting point.) *Black Square* isn’t technically a monochrome, as it depicts a specific figure—a black shape—on a white background. Yet it still suggests the potency present in a simple block of color, relying on the black/white contrast to raise questions about presence, absence, signs, and symbols.

In the mid-20th century, artist Ad Reinhardt eliminated all traces of representation in the all-black monochrome paintings he made beginning around 1953 until his death in 1967. Obsessed with precision and paint viscosity, the artist laid down even, black surfaces and attempted to remove hints of his own creative gestures. The final products, five-by-five-foot canvases, leave the viewer gazing into a dark void while (Reinhardt hoped) questioning their own existence. He once summed up the power of abstractions in a cartoon. A gallery viewer mocks a painting on the wall: “Ha ha what does that represent?” The canvas, coming to life, angrily answers, “What do you represent?”



These notions of paring down art and making it more about ideas than aesthetic presentations had a major impact on the Minimalist and Conceptual Art of future generations. Not one to underplay his achievements, Reinhardt called the series the last paintings that anyone could make. He felt he'd pushed the medium to its logical conclusion. Notably, Rodchenko before him had assumed a similar sentiment. The history of monochromes, in general, is full of (predominantly male) characters who liked to undermine other artists' achievements and believed they got painting's last laugh.



Robert Rauschenberg    *Untitled [glossy black four-panel painting], ca. 1951*  
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Shortly after Reinhardt embarked on his black paintings, artist Robert Ryman narrowed his own palette to white. In 1955, he exhibited what he considered his first professional work, asserting his interest in employing a single hue with the aptly-titled *Orange Painting*. Ryman eventually shifted to using white toward the end of the decade, drawn to the color's complex interactions with frames, walls, surfaces, and light itself. His "whites," which seem infused with other tones the more you look, invite long and meditative gazes. Both Ryman and Reinhardt opted to paint on square canvases. They were neutral shapes, unlike a rectangle, which could more easily conjure other associations: a portrait, landscape, door, or window.



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Ryman's diverse materials—Chemex filters, glassine—made his works as much about the paint as what lies underneath it (and how the two interact). “Ryman would never consider himself a monochromatic painter,” says Pace Gallery president Susan Dunne, who organized its current “Robert Ryman: Drawings” show. “He paints light. Even things that appear white have different colors of white. He’s using colors of canvas, the stretcher, everything.”

If Ryman and Reinhardt became associated with white and black monochromatic paintings, respectively, they shared an unlikely predecessor: Robert Rauschenberg. Perhaps best known for busy silkscreens and an assemblage that featured a stuffed goat inside a tire (*Monogram*, 1955–59), the artist experimented with simpler forms earlier in his career. Rejecting the Abstract Expressionists' bold, individualist gestures, Rauschenberg filled black paintings with crumpled newspaper—cheap, everyday material. In his white paintings, he defied rules of authorship by allowing his friends and lovers (including Cy Twombly) to generate, remake, and repaint some of them. Notably, these works helped spur musician John Cage to create his own, auditory version of the monochrome: *4'33"* (1952), which consists only of silence. Here, according to Dickerman, the lack of composition refocuses attention on music's primary element: time itself.



Chung Sang-Hwa  
*Untitled 84-3-1, 1984*  
Phillips



Park Seo-Bo  
*Ecriture (描法) No.47-81, 1981*  
Wellside Gallery



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At the same time that Rauschenberg, Ryman, and Reinhardt were experimenting with monochromes, interest in the form was blossoming in Korea. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the Korean movement Dansaekhwa (which translates to “monochrome painting”) created art centered on its basic, material elements. Park Seo-Bo created his “Ecriture” series by drawing in delicate lines atop wet white paint, then repainting and rescoring. A sense of rhythm and texture result.

Chung Sang-Hwa’s white monochromes utilize a similarly repetitive process. He coats his canvases with glue, water, and kaolin clay, then strips off the material. He fills in bare segments with acrylic paint, then repeats the process. If the paintings at first seem like simple monochromes, they belie an intensive process of creation that becomes apparent the longer the viewer looks. Dansaekhwa works have become more prominent in New York galleries and American scholarship within the last ten years, yet their long absence from Western art history discourse is a reminder that monochromatic painting, and abstraction at large, hardly developed in a Eurocentric vacuum.

“Monochromes are often test cases, pushing the limits of painting as it has been understood in different moments and places,” says Dickerman. Reinhardt sought the ultimate negation in painting, rejecting color, gesture, and composition. Ryman, alternately, pushed viewers to consider the infinite mutations of a single color (perhaps more accurately, the hue that’s supposedly the absence of color) for as long as possible.

