

TIME ZONES: THE RECENT WORK OF THOMAS EGGERER

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Thomas Eggerer, *Rodeo*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 79".

IN THOMAS EGGERER'S RECENT PAINTINGS, figures enter thickets of agitated brushstrokes and zones of candy color, impossible landscapes of painterly marks. These figures appear in two distinct ways: as cutouts, dislocated from the canvas by a narrow, encircling border of contrasting color; and as pentimenti, palimpsests of drawn and redrawn human contours emerging out of (or falling back into) fields of paint. But cutouts

and pentimenti could not be more different. They represent two opposing poles in the possible relation between a figure and a ground. The first strategy suggests alienation, as though both gestural marks and the monochrome expanses surrounding them were rejecting figures like so many transplanted organs. The brushwork around groups of boys in works such as *Waste Management*, 2012; *Rodeo*, 2012; and *Carousel*, 2013, for instance, tends to be agitated and crude, implying that the serene modulation of paint in other areas of the canvas has been disrupted by the entry of a foreign body—the human image. Pentimenti, on the other hand, index the emergence of figures through stages of revision that occur over time and are wholly internal to painterly procedures. In Eggerer’s collision of cutouts and pentimenti, alienation encounters immanence—just as the monochrome, a mode associated with cool anonymity, meets expressionist gesture, the epitome of painterly self-assertion.

This double contest between modes of figuration and modes of abstraction has a long history. Since Pop art, painting has had to reconcile gestural mark-making, the mid-twentieth-century sign of agency and interiority par excellence, with the encroachment of “pictures”—commodified and usually mechanically reproduced images—as defined by Douglas Crimp in his foundational account of appropriation. Andy Warhol’s silk-screened canvases of 1962, such as *210 Coca-Cola Bottles* or *Marilyn x 100*, already staged a play between photomechanical cutouts (the silk screens themselves are stencils) and pentimenti (manifested in the famously uneven printing of individual screens and the purposeful lack of registration between successive ones, errors hinting at a subjective “hand” behind the process). Warhol’s dyad recalled the nascent dynamic between stamped-out shape and gestural stroke, the almost compulsive return to figuration in the midst of automatic gesture, characteristic of Abstract Expressionism (as most famously embodied in Jackson Pollock’s *Cut-Out*, 1948–50). And if Warhol made explicit the contest between subjective composition and mechanization that had already haunted Pollock, it is a dynamic that persists to this day, in the serialized printing and smeared facture of Christopher Wool or Wade Guyton.

Simply put, in the postwar period, painting has explored the increasing tension between an “inner-directed” form of image associated with the assertion both of conscious will and unconscious drives, and an “outer-directed” one, centered on pictures thoroughly saturated by cultural codes. One might argue that painting since 1960 has explored the shifting and contradictory ways in which, to cite Harold Rosenberg, pictures can become “an arena in which to act.” Warhol addressed this challenge through procedures of serialization, the individual becoming multiple through its virtually infinite reproduction, even as the singular—some might say “human”—slipped in through the slight variations that differentiate one iteration of a Marilyn or a Coke from another. But in Eggerer’s paintings, Warhol’s procedure has been introjected within the figure: Here the body is internally divided, partitioned, into distinct temporal zones.

It may not be immediately evident that the “pictures” introduced into Eggerer’s canvases are actually drawn from photographs published in magazines and books. Yet whether or not a viewer recognizes these origins, it is clear that the bodies in a work like *Floorpiece*,

2013, have been *rescored*: They are articulated and rearticulated by different types of painted marks, each of which establishes its own distinctive tempo based on the speed and direction of application. The fragmentary figures in this piece, for example, are submitted to two kinds of initial dislocation. First, their capacity to occupy a common ground is short-circuited: The recumbent figure at the foot of the painting seems to lie below a brown cloud of paint, while the crouching or seated figures at the top are positioned above this same expanse, resulting in a vertiginous spatial warping. Second, the fixed contours of the canvas interrupt the figures—seemingly arbitrarily—completely transgressing their anatomical logic: The bodies are missing calves, torsos, and, in the case of the vestigial leg in the upper right corner, virtually everything that makes a picture recognizable as an image of a human being. These bodies have been both unmoored from their spatial coordinates and fractured. They find themselves in an impossible location: the territory of painting itself. (Eggerer's recent show at Petzel Gallery was, in fact, titled "Gesture and Territory.")



