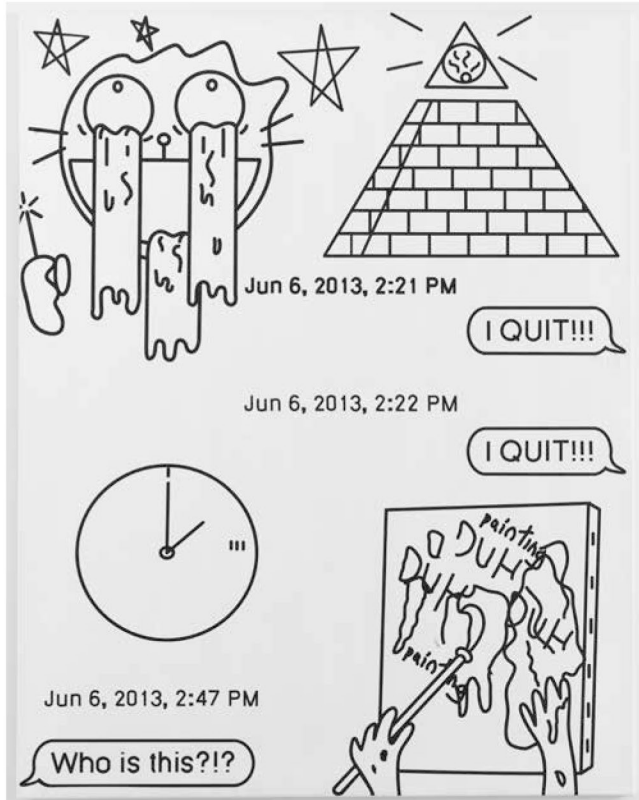
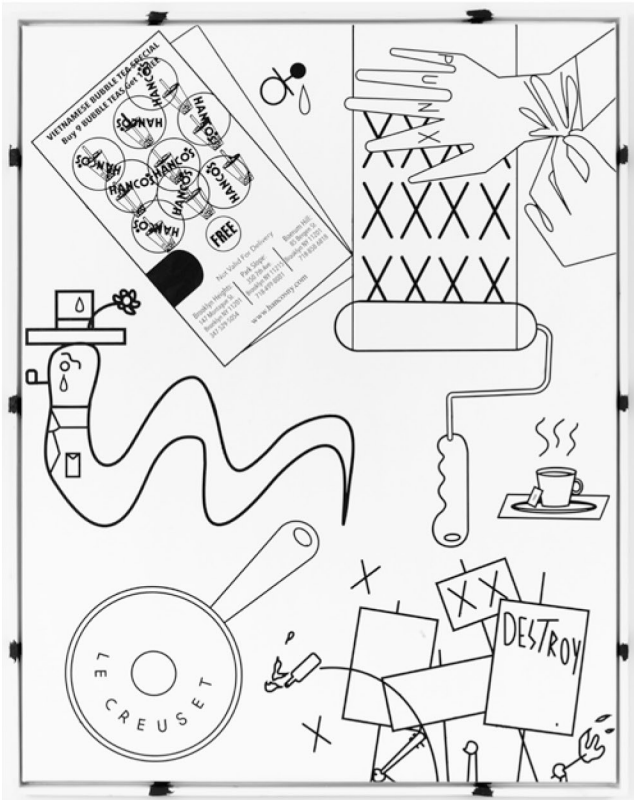


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Jaya Howey, *Kitchen Narrative*, 2013, oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in.  
 Jaya Howey, *Opening Narrative with Frame Work 3*, 2014, oil on canvas, ceramic, and epoxy, 45 x 35 in. Jaya Howey, *Painting*

*Narrative*, 2013, oil on canvas, 45 x 35 in. Jaya Howey, *Vacillation Narrative with Frame Work 1*, 2014, oil on canvas, ceramic, and epoxy, 45 x 35 in.

# JAYA HOWEY + GREG PARMA SMITH =

**GREG:** I'm finding it challenging to generate focus for a structured interview, even one with a conversational tone, given that our studios are right down the hall from one another and we've been friends for almost ten years.... We've spoken about art, life, and other interests a thousand times. So maybe we should just start with your most recent show. How did those paintings, and your peculiar technique of making them, evolve?