“So to be good,” Dickerman continues, a monochrome “should make us see something about painting that we hadn’t seen before, defining its essence in a new way. It also means in some fundamental way that monochromes don’t stand in isolation, but in relation to the field of painting at large.”



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Ellen Gallagher *O.K. Corral, 2008*  
Gagosian



Jessica Dickinson *Of/How, 2013*  
Altman Siegel

This may account, as well, for why many artists don't like to consider themselves "monochromatic painters"—they see themselves engaging with a larger conversation that extends far beyond a single color.

Contemporary artist Jessica Dickinson similarly rejects the label. "I'm an artist that makes paintings that end up to be monochromes at times," she says. Like Ryman, however, she's interested in the "speed" of the monochrome, or the way the viewer's perception shifts the longer she looks at the painting. Dickinson works slowly, taking several months (sometimes over a year) to finish a single panel. She builds up limestone polymer, then gradually layers oil paint on top. As she works, she gouges or etches into the surface, lending her paintings a sense of distress and decay—another marker of time. "I put my paintings through different stages and events," she describes. "Color is a result of all the events it goes through."

Increasingly, young artists and curators are using monochromes to explore "color" in a more figurative sense, addressing issues of identity. In 2016, curator Adrienne Edwards mounted an exhibition called "Blackness in Abstraction" at Pace Gallery, which used black monochromes to underscore the hue's conceptual and formal possibilities. Wangechi Mutu employed black paper splatters on a wall, while Ellen Gallagher specifically referenced Malevich's work in her own painting.



Alteronce Gumby *I'm Not Red I'm OJ, 2017*  
Long Gallery Harlem

Elsewhere in New York City, artist Alteronce Gumby hopes to “redefine color as shade,” as he describes it to *Artsy*. He paints heavily layered monochromes with his hands, and mixes his own black paints by combining various shades together. “All of that adds to the experience of how we build our identities or our personalities,” he says. *Wakanda* (2017), for example, references the fictional African nation now trending on Twitter thanks to *Black Panther* (it’s the movie’s predominant setting). Upon first glance, the painting is an all-black monochrome. Look closer, and pinks, blues, and greens begin to appear.

Gumby’s work suggests that monochromatic painting will continue to evolve as artists grapple with ever-changing aesthetic, social, and autobiographical issues. “I think what makes a monochrome painting good is what makes any painting good,” he says. “Does it change the way I see the world around me?” ●

Alina Cohen



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## NEW YORK

Saltz, Jerry, "Jessica Dickinson: Are: For + remainders," Three Sentence Reviews, *Vulture*, *New York*, September 19, 2017

### **Jessica Dickinson; *Are: For + remainders***

James Fuentes

55 Delancey Street

It's no secret that I have had my critical problems with the many redoes of 1960s and '70s monochrome painting and painting that confuses process for content — artists making pretentious empty canvases by leaving them in the Red Sea or rubbing them on the sidewalks of Ferguson, Missouri. I have been following Jessica Dickinson's work for a long time and while I still think she may be just another one of these later-day process painters, there is some sort of resonance to the way, for example, she makes a rubbing of every stage of a painting, and then shows, as she does here, all the rubbings and the painting. That at least lets me know that even things that can look like nothing — like these rubbings and the paintings — may really be something, so I'm still on board — for now.



Zachary Royer Scholz, "Review: Are:," *Artpractical.com*, June 7, 2016

## Review

# Are:

*By Zachary Royer Scholz*

*June 7, 2016*

Jessica Dickinson's exhibition at Altman Siegel offers a contemplative space in which to reflect on the deep resonances and accumulated impacts of seemingly incidental actions. The show, entitled *Are:*, includes three different types of work: evanescent notebook drawings, densely worked paper pieces, and slowly developed, deeply textured paintings on panel. The exhibition is also accompanied by a small catalog of Dickinson's *Remainders* works, graphite rubbings of the surfaces of her paintings made at various points during their slow evolution. Despite distinct material differences, these varied bodies of work form a cohesive whole that reciprocally feeds into, and off of, itself.

