

SCOTT OLSON



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I once went to Leo Steinberg's apartment in New York.¹ I know, unbelievable. He was high on the 17th floor of a building near Lincoln Center—requiring ascent. The door was on the right at the end of the hall. I remember entering: lots of warm, yellow light coming in from windows across the room. The light filtered through smoke and particles suspended in the air, which made it, and everything in it, substantial. But it was dim too, at the same time; twilight in a cave. The whole place was shades of ochre and umber, tea and tobacco, old newspaper and breadcrumbs.

The visit was part of a seminar on Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907). Not the first Cubist painting, check. Steinberg's essay, "The Philosophical Brothel" (1972), remains emblematic of the kind of transformational pivot in perspective that looking at a painting for a long time can bring about. But the discursive particulars of that day have since sunk into a deeper, post-lingual level of consciousness. What remains available to me is a feeling for the way we sat around Steinberg like he was a fireplace, on the couch and cross-legged on the floor in a wobbly, hand-drawn ovoid ringing the coffee table. That, and the stale color of the walls, the cumulative effect of countless cigarettes. Color, grit, smell, the way space fits together as interlocking shapes and the translucence of the encounter continue to matter more. Things that are quilted and dense by nature.

The smokiness of Steinberg's living room smelled like history, or the end of a certain way of studying things. "Here was a man," a friend of his remarked in memoriam, "whose mother tongue was Russian, who learned Hebrew, Latin, also German, English, Italian, and I do not know what others and who sits calmly before me at the end of his life declaiming these glorious lines of seventeenth-century blank verse, and he goes on until I beg him to stop because I cannot bear it. Will there ever again be anyone in the world who can do this? Now that people depend on Google and such."²

Scott Olson's paintings look something like the way Leo Steinberg's apartment smelled to me, or the way its smell and light still mingle and hang heavy in memory. Their small scale, polemically anti-spectacle as tabletop constructions, isn't so much intimate as it is domestic and middle-class, insisting on painting as an art to really live with day in and day out; working art. They appear all about history, exuding it from every sanded inch of meticulously prepared white-marble-dust-and-rabbit-skin-glue ground. Craft and technique are essential, mainly to sustain a connection to the medium's lineage that Olson phrases as "doing something quite useful like protecting a dying language."³ Pre-industrial, let alone pre-digital, handmade-ness is more than a romance, more than nostalgia.

Such obsessive attention to (traditional) materials and mastery of their properties accrues gravitas, hints of that Steinbergian tone of total authority that may or may not make sense in today's blogosphere, but persists as a desire for context in a time of no context. Relating picture plane to wall, gesso to plaster, painting to fresco—a picture of a picture hung on a wall—contextualizes Olson's painting both spatially (architecturally) and art historically. Putting on formal displays of framing, cropping, and belabored

positioning and repositioning, visualizes problems of locating oneself in the scheme of things. Non-objective and arbitrary as life itself, Olson's kind of abstraction reiterates the need to create specific, personally-derived criteria for intentional acts.

Abstraction is the rusted engine of modernism, a past century's legacy that Olson's paintings resuscitate through the familiar European specters of Klee and Kandinsky, Miro and Malevich, Delaunay and early Duchamp, Picasso and Braque. They also hold up distinctly American touchstones, often with strong regional allegiances, like Demuth and Dove, O'Keefe and Hartley, Scheeler and Burchfield that are models for Olson's life as an artist on the so-called periphery of the Midwest. Pictures of distance and time alone in a cork-lined room.

Pictures of the Smoke and when it clears, the Dust and where it settles. I settle on the paintings' hard, matte, smooth surfaces—here bright white, there smudged and muddy—that feel like unearthed bone or the burnished keys of a piano, even as they clearly refer to the plaster wall they are hung on. They are electricity and candlelight together in the same room. Squeezed, soiled, scraped, rubbed, stained, and smeared, as though with dirty motor oil or soot. Instances of clear, vivid watery color are younger and more salient by contrast. Color-block, flat puzzle compositions are employed for their capacity to be distressed and contain the uneven patina of something archaeological, tarnished like silver, old from the attic, antiquated by design. This is for reasons similar to why a premium is placed on faded, torn, and threadbare antiques in the textile stores I shopped at in India: a certain quality of handmade workmanship and design will not be made again. Aging is accelerated, pre-empted and (thus) inverted like Andy Warhol and his white fright wig.

Yes, the work appears to be all about history, in an immediate sense. But that immediate legibility raises a flag over how we cue modernism, and for what ends, in our present. I find myself asking: what does it feel like now to encounter a painting made a hundred years ago, versus a painting made today to look like or pass as or channel the energy of being made a hundred years ago? It feels a little woozy and uncanny, a little hallucinatory, too. Like time-travel. Is regression a way forward? The possibility has its attraction, especially when triangulated between such unsettling modes of non-linear (or hyper-linear, depending on how you look at it) production enacted by the fictional Pierre Menard and the just as unbelievable Sturtevant.⁴

Ultimately, beyond their evident optical appeal, Olson's paintings depict a medium-specific seriousness and exactitude that is their primary subject and which tries to distance them from being merely commensurate with market value. His paintings want to propose, in so many ways, the timeliness and possible urgency of a non-capital, or extra-capital, valuation of manual craft, irreproducible labor, slowness, smallness, and studio solitude. i.e., living in your head with eyes wide open. i.e., "There is definitely existential anxiety about why I am painting these strange pictures, what they are good for and what to do next."⁵

¹ Leo Steinberg (1920-2011) was a prominent art historian and critic of modern and contemporary art.

² Ellen Handler Spitz, "Liminal Leo: Mourning Leo Steinberg," *Artcritical.com* (September 24, 2011).

³ Scott Olson, "A chat with Scott Olson," interview by Johnny Misheff, *Rereveal.com* (2010).

⁴ In Jorge Luis Borges' story "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote" (1939), the eponymous character is a writer who endeavored over his lifetime to compose a text that would coincide verbatim with Cervantes' masterwork. Likewise, Elaine Sturtevant has, since the 1960s, developed an artistic practice based on (re)making works by other artists who are (or were) her contemporaries.

⁵ Olson in Misheff.