**JAYA:** In a lot of ways this recent work was a direct result of relocating to that studio down the hall from yours. Taxter & Spengemann had recently closed, and I was being consciously unproductive in terms of making art. My studio routine mostly consisted of cycling through various hang-out sessions with you, Daniel [Lefcourt], and Amelia [Saddington]. After months of going out of my way to avoid making things, I one day mindlessly just started drawing these tight, one-inch circles in neat two-by-three rows. I was using a mechanical pencil, a ruler, and the kind of plastic circle template that you buy in the drafting section of the art supply store. I found it hard to resist making those austere rows of circles into smiley faces—I was pretty depressed at the time—so I gave in and indulged myself.

After completing a few drawings like this I began noticing a sort of syntactic relationship between the individual faces I'd drawn. The relaying of information between one floating image to the next reminded me a bit of sentence structure, which seemed to present the possibility for a kind of communication I hadn't really had access to in my work up until that point. It's nothing new, of course, but in terms of conveying specific information it felt surprisingly direct, especially compared to my previous attempts to use the visual tropes of contemporary abstract painting in order to convey meaning.

As for the procedure in making them into paintings, Daniel loaned me a really old vinyl cutter that he had lying around, so I leaned on all my tech-savvy friends to teach me the basics of Adobe Illustrator in the hope that I could transfer these tight drawings I was making into mechanically cut stencils for painting.

**GREG:** You've reduced images in various ways—paring down color, simplifying pictograms, cutting up a source picture of a teenage Prince Charles until it was just shapes—only to

build complexity back into the painting through subsequent layering. Is that two-step process a way of claiming the generic elements of painting for yourself? It's as though the narrative of your painterly process can only be staged if the props are of your own making.

**JAYA:** I'm certainly claiming something for myself, but for me it's not about carving out my own distinct niche within the various archetypal styles of contemporary painting. I don't think it's possible for me to really deny or even normalize my own alienation from historically specific painting looks. I see procedures and styles as references with somewhat fixed art-historical connotations that represent loose but still distinct positions. The "A Clear Expression of Mixed Feelings" works you mention [the Prince Charles cut-ups] were meant to function in that way, where the process of cutting up and recombination was only significant in its contradictory relationship to the process employed to make the "My Abandoned Novel" works that it was hung alongside. The two parts of that show signified in my eyes two familiar and opposing takes, forced to cohere into a messier whole in terms of positioning.

**GREG:** Explain the two takes being asserted in that show.

**JAYA:** At the time, Taxter & Spengemann was spread over two floors in a brownstone. They had two distinct gallery spaces with somewhat different characteristics. The gallery would often have separate artist's shows running in each space, so with access to both I decided to make two sets of work that at first glance would appear to be made by two separate artists. The paintings downstairs ["My Abandoned Novel"] were large and made in the tradition of slow, tortuous, painterly improvisation. I would start a painting with no set plan, make a move, step back, stare at it for hours, and then make another move in response to the first. The result was a room full of distinct-looking paintings, some with resolved compositions and others that ended up being a mess of self-cancellation. The work upstairs ["A Clear Expression of Mixed Feelings"] was small and the process was rule-based. The compositions came about through chance, and each painting was somewhat indistinguishable from the one hung next to it. I saw the whole thing as an attempt to claim opposing motivational strains within a single show. ▶

I essentially wanted to simultaneously assert and then destabilize both positions in my own output.

**GREG:** I've always really responded to your use of rulers, guides, and stencils. There really is a unique "hand" in the way you deploy what are meant to be "hands-off" shapes and lines. One might be tempted to view a resort to technical drawing aides, vinyl stencils, etc., as a gesture of punk de-skilling. But it seems to relate more to testing the capacity of your medium to convey subjecthood.

**JAYA:** It's interesting to hear you make a connection between punk de-skilling and drafting tools, since for me the term brings to mind a certain outward messiness... dripping paint, cut canvas, spit, vomit, vitriol. But you're right—even as the finished piece has the look of self-restraint, in all actuality these devices are designed to allow for a lot of behind-the-scenes disorder. Through the "hand" and especially the subject matter I'm trying to draw attention to that sublimated chaos as much as I'm asserting the orderly façade that the equipment affords.