The most physically substantial works are the paintings, which are made with oil paint and limestone polymer on panel. Dickinson typically produces three to four of these paintings at a time and works on them slowly over a period of a year or more, periodically making her graphite-rubbed *Remainders* works from their surfaces. This gradual process invests each piece with intense, layered consideration, and gives the works an immensely satisfying, though diffuse, heft. The three paintings in the exhibition are all in cool, deftly modulated shades of gray, white, and blue. The two pieces hung on adjacent walls in the main gallery are almost a diptych, sharing nearly identical formal structures in which the edges of the panels are echoed by offset and tilted planes as well as frames of different densities, pigments, and marks. The techniques and materials used in the paintings are aggressive and sculptural. Gouges and chips, scratches and scrapings have left the surfaces pitted and abraded like rough-hewn stone. However, the cumulative effect is diaphanous, the hacked fields of marks overlaying each other like muslin veils and drifting planes of shadow. The third painting, tucked furthest into the gallery, takes this unexpected textile quality in a heavier direction, its grid-like chipped expanse reading almost like heavy burlap or a woven rug.



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Jessica Dickinson. *Are.*, 2015-2016; oil on limestone polymer on panel; 53 x 51 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

Nearly as large as the works on panel are three commanding framed works on paper, one black, one red, and one blue. These pieces are less physically massive and temporally dense than the panel paintings, but exhibit similar logics. Each has been so heavily worked with pastels and other material such as wax crayon, graphite, and gouache that in places the heavy paper has given way. Even where the paper has held, the pigment application has left physical marks: stuttering stripes, glancing dents, and chisel-like gouges. Though all three pieces are worked similarly, the results diverge dramatically. The red piece is unexpectedly light. Its matte blood-red expanse is broken by dents and rents scattered across it like dropped straw. The white flecks glimpsed through the tears in its surface float delicately in the red expanse like constellations. The blue work that hangs opposite is by contrast inaccessibly menacing. The white flecks glimpsed through its torn holes set up a harsh, staccato rhythm that bounces the eye over its hard, flinty surface and icy depths. The black work, hung away from the other two on the long wall of the main gallery, is enigmatically indistinct. The hazy shapes and dim structures that lurk within it are sensed as much as seen. The ridges, rips, abrasions, and bumps that softly mottle its surface are as much found as made. Their artless inevitability make the piece seem as much an artifact as an artwork.

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Jessica Dickinson. *Are: This*, 2015-2016; oil on limestone polymer on panel; 56 x 53 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.



Jessica Dickinson. *Here: Are*, 2014-2015; pastel, graphite, wax oil pastel and wax crayon on paper with holes; 50 1/8 x 42 1/4" in. Courtesy of the Artist and Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.



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The slightest and most problematic works in the show are Dickinson's notebook drawings in lightly scribbled colored pencil. Each individual drawing has been torn from facing pages of a bound sketchbook and framed along with seven others in a vertical column of eight. Three of these columns have been included in the show and are hung so close to each other that they read as a single, larger work. The exhibition's press release reveals that each vertical set of drawings relate to a specific painting, and their organization is how Dickinson ordered them in her studio to inform the successive actions and layers in those paintings. It is fascinating to see this aspect of Dickinson's output, but the sequenced presentation is overly didactic and diminishes the drawings by binding them to a specific painting and aligning them with the traditional role that drawings have played as preparatory materials. The press release notes that this is the first time these works have been exhibited, and I hope that in the future these drawings will be shown individually, so viewers can give these delicately bittersweet pieces the same measured, focused attention that Dickinson's other works invite and reward.



*Jessica Dickinson: Are::*; installation view, Altman Siegel Gallery, San Francisco.

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Taken on their own, Dickinson's works look vaguely like many other artists'. Her compositional tendencies, particularly her interest in edges and frames, are reminiscent of Richard Diebenkorn. Her scraped and torn surfaces obviously bring to mind Gerhard Richter's squeegee works and Lucio Fontana's slashed paintings, but also look remarkably like the chipped non-finito expanses in Michelangelo's stone *Slaves*. Her pieces' deep emotional palate resonates with the paintings of John Zurier. And the stillness of her work brings to mind Agnes Martin. Dickinson can variously be connected to all sorts of other artists too, such as Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Tuttle, and even Jules Olitski, but there is something critical to understanding Dickinson's practice that eludes the reach of these direct aesthetic comparisons.

What sets Dickinson apart from many of the artists to whom she can be formally compared is the interwoven relationship between the different aspects of her practice. Her drawings structure her paintings, which are rubbed to produce her *Remainders* works, which echo in her large paper pieces. This set of outputs cycles ceaselessly, cross-influencing and pollinating at all points as works seamlessly become sources and sources become finished works. This entangled contingency allows incidental slippages to amplify and accidents to become codified. It is a system whose reflexive generation of meaning over time leads to interesting, unforeseen ends, mirroring the way each of us authors and makes sense of our own lives, progressively, bit by bit, as we live them.



