

A Fragile Artificiality

BY JOHN KELSEY

john kelsey: One painting that really grabbed me in your new show at Petzel is the smaller one with the red sock. A boy's ass faces the viewer at the bottom of the canvas. The rest of his body is obliterated in some brown action. And a foot with a red sock kind of stomps him into the ground from above. The space is dreamlike and strangely violent and gentle at the same time, with these partial figures interacting in a top/bottom kind of way. They feel collaged, and the collage is erotic. It's not a rational space. I guess this is a question about space and sex in painting...

thomas eggerer: Well, the question is always how far you can go without being too illustrative. Issues of dominance/control, submission and exposure/voyeurism are prominent in my work. But to some extent I want to deflect from them, without making them obscure. The spatial construction you describe renders the situation virtual and dreamlike, but it is only through this artificiality that I can address the transience and vulnerability of the exposed ass in dialogue with the red sock-foot.

jk: Your flattened-out color fields do a lot of this work. The figures don't feel quite grounded on them. There's usually a flat color that feels kind of "decorator" but in a very off way, then some expressive, brushy action that's more earthy or shitty, and the figures hallucinated in between. The space often says "ground" but it doesn't feel like ground.

te: You are right. The space is not "ground," even less background. Though it is not figural, per se, it does—to some extent—reverse the traditional order of figure and ground. In some of these recent paintings the "ground" is actually becoming the "figure" and the mostly drawn, airy figurative elements become the ground. The space is rendered flat and without orientation (no horizon line, etc.), thus rejecting the traditional model of space as a stable container.

jk: For some reason I start to think of Francis Bacon, his weird color fields and how they related to his volatilized figures. The rooms in his paintings are like vacuums or test tubes where figures do strange things. Are you a fan? I was also thinking about Tiepolo's disoriented spaces.

te: I like Bacon. The large-scale triptychs. I like how his spaces feel both open and claustrophobic. Similarly, in my work the spaces are both sheltering and exposing, contracting and expanding. The figures in Bacon's paintings, however, are much more distorted and absurd. In my recent show at Petzel the size of the figures became much larger than usual. Mostly drawn, they have a more mirage-like appearance. But in many paintings the figures are puppet-size or smaller, carefully constructed units, more reminiscent of Bauhaus artists like Oskar Schlemmer or Otto Meyer-Amden. Working on these figures often feels like dressing and redressing a doll. Tiepolo is often too grand and too professional for me (the Treppenhaus in Wuerzburg is amazing, of course), but I love the multi-vectorial figurative constructions of Poussin.

The paintings of Thomas Eggerer are inhabited by particular figures. Anonymous, absorbed in unfathomable actions, immersed in spaces without orientation or horizon, they are often surrounded or overwhelmed by earthy brushstrokes, a primordial sludge that evokes infantile, anarchic amusements. John Kelsey met with the artist to investigate the voyeuristic gaze that glimpses these figures like insects on an exhibit panel.

jk: I still haven't read the TJ Clark book on Poussin that I know Jutta, too, was obsessing about. "Vectorial" makes me think of vector graphics. Your figures could also live on t-shirts, or as tattoos. They are vectorial because they don't have much meat on them to weigh them down in place. And they can easily shift between scales. I guess you found these boys in vintage Boy Scout publications?

te: Yes, many of the figures are lifted from Boy Scout publications. The outdoors, healthy male bodies bonding, shared physical challenges, responsible future leaders—I am always drawn to these propagandistic materials. Many of my paintings exist in the shadow of a rhetoric that seems to promise progress and bright days ahead. Take for instance my recent painting *Grey Harvest*. It seems to be reminiscent of a farming collective, a classic topic in Socialist Realism. Looking closer though, the viewer realizes that this seems to be more like a hipster country commune. Working but not really working all that hard. The erosion of the fixed boundaries between labor and leisure, subject and object. After all, it is mostly very unclear what the figures in my work are doing. You say they have no meat on their bones. I guess I want them to be anonymous and not too serious (especially when they are life size). They are neither joyous nor tragic, but absorbed in their actions.

But I feel your remark is more generally addressing my relationship to "painting." I think I am avoiding consistency, harmony or authenticity to enforce ambivalence and doubt. There is great inconsistency with regard to representation often within a single painting: some figures are drawn while others are more or less rendered in detail. One painting is painted thoroughly while another is just a casual wash. The standpoint of the viewer seems to be shifting with the scale of the figures. Often smaller figures are removed into the middle ground, forcing the viewer into the position of a voyeuristic outsider, whereas bigger figures seem to suggest to the viewers to share their territory with them.