**GREG:** Maybe punk was the wrong word. But there are clear references to subculture in your recent work: straight-edge, skinhead, rave, etc. I see those references as analogous to your use of brushy paint application within a sharply stenciled area in that they announce individuality, but only within prescribed boundaries. In most approaches to painting the problem of containing the artist's selfhood isn't made explicit. What is the role of selfhood in your painting? Or, how did selfhood come into your work, versus the use of techno lyrics in earlier paintings?

**JAYA:** I think I deal with the subject in my work sort of elliptically. When I make self-assertive and self-repressive gestures simultaneously, I'm trying to see if some opposing motivations can possibly cohere into larger, more complex statements of intent. But holding up and attempting to rationalize these kind of contradictions inevitably creates conflict. And so what I try and do is channel that conflict into the work itself, which I suppose is another example of me allowing for a kind of self-assertive gesture to happen. Recognizing and communicating conflict, especially in terms of rationalization, seems important to me, even if the way I'm doing it comes off as problematically personal and a little self-indulgent. It's a constant negotiation with what is forgivable and what is superfluous.

**GREG:** I really appreciate this about your work—that the conflict is ongoing, fluid, and therefore seems more felt and real. In some recent painting, the presumptive "guilt" about working in a classical medium is reflexively buffered by a resort to process. Problem and solution are just choreographed mannerisms. A sense of guilt, I think, was never even real for a lot of younger painters who nevertheless are guided by a response to it.

**JAYA:** It would be difficult for me to claim that what I'm doing is any more felt or real than whatever else is out there,

since I'm knowingly introducing this conflicted, personal element into the work in a really calculated way. The kind of self-absorbed, "lived" content I'm putting forth, especially when it shows up in painting, can be really insufferable from a viewer's perspective. It raises red flags, or at least elicits eye rolls—for good reason. But in certain circumstances I can't help but think it has some value if it can push up against the kind of symbolic critical gestures you're referring to, without undermining the core motivations those moves may or may not still represent.

So it's complicated. I can't say it's completely contrived or absolutely sincere. I don't think that admitting to a certain amount of mediation on my part instantly reduces what I'm doing to something so obvious as a snide satire. But I also don't think that depicting emotional irrationality reduces things to something so laughable as a maudlin cry for help, either.

**GREG:** Back to something you mentioned earlier.... For you, what is forgivable and what is superfluous?

**JAYA:** With these paintings I'm seeing the kind of personal content I just mentioned as cringeworthy, but forgivable. As for what I think might be superfluous—on a nuts-and-bolts level, having to make constant color decisions began feeling more self-indulgent than the emotional stuff. I dealt with that by making a one-time decision to use Torrit Grey, which comes with its own random color variation intact. What else? I suppose printing these images would have been an easy route to take, since they're drawn and composed on a computer, but that just seems too self-congratulatory and tidy, especially if it's presented as some sort of solution to the problems usually associated with painting.

**GREG:** Can you talk about what Torrit Grey is?

**JAYA:** Torrit Grey is a color of paint made by the Gamblin oil paint company. Essentially they collect all of the powdered pigment that builds up in their factory's air filtration system and use that as the base for a promotional color that they release once a year. I learned about it when I was given a tube for free—it's always free—by someone at an art supply store a few years ago. Because the ratio of various pigments is different each time, the Gamblin people empty whatever mechanism collects it, so each batch they make is recognizably unique in terms of its color. Some end up being a standard neutral gray, others have a green tint to them, while others have been blueish or reddish brown. Coming across a color whose only constant is its name and packaging gave me the opportunity to seem as if I was making repeated color decisions without actually having to do so—the factory in a sense was doing it for me. The color variation in the "Note to Self" show is subtle—my work often looks black and white in reproduction—but it's certainly noticeable enough in person to create an illusion of constant color decisions being made on my part.