## **BROOKLYN RAIL** CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

### In Conversation

Jessica Dickinson with Danielle Mysliwicz

June 3, 2015

One week prior to the opening of her solo show *Close/Close* at James Fuentes (May 3 – June 7, 2015), Jessica Dickinson hosted Danielle Mysliwicz at her Gowanus studio for a conversation about her paintings, her practice, and the publication of her new book *Under / Press. / With-This / Hold- / Of-Also / Of/How / Of-More / Of:Know*, published in conjunction with the show by Inventory Press.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**Danielle Mysliwicz (Rail):** When I visited the studio last week to sit with your work alone, I was immediately drawn to this painting, “Knows:” (2013 – 2015). I’ve never seen a painting of yours like this before! The word aggregate appears in your writings and, to me, “Knows:” feels like an aggregate of all of your different approaches to painting that I’ve seen to date. I see the echo of the slanted rectangle from the composition of “Here”, (2008 – 2009) and this

ephemeral light that is in many of your works, which feels like it is being cast from a window outside the painting’s edge. The surface simultaneously calls to mind crumbling ruins, polished marble, a weathered slab of stone. Then there are these beautifully wedged marks reading like cuneiform or some illegible lost language carved into a cave wall from the beginnings of time. How do you see it?

**Jessica Dickinson:** I was thinking about a moment of sharp clarity being materialized, like that black line marking the open rectangle, but then also making visible everything that led up to that moment—as if seeing multiple ways of attempting to understand something at once. To me it’s like a strange sensation of understanding time in a very material sense. Sensations can be physical, like the carved out sections, or ethereal, like the light—and then almost linguistic, like the opaque black line. In a way, I thought of all these paintings as having this sort of archaeology, if that’s the right word. So, it’s interesting that you say that it’s all of the paintings I’ve ever made combined because I feel like it’s also the other five paintings for the show combined in it. For this show, I wanted to create an environment where there were multiple and differing spaces and times at once, and this is the centerpiece where it is all collapsed.



Photographs on Dickinson’s studio wall. Courtesy of the artist.

**Rail:** Archaeology conjures the act of excavating and I feel that process in looking at this painting. Can you describe how you made it?

**Dickinson:** With all the paintings, I work with oil on a plaster-like surface, like fresco, and layer a series of events, both additive and subtractive, over long periods of time. Certain things are planned, like a loose script, but I don’t know what it will look like—however, I start with the title and have a very specific thing I am



after. It's actually hard to describe how it was made, since they are so layered, and each painting is different. With "Knows:" I started with a thin white line on a grey surface that was an echo from the painting "Of:Know" (2013). That was like a thin perimeter of a thought. I carved that out and then applied layers of white paint, like curtains continually closing. Once that initial delineation was lost, I carved out these deep decisive gouges with a chisel to create a larger perimeter. Chunks of plaster flaked off, and that was a dramatic, unexpected moment. And then it was red, and then bright blue, and then I painted the slanted rectangular form, which for this painting comes from that motion of opening a curtain, that transition, the appearance of illumination. This takes different forms in different paintings for this show, this idea of being open or closed, different degrees of being closed, or closeness. Then after painting a black layer—like a light being turned off—I slowly scraped out the slanted shape with a small chisel that would dull and be replaced repeatedly. All along, though, I knew I wanted there to be this firm rectangular line. It's based on this window frame here. I woke up from a studio floor nap and it was very strong and staring at me. It evoked this certainty and I wrote down "The feeling of seeing a hard thought." In a sense the excavation is like this migration of a thought, like a foundation being moved and the traces of its former perimeters being visible.

**Rail:** The new book of your work features the eight paintings made between 2012 and 2013, each followed by its complete set of "remainders" (full-scale graphite rubbings documenting significant shifts in the paintings as they're made). And in your interview with Patricia Treib, included in the book, you said you were imagining the paintings from your show *Before/Beside* (2011), emitting light, then casting shadows, and the next body of work being conceived of as those shadows. I loved the idea of the shadows becoming physical objects. I thought that was a poetic way to connect the two bodies of work and it speaks to your interest in light and time as subject matter. Is the work in your current show a continuation of this kind of conceptual chronology?