Thomas Eggerer, *Floorpiece*, 2013, acrylic, oil, and charcoal on canvas, 51 x 46".

In this destabilized realm, figures are subjected to at least four kinds of marking, each with its own temporal signature. These four typologies, as I see them, are made explicit in *Floorpiece*:

Sketching is the most rapid mark. It is evident in the rendering of the boys' pants at the top of the painting; particularly noteworthy are the quick marks along the crook of the knee of the figure in the upper right.

Stuttering is the second most rapid mode of marking, though it is significantly slower than sketching. The stutters—repeated but dislocated contours, creating ghostly figures alongside the more substantial ones—here constitute the penitenti I have discussed.

They create a shuddering or reverberating effect, which delineates successive poses and thereby hints at movement or temporal progression, introducing a kind of historicity into the work.

Dripping may feel fast or slow, but to my eye, the drips in this painting belong to the slower end of the spectrum. While sketching and stuttering result from the direct agency of the artist, dripping arises from the autonomous behavior of paint itself: its degree of viscosity, on the one hand, and its subjection to gravity, on the other. Unlike passages of sketching and stuttering, the dripped paint along the back and leg of the recumbent figure seems to caress (or even violate) him. This sensation is produced in part by the quality of painting in the left thigh of the recumbent boy, which is one of the most layered, blended, and haptic passages in the work.

*Staining is the last and slowest operation marking time in *Floorpiece*. It is seen in the atmospheric brown cloud of color whose suggestion of liquidity is put into question, as I have noted, by its paradoxical effect of covering the figure at the foot of the painting while functioning as a ground for those at the top. The stain is a sluggish expansion, creeping outward while simultaneously remaining present at its point of origin. It is a form of multidimensional movement and dilatory insinuation. Its spreading action is thus quite different from the unidirectional drip, the confident or virtuosic sketch, or the hesitant, historicizing stutter.*

Each of the figures in *Floorpiece* is implicated in all four of these different movements and velocities simultaneously, their bodies dismantled and stitched back together—submitted to a kind of Frankensteinian psychosis. And, finally, in addition to the different time signatures to which the figures are subjected, there are two broader operations that they undergo. The first is the cut, whereby figures are applied to their grounds inexactly and crudely, like paper dolls. The second arises through the action of covering, which is most pronounced in the brown scatological stain that spreads over and obscures the torso and head of the recumbent figure, suggesting an anality that is only reinforced by the darker blue “stain” in the seat and inner legs of his shorts. This use of staining is far from the sublime or transparent effect of a Rothko or a Louis. Rather, Eggerer’s abject blooms of paint are resolutely corporeal, broken, and discontinuous. Indeed, I am tempted to see the three figures in *Floorpiece* as aspects of a single, disarticulated body. It is a body that exists in different temporal signatures at once and whose ties to the territory of painting are always profoundly precarious.

Occupying divergent time zones is an apt metaphor for the experience of simultaneous capture within multiple electronic and mechanical devices—an experience that characterizes our everyday lives today (driving, say, guided by a GPS system while talking on the phone). Likewise, those of us who live a middle-class lifestyle in a “developed” nation constantly, if semiconsciously, exploit asymmetries in labor conditions across the time zones of a globalized world. Who made the components in the car we drive? How was the gasoline that fuels it extracted and processed? Who launched the

satellites that guide that car, or built the chips in the phone we're talking on while driving? This is our quotidian vertigo—the infrastructural unconscious—whose political economy is constantly and skillfully repressed.

It is paradoxical that a luxury commodity like painting can be so eloquent in exploring the affective experience of this vertigo and the partitioned bodies it produces. In his fine catalogue essay for Eggerer's exhibition, "Everyone Has a Job," Devin Fore emphasizes the indeterminacy and multiplicity of the artist's figures with regard to work: He suggests that the stooped postures in a painting such as *Triple Constellation*, 2013, recall anachronistic tasks like gleaning, which belong to the prehistory of industrialization, at precisely the moment when the West has "transcended" industrial production by exporting it to the "developing" world. Eggerer is clearly not trafficking in direct allusions either to digital media or to globalized labor. But just as Warhol captured the enervating repetition of human images under 1960s regimes of celebrity, Eggerer's paintings evoke a contemporary condition of internal splitting or *dis-location*, which corresponds to conditions of radically uneven development and mediatized globalization. Our eyes can now occupy different time zones from our feet or hands. Eggerer's paintings perform this fission in paint.

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