



Paul Fägerskiöld
1 April, 2021, Brooklyn, NY
John Tremblay

91.

A few years ago Paul and I were out strolling—discussing color, as painters do, or did, or still do from time to time. Paul was dressed in a lot of bright, clashing colors. An acquaintance, who didn't know Paul very well, referred to him then as "The Rainbow Ninja." He did have a look about him. Paul mentioned dinosaurs, a subject near and dear to his heart, saying paleontologists have a pretty good idea of the size, shape, and diet of these non-mythical creatures, but they have no idea of what COLOR these creatures actually were and we'll never know. They could have been neon orange! Like those tiny lizards you see in the forest, or purple! I thought, there is a lot I could learn from this guy. At the time Paul was making paintings of flags, stripped of color, white on white, reduced to lines, depicting flags of countries that don't exist anymore. It reminded me a bit of Francis Baudevin, who paints packaging, just the colors and the hard-edge graphic design, leaving out the text and product name. Francis removes all the words from the familiar products. Paul removes all the color from the flags . . . maybe to get at what these things really look like? You will have to ask him why he did this exactly and why he used defunct flags. My guess is he wanted to slow things down since color is such a quick identifier, to show us what we know, or don't know, about color. One of the painter's jobs is to come to grips with color and painters make attempts, but no one will ever entirely figure it out. A long time ago, Alan Uglow said to me, "JT, COLOR is a motherfucker."

After some time, Paul went from no color to using every color all at once. In his series, *Silent Spring* (2014) the surfaces are speckled with very tiny dots of multicolored paint. Some look greener by using more colors which add up to green or actual true green dots of paint. In others, red is predominate and in another blue reflects back to our eyes. In some yellow pulsates louder than the millions of colored dots on the canvas. Distributing the dots in such a way that the edges are modulated, the surface expands and seems to somehow breathe gently. He applies the paint with cans of spray paint, but he doesn't really spray it, the paint is dripped and splattered out of the can, something you typically don't want spray paint to do. This was likely hard to control and I always admire people who use materials in the "wrong" way. The result he achieves is beautiful, an accumulation of millions of fine dots of color, not much bigger than grains of sand; the surfaces appear to glow. In a work called *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (2017) and similar landscapes, dark paint is brushed very thick, as if it was deciding to be tar instead of oil paint. He uses the same technique in *My Life In The Woods* (2018). A field of black contrasts with

the precise edge where there is no paint at all, just linen. Most of these works depict a single geometric shape or icons in the center. In *The Day After Tomorrow* (2018) it is a solitary circle. By leaving blank linen exposed, by not painting that area, a shape or image is described by the black paint. Sometimes, under the black a faint under-painting is visible, a red or blue that rims the edge of the unpainted linen. Like holes in the surface, the "object" or "shape" is the thing which is unpainted, reminiscent of the white flags but also entirely different. Besides a geometric subject edged in the paint, the black fields often have one gently curved edge at the top or bottom, like a horizon or hollow sky. Other fields of black are scattered with dots, these "holes" or unpainted areas depict the actual position of stars in the sky. This night sky could also be considered a speckled surface. What is notable about these night skies is that they are not made up or guessed at; they are accurate to specific dates. Paul tells me there is an application (an app) which can show you a night sky from a specific date and a specific location. You can look up your birthday sky on the night you were born and the town where you were born, Bethlehem, December 25th, for instance. You put in a date and it tells you what the stars were doing on that particular night in that particular geographic location. Art historians would love this, when they found out van Gogh's *Starry Night* was actually pretty damn accurate.

Navigators, who use the stars, know the accuracy of sky charts. Going back in time from before there were paper charts, sailors in the Marshall Islands made tidal current charts out of sticks and reeds, with the sticks and reeds as the "currents" and cowrie shells as the "islands." These maps, called *meddo* or *rebbelib*, portrayed the current between the islands and their precise locations. This enabled islanders to visit and trade with one another and travel back home safely. Although this type of navigation had nothing to do with the celestial version, I was excited to mention these maps to Paul, but of course, he had already seen them. They can be found in a glass case at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. You could theoretically take one out and use it with a certain degree of accuracy today. Paul's paintings, too, contain this kind of useful accuracy. What all his subjects have in common, and how they are linked, is that Paul is getting to the heart of the matter; he is concerned with facts or facts yet to be discovered, cultural curiosities, celestial bodies, and archaeology. It's funny, for an abstract painter to deal with only what we know for certain. His subjects are, to quote him, ". . . something which everyone can relate to."