**Dickinson:** Yes, to me it's a way to structure things. I do think in terms of sequences, reoccurrences, and shifts. It's not some meta-narrative that anyone needs to comprehend to enter the work, and each piece can work on its own. The book covers paintings that went from darkness in an intimate space ("Under," "Press.," "With-This") to countering whitish paintings not exhibited ("Hold-," "Of-Also") to expansive color and scorching light in the Altman Siegel show ("Of/How,"

"Of-More," "Of:Know"). For this body of work I made more paintings in order to deal with a larger expanse of time. I thought of three of the paintings as more stone-like ("How-Close," "More:Yet," "Knows:") where light and color is embedded, and the other three ("Close-Now," "Yet:For," "More") as more luminous and coming forward in space, with their weight slowly emerging.

**Rail:** Over the years it seems you've moved away from a more pictorial painting space and foregrounded your presence at the surface as the content of the work. When I was reading the stamped definitions of the titles on your exhibition flyer, this one stuck with me: "in what way – to what extent – like what – in whatever way – to mention a fact or event – to introduce a suggestion – in what way or manner – in, or to what degree, amount, number – in what condition – for what reason, why"

**Dickinson:** That's a composite of definitions of the word "how." One of the paintings is titled "How-Close."

**Rail:** I like that it ends on "why." It brings to mind existential questions and ideas of being. To act is to be, and in painting, in a way, to make a mark is to be. As an abstract painter today one has to contend with the iconic gesture of expressionism, so this question of "how?" is essential if you're trying to make a mark that is felt. You've referred to your paintings as "radically cared for surfaces" and that care is evident. All of this is to say that when I look over the last several years of your work and think about the title of your first show with Fuentes—*Here* (2009)—I feel a profound sense of gravity, like I'm looking at a geological record of the self, of your here-ness if you will. And it resonates with my individual being as a viewer, causing me to reflect on my here-ness. Do you see the work as a record of you?

**Dickinson:** No. They are not autobiographical. Nor are they about my presence or the value of my labor or my subjectivity. Ultimately, the paintings are for others, so the fact that it causes you to reflect on your own here-ness makes me feel like something is working. That said, when I saw the book printed, it was really intense to look back at those paintings, because the details are almost to scale, and the reproductions of the "remainders" so clear, that I felt like I was making them again, in this tactile way. I could feel it in my body. And since painting is part of daily life for me, it can't help but conjure everything those mean to me, my associations with them, because there is a deeply personal motivation behind each piece. But I think it's



so important for me to make the paintings assert their ability to make space for others, and I've found that the best way to do this is to be as specific to my own experience as possible, it somehow opens things up for people better. In a sense there is no "mark" in my work to "be," there is so much obfuscation, repetition, obliteration, and layers. There isn't, for me, an assertion of self; rather, perhaps, an acceptance of intention compounded by chance, a sense of being partial and incomplete. I think so far away from the singular, and perhaps that is the existential question. One of my favorite quotes by Clarice Lispector is, "At the moment of painting and writing I am anonymous. My deep anonymity, that no one has ever touched." I think I work the surfaces so much to leave myself, to have something internal evolve into something outside of me. Griselda Pollock also struck a chord with me when she wrote about Agnes Martin's work producing a "generic subjectivity." I think these ideas are different than ideas of "universality," but I think perhaps the geological record you're talking of is something we relate to with our bodies as matter, something more haptic than optic, that perhaps can connect us—and something about the ability of surfaces to register time, obliquely.

Going back to your comment about the earlier work, that transition from the more pictorial to more surface oriented, one thing I realized in the mid-2000s is that the work was getting too representational, which is an issue that ebbs and flows for me, that I have to keep in check. I want something more physical. When I was at MICA in 1996, I did the University of Georgia studies abroad program in Tuscany. My teacher from MICA, Ken Tisa, said, "you have to look at frescoes. Your art is about decay and fragility and you need to look at frescoes."

**Rail:** So, even early on, it was evident that there was an interest in something physically being worn away over a long period of time.

**Dickinson:** I think a good teacher can sense the larger thing that's in your work but not entirely visible, and direct you. I was making quasi-abstract process oriented paintings at that time. I saw the Assisi frescoes by Cimabue that have changed through both erosion, accident, and mistakes—everything painted white turned black through slow oxidation. After seeing those I felt like I didn't know how to make a painting. How do you make this thing whose forms and marks are only partially decided? It took a lot of trial and error to figure it out, perhaps a decade of trying things. I learned true fresco, and didn't like it. In grad school I made a

big installation, with multiple panels, like a frieze, but then I thought, Maybe it's about the decorative border? I started working on the plaster-like ground with oil paint, but I still thought, Maybe I should make more illustrative, figurative paintings that are more Baroque? [Laughter.]