jk: It's very strange how the boys "work" in these paintings. Most of them are down on their knees; many touch the "ground" with their hands. There's always a tactile relationship between these figures and their ground. I'm reminded here of Dali's paranoiac-critical reading of Millet's painting *L'Angelus*, which depicts a farmer couple sowing seeds in a field at sunset. Dali thought there was something hidden in this painting, buried under the earth, and he had the canvas x-rayed by the Louvre. Sure enough, it turns out that Millet had originally painted a scene with a mother and father burying their dead child in the field, and he'd later painted over the corpse and changed it to a farming scene. In your paintings too, there's something ambiguous or mysterious going on between the figures and the ground.

te: Wow—that's amazing! Yes—all these figures in my paintings are gleaned, which appears to be an outdated, pre-modern pose. I think the movement of sitting down in my work is, however, more related to a strategy of self-definition. The figures inhabit an unmarked zone between horizontal and vertical,



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Grey Harvest, 2013. Courtesy: the artist, Petzel, New York.
Photo: Lanay Photo



Recycler, 2013. Courtesy: the artist, Petzel, New York.
Photo: Lamay Photo

absorbing the pressures of their surroundings with folding limbs. Blending into the ground: survival and camouflage. I think of Valie Export's *Body Configurations*. Sitting down as a gesture of negation and refusal, of not being available, demanding repose, of stepping out of the gestural canon. There is of course also the aspect of animalistic fun, kneeling in the mud, enjoying encounters with liquid, entropic masses. That is in part why I often paint children or teenagers. The anarchic sexuality of childhood is not yet converted into the regulated economy of grownup desire.

jk: What about the figure kneeling down to pour what looks like paint from a bucket? He's an unavailable painter. He's pouring the paint into the unpainted area of the canvas. This could be a message about yourself and your own labor. And once again the work goes downward, sinks down to make contact with the ground he's kneeling on, where it also disappears. Maybe he's just getting rid of the paint...

te: Yes, he is unavailable. Totally self-absorbed and ignoring the viewer. Do you know Heinrich von Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theatre"? In it, Kleist describes how a marionette is the perfect dancer, because—like a god—it has either no conscience or total conscience. Besides, in all my work the ground can't hold what it seems to promise. I can't be trusted to really keep a body in a stable position, which makes the giants' silent confidence even more poignant.

jk: I like this idea of a weak ground that doesn't quite do its job. It's hard not to think about it in terms of repression, too. The things we keep buried, and that suddenly erupt. The ground is where we get rid of the dead, or hide treasures, or dump toxic waste. It's interesting to imagine what sort of a dance might happen in relation to this repressed, out-of-frame, unconscious stuff. A dance would seem to require a solid ground...

te: A solid ground is the common stage for action. These figures seem to turn their back on action, though. They are self-absorbed and perhaps the ground is becoming something like a mirror or a container of memories, which otherwise have to be repressed to keep the ground solid. Growing up in postwar Munich, I could also think of Germany's repression of its fascist past.

jk: Still, as much as the figures retreat into themselves and shrug off their viewers, there's something voyeuristic in your work. You seem to pin the figures down in their unavailability, just as the unavailability seems to hypnotize or fixate you.

te: The voyeuristic and the ethnographic seem closely related. I distance the figures by pinning them down in a flat space, like a butterfly collection on a display board. Looking itself, always being part of a regime of glances, is the

topic here. Looking is not just an aesthetic experience but rather charged with desire. The self-absorbance of the figures becomes theatrical: exposed to an ambivalent view, the figures are partly sexualized. Perhaps the viewer recognizes his own sexual interest in looking at the figures. Sexuality may be absent as concrete subject matter, but it is present as a latent code.

jk: Your surfaces have a very specific thin and saturated flatness. The acrylic pigments you use and your weird, slightly sour, acid colors make for surfaces that could never be mistaken for those of another painter. I often feel I'm looking at colors I've never seen before, or else they bring a hauntingly familiar atmosphere I maybe remember from childhood, vaguely... Discontinued colors that in the 1970s must have communicated the most modern feeling but are no longer quite possible now, in this time. An alien palette. You once told me about memories of sitting on floors in Munich staring at orange walls...



Yellow Harvest, 2012. © The artist.
Courtesy: Maureen Paley, London

te: Acidity is not necessarily what I am looking for. A friend once called the vibe of my color choice "artificial sweetener." Growing up in the 1970s there was a lot of "optimism," colorful wall graphics, the rainbow colors of the 1972 Munich Olympics. People were sitting on pillows on the floor. Walls were painted hot orange and yellow. I go with that optimism. I want to make something beautiful. Color can drive and to some extent regulate social narrative. I like paintings that are neither cold nor warm—a fragile artificiality.

jk: A regime of glances within an atmosphere of fragile artificiality. What do you make of this recent discourse that keeps wanting to discuss painting in terms of networks?