**Rail:** How do I get to this thing that is resonating with me? Where is it located?

**Dickinson:** But also, what exactly *is* it? It isn't purely how it looks, it's how it feels, and also what took me longer to figure out was a concept to drive a method, and the right materials. I returned to see the Cimabue frescoes again in September of 2001, and realized how incredibly physical they were, and abstract. After that I started to treat the painting more like a surface going through various events, and I considered the viewer more as encountering the painting as a perceptual field. But it took a while to figure out a method. Then during a residency in France in 2008, I spent more time with crumbling frescoes nobody cared about, and started doing the large mixed-media works on paper, which got me thinking much more about pressure and absorption of time, which affected the pressure exerted on the paintings. I was realizing the need to slow everything down—turn the reductiveness up and turn the contrast and chromatic drama down so that I can create this really physical space that operates more gradually. A friend who visited my studio recently, just after travelling to Pompeii, was describing how the wall paintings he saw had this feeling of being "lived in" and this sense of "frozen time" that he sensed in my work as well, which may be ultimately what I've been trying to figure out.

**Rail:** I mentioned the surface of "Knows:" having what appears to me as a cuneiform-like marking over a large part of the surface. Were you thinking of cuneiform or text when you made that?

**Dickinson:** I have a strong attraction to ancient notching in stone. I wasn't thinking as much about it being writing as I was thinking about a surface being pressured through time, and marking time in different speeds. The pressure of trying to remove that surface created the motion of the mark. I'm physically doing it over a long period of time so I have to come up with different strategies. I like to do things in the work that are really slow and I like to use a small tool for a big thing. I don't always feel like a painter—I say I'm painting and then I've got a hammer and a chisel. I'm picking at a painting with a razor for two months. The mark, for me, is not an authoritative mark or a gestural



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mark about my presence, it's often these marks that build up in slow increments to become a big thing—or sudden and dramatic removal—that maybe look like they weren't made by hand, perhaps by other processes, forces. This goes back to what I was talking about before—an accretion of parts rather than a singular mark. Someone else mentioned to me that they were reminded of the first markings of counting, or the stone in a monk's cell that's worn down from repeated prayer in one place.

**Rail:** I liked how you said earlier “turn the reductiveness up.” It reminds me that I came across the idea of “baroque minimalism” in your notes. That seems to be one way this idea of accumulation operates in the paintings. It's true that on first glance many of the paintings share a reductive monochromatic language of minimalism, but the immense history of each painting seems to be both hidden behind and pushing through its surface in a mysterious way that beckons incredibly long and slow periods of looking. In this painting, “More: Yet,” it reads like a wind blown stone with these two luminous blue lines that have been gouged out and it's hard for me to even comprehend if the final layer was actually applied last or sanded down to and recovered.



Jessica Dickinson, “Knows:” (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 × 53 1/8”. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.



Jessica Dickinson, detail of “Knows:” (2013 – 15). Oil on limestone polymer on panel, 56 1/4 × 53 1/8”. Photo: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of James Fuentes, New York.

**Dickinson:** I think in terms of the Baroque and Deleuze's discussion of Leibniz and *The Fold*, of multiple times and material states existing at once and the potential to unceasingly unfold. In a sense the surfaces are compressed and hopefully expand in the process of viewing, with no fixed viewpoint. This painting has 23 “remainders”, which is the most so far. I wanted a series of opposing actions to happen to it but then somehow become assimilated into one field with this bracketing of the blue lines that are almost pushing the surface open. I was thinking of this painting as opaque and transparent at the same time, and I thought of it as a heaviness that's been opened and closed several times, which is literally what happened. A few years ago, I looked at my wall of photographs and realized they're all of passages of light or something really hard, like stone or concrete. To me the light, in a sense, represents something that's fleeting and constantly changing, but slightly predictable. The hard surfaces are slowly eroding, being worn down by different forms of exposure, or resealing. They both mark time and change in these different ways.

**Rail:** It makes me think of “the gradual instant,” which is a phrase I came across a long time ago that has stuck with me. It's a recurring theme in Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* and I looked it up after seeing your work last week. “Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant.” And then later in the novel, “at what point does wood become stone, peat become coal, limestone become marble? The gradual instant.” It describes one way I've been thinking about meaning in your work and the metaphors conjured by your process. There is that notion of the minor forming the monumental. These feel monumental to me, not in the expressionistic way of, say, Pollock, but in their visual weight. I think



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about the sound they would make if they were tipped over and what it would feel like to lift them off the wall.

**Dickinson:** The need for them to have a sense of gravity is important to me. I do think of all these repeated actions of accumulation and removal as a way to make the minor into something major. I think also about the potential of the monumental while viewing the work, how it shifts from different viewpoints—this could also connect to the “gradual instant,” with multiple parts and transitions—from the optical to the material—revealing itself at different speeds and in different ways for different people. Like with “More:Yet” how the blue lines seem to be floating from a distance, but up close they are dug in. That could go unnoticed by some, or be apparent right away. At first they seem atmospheric, and then become heavy. Others can be heavy at first and then become atmospheric. Painting always deals with an “instant,” but I really consider the viewing operation, and work to stretch it out, to create something that maybe appears to be nothing, yet holds so much, or holds contradictions. I guess in some ways that goes back to the source of the work. In “More:Yet,” I knew I wanted to use these vertical lines—there’s this light that comes through the shades in my room, there’s photos of them on the wall there, they’re almost like incisions. They kind of haunt me at all times; they’re there when I wake up in the middle of the night, they’re there when I wake up in the morning, they’re there as I’m on the other side of the apartment, and they’re sort of like a bracket, in my peripheral vision, yet so strong in space, and they’re sort of asking a question—they are peripheral but major, somehow.

**Rail:** Do you make these notebook drawings when you’re actually looking at the light coming through?

**Dickinson:** No, it’s not so literally an observational drawing. It’s not so much about what it looks like—it’s more like marking different sensations produced in my thought process or psychological state. I think of seeing, thinking, and feeling as one thing. The notebook drawings are more like an automatic drawing practice that later turns into stages for the paintings.

**Rail:** In your statement, you describe your practice as devotional. I know you grew up Catholic, and earlier you mentioned the stone in a monk’s cell being marked by prayer. Do you mean devotional in a religious way?

**Dickinson:** No, I think it’s important for me to not refer to some other power or higher power, so I don’t mean that in a religious way. I used the word “devotional”

because I think of the surface of the painting as a place where something is worked out philosophically through material, different from producing an icon, but with a fidelity to a process. Perhaps it’s a word I use in the wrong way to stake out the more conceptual side of my project, which is weird of me! But I think “painting production” now is so linked to a marketing system of the signature style or intellectual value of the artist, that I needed to frame my project in terms of loyalty to whatever drives it, to serve the painting’s question rather than the demands of the outside world or standard ideas of “painting.” Another text that has influenced me is “The Blank Page” by Isak Dinesen. It’s maybe too much to get into here, but it’s a parable about how the secret of every good story is to be “loyal to the story,” and to do this we must always “include the blank page.” This to me is a structural setup to allow for the unknown, and perhaps in my need to really work the painting through, I have to think of it as devotional and linked to an intention, to make it really work.

**Rail:** It makes sense to me because of the commitment you have to the daily practice. There are a lot of people who say, “Oh, this painting took me two years to make,” but that means the painting sat on the sidelines for 6 months and then they went back to it periodically. You are returning to the surface, over and over and over and over again and, to me, that’s what seems devotional about it. You’ve ventured into this pact with the painting to return to it and that’s unique to your practice, that there’s no abandonment in this work. You return, until it’s done. At least that’s how I understand it.

**Dickinson:** I do want to see something through, no matter what it takes.

**Rail:** Returning to the role of the minor. You write about the minor, the peripheral and what you term the “antiheroic” gesture. And then in another text of yours I came across this idea of feminism opening up a space in abstraction. I don’t know if those two ideas were linked for you. Can you say more?

in what way - to what extent - like what - in  
whatever way - to mention a fact or event - to  
introduce a suggestion - in what way or manner -  
in, or to what degree, amount, number - in what  
condition - for what reason, why

Stamp of composite definitions of the word “how” from the exhibition poster. Courtesy of the artist.