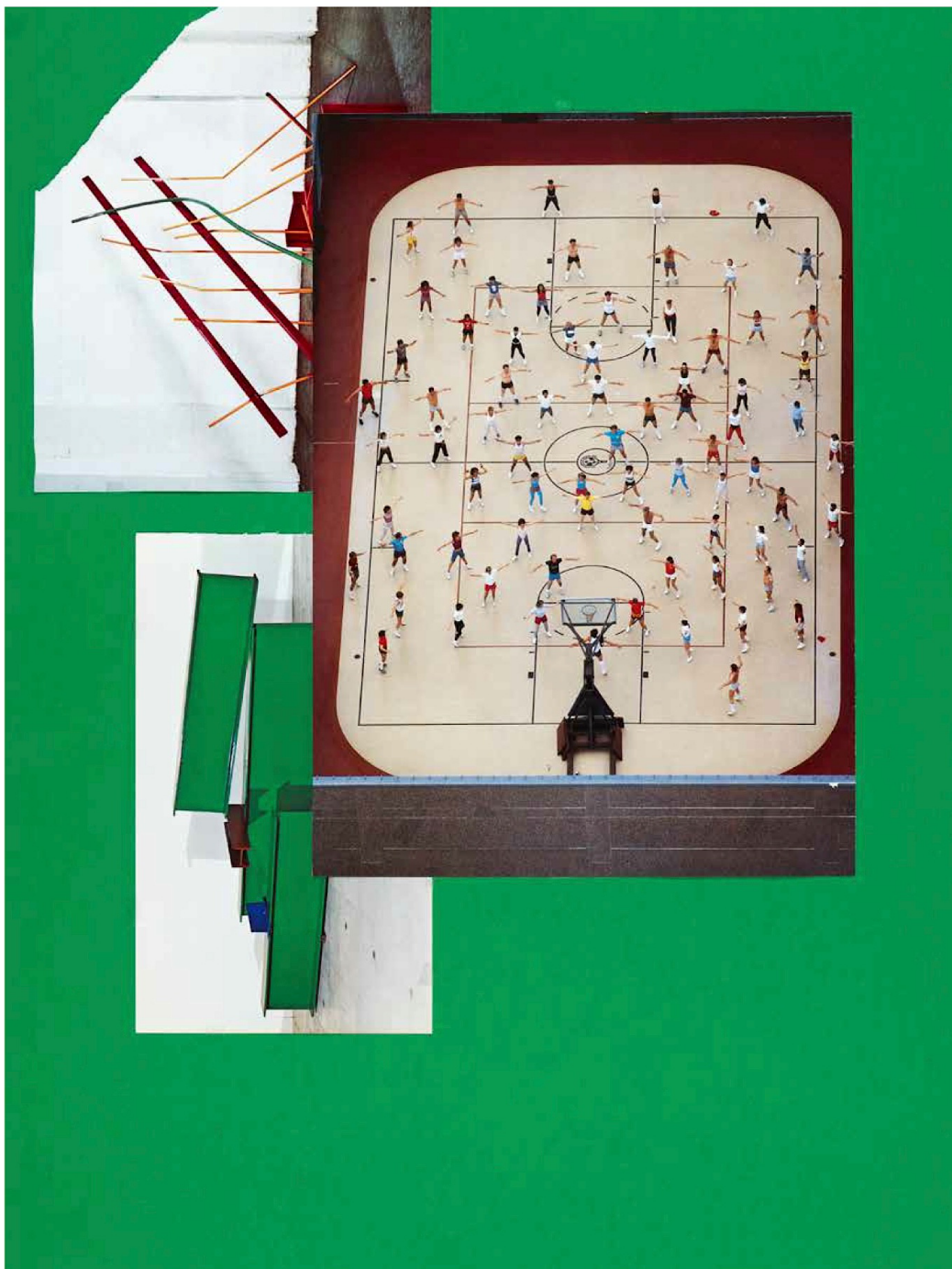
te: Oh... I don't know... Because I do not want to invent anything myself, everything is connected to an outside source. Does that constitute a network? As far as I am concerned I think I am never alone in the studio. As an artist I have been a part of the art worlds of Cologne, Los Angeles and New York. Each context has its own specific history involving different people and different social interactions. It's nice to think of network as a refusal of the cliché image of the autonomous artist working away in solitude, but perhaps that's only one side of it.

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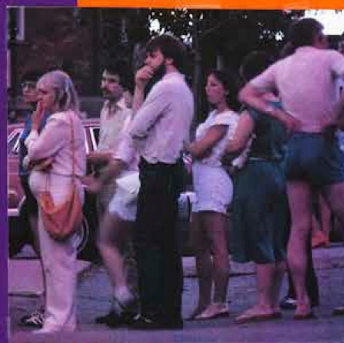
Floorpiece, 2013. Courtesy: the artist; Petzel, New York.
Photo: Lamay Photo

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Untitled, 2011. Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne

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