**Dickinson:** Yes, they are linked. It's a way to rethink how to paint for me. When I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* so long ago, I was struck by this simple notion of her call to try to make your experience most accurately into art, and how this can make art richer and better. It's not necessarily about a gendered life, or gendered view, and not about asserting an identity, but thinking about what constitutes a valid subject—that the fleeting intervals of daily life not constituted as “major” can hold profound possibilities. This affects the concepts that drive each piece, and also the approach to making in which a kind of invisibility is layered so much it becomes something with weight—so the result of small moves rather than a heroic gesture. And in the parameters of modernist abstract painting, we have the authoritative gesture and declarative statements, and also this idea of a linear canonical march of abstract painting with a beginning and an end. Growing up as a feminist I just always felt outside of that, I couldn't relate. Rothko is often brought up with my work, and I understand the association, but I've never felt so moved by his work. It feels too adhered to a notion of the transcendental for me. He talks about how once the viewer is in a fixed position in front of his work the painting performs. I always think about a moving viewer, an unending possibility, not about filling a lack, and abstraction being a possibility for this. The process of working, letting go of a space of authority, or an assertion of the ego, through painting—and then the process of viewing it being a space of sharing and belonging through multiple encounters and exchanges—I think this is a feminist notion.

**Rail:** I took some pictures of your bookcase last week and in one there's this stack of books: George Kubler's *The Shape of Time* on top of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, on top of Helen Cixous's *The Third Body*, on top of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, on top of Rosalind Krauss's *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, on top of Robert Etienne's *Pompeii: The Day a City Died*. And I just laughed and thought, “Well, she's pretty much summed that up!”

**Dickinson:** I'm so attached to that copy of *Moby Dick*, which I've been thinking of again lately. When I finally got to page through the new publication with the “remainders” I had this odd revelation where I was like, “Wait a second, I had this idea a long time ago. How could a painting be like a book? How could it unfold through time, be this compact thing that somehow holds so much?” Around 1999, I wanted to create a painting that somehow produced epic time. I was reading epic literature, like *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *The Iliad*.

And then I had this sense when I got the new publication that the actual “remainders” are like a book form of the paintings. Also all the paintings' titles are thought of in sequence, however poetic and oblique, so the paintings are strangely structured as a book. Not so literary or narrative, but in a kind of sequential experience. Maybe I'm not a devotional painter—maybe I'm a novelist! [Laughter.]

**Rail:** Yes! That's what I was thinking when I paged through the “remainders” in the book. In fact I wrote in my notes “This reads as a really understated suspense thriller.” I was kind of taken aback by how invested I became in seeing what came next, because honestly when I originally sat down with the book, I was expecting to flip through them and stop at a few that caught my attention. Then I ended up going very slowly, page by page. When did you start making the “remainders”?

**Dickinson:** I did the first “remainders” in 2009, which were rubbings of the final state of each painting. I thought, what if I just made a really direct drawing where I didn't touch it at all after, just transcribed the surface? Because the paintings always have a specific material state that is not always visible. I liked that this could account for some other less visible reality of the painting. One thing that opened up my practice at large was Jay DeFeo's idea of *The Rose* going through a “lifespan,” and the performative element of the documentation she made of that piece. With the next group of paintings, I started an experiment, making a rubbing every time I completed something significant on the surface. Sometimes that shift in the surface isn't so clear in the “remainder,” but that's part of it, it has to be in the sequence, because I think sometimes things occur that aren't always so dramatic and that's part of it, that time can be uneventful, or there is a discrepancy between the physical reality of the painting and the visual. And then I liked the way the “remainders” embody time in this more lateral way than the paintings.

**Rail:** Do you ever look back to them as a map of what to uncover or reveal later?

**Dickinson:** Honestly, I don't look at them that much while I'm painting. I kind of know what's there. What they do help me with is making a recording of an event and then letting it go. I think the “remainders” have been good for the paintings, because I can be more disciplined and obliterate or cover something if that's what needs to happen.



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**Rail:** Right. They seem to allow you to maintain that loyalty to the painting you spoke of earlier, in this case, to acknowledge the inevitable loss that comes with time passing.

**Dickinson:** Yes, and also give credit to the not entirely visible, because all the actions and obliterations aren't lost, and time is not lost—these events are always necessary to get to what comes next.

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<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/06/art/jessica-dickinson-with-danielle-mysliwicz>

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## THE NEW YORKER

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SEPTEMBER 14, 2009

### ART

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#### GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

##### **JESSICA DICKINSON**

The best of Dickinson's three painted panels and four works on paper, all abstract and more or less four feet wide, will slow you down and knock you out. Each surface was months in the making: trowelled with layers of plaster, sanded and painted, sanded and painted, and gouged and scored with knives. The results are as metamorphic as they are painterly, though history looms large. The verdigris-and-bone-colored "Distance—Come Closer," in its crumbling surface and pellucid blues, recalls a Florentine fresco; the nested rectangles in the pearl-gray and yolk-yellow "Here" serve Rothko and Albers sunny-side up. Through Sept. 20. (Fuentes, 35 St. James Pl. 212-577-1201.)