Being that Torrit Grey is also always free solved another pressing problem I was seriously contending with at the time. It also just felt appropriate for me to be using the leftovers of the production process that supplies real paint to real painters. ▶

**GREG:** Is Torrit Grey your set palette from here on?

**JAYA:** I'll likely have to revisit my palette sometime in the near future as I'm becoming a bit tired of being the forty-one-year-old guy constantly dropping into art supply stores asking for free stuff. It's interesting to see how various art supply stores go about negotiating the stocking of a product they aren't allowed to sell. One constant among all stores I go to is that they always keep it hidden behind the counter, so you have to actually ask the person working there if they have any in stock and if they're willing to give you some. Pearl Paint had a "policy" where if you bought \$25 worth of merchandise you would then be given one tube of it for free. My dealings with Utrecht were constantly shifting based on who was working and what store I was going to, but usually it involved buying something first. The people at Blick never knew what I was talking about, as there seemed to be a disconnect between the management and the people who worked on the floor. The people at New York Central Art Supply were always the most gracious about it and would just give it to me, no questions asked.

On a different subject, I'm noticing that throughout this conversation we've been circling around this idea of personal space in the work. I'm curious if there's a distinction to be made between the type of personal space we're talking about here and the kind you find questionable in the indie lifestyle comics that you appropriate in your own work?

**GREG:** Yes, they're different. I think your approach is about testing the viability of emotional narrative within a formalist dialogue of painting. The autobiographers of indie comics assume their hyperpersonalized method of expression is transparent and unmediated. In the case of your work, the textbook history of abstract painting provides the context for your emotionally coded gestures and images, which intentionally disrupt that space.

This coexistence of formal and narrative elements—it seems like you've boiled it down to a very stark clarity in your most recent work....

**JAYA:** In terms of boiling things down, what I'm doing now with the rebus-type work on a smaller scale and in a very limited palette has, in my eyes, taken that somewhat unharmonious grouping of the formal and emotional you're referring to—the "No One's No-No" show immediately comes to mind—and pares it down into a more efficient and cohesive way of depicting that contradiction.

I find the frivolity of such emotionally coded gestures to be useful when it is used to plainly convey an ill-at-ease relationship to art making in an absurd and seemingly misinformed way. Crafting emotionally fraught narratives in oil paint probably isn't the most direct way to appeal to the kinds of people who are engaged in a discussion that questions the validity of art and art making. But as you point out, my own awareness of exactly how conspicuous and contrived these kinds of utterances actually are folds back into the work and complicates things, hopefully constructively.

**GREG:** How do you think you did this with the "No One's No-No" work?

**JAYA:** That show was made up of six large paintings made in the somewhat generic post-minimal vein of painting undynamic squares on top of a series of somewhat undynamic rectangles—with some small procedural variation throughout. Five of the works maintain a certain overall consistency, while the sixth goes off-track a bit by having a quote from a Happy Hardcore techno anthem written in large script across its face. The quote read "no one's judging you" and was put there not only for its unrealistic promise—when in life are you not being judged?—but also to signify a crisis in the process of doing what is expected of me as an artist, which is to maintain my composure throughout the lead-up to a show by making a simple, legible, and consistent body of work. I wanted to play out an attempt and ultimate failure to temporarily inhabit an art-historical style associated with cool detachment and composed rationality. So I played out a kind of drama where the paintings function like markers in time that lead up to the show. Everything is going okay until something goes wrong. That quote—I had collected tons of these sorts of vapid, motivational dance lyrics by this point—was chosen for the way it could be understood as not only being there for my own benefit, but also for the benefit of viewers, who find themselves in an uncomfortably bright, neon-lit gallery at the base of a new cheesy condo building in Chelsea looking at a group of huge, somewhat dry paintings.

**GREG:** I could imagine a viewer expecting these paintings to provide some kind of morose critical commentary on the cultural meaning of the emoticon or emoji, but I really don't think it's there.... In your elaboration and translation of them, they have become their own world.

**JAYA:** When I reference something like emoji, it's less out of an interest in debating the viability of mobile versus painterly platforms and more because I find the affective quality of that sort of imagery to be useful and problematic. Manga is another visual language that makes its way into the work at times, but my interest is mostly in its ubiquity more than anything else. If you've taught drawing in the last ten years you know that most young people learn to draw in a manga style before they learn to draw in a "Western" one. It has become the default representational mode for a huge part of the population, which I love. Lettrist metagraphics, particularly Gabriel Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto des Prêts*, have also influenced the way I think about pictorial space and language as well. So these sorts of things make their way in and out of the work, but ultimately they're just variables that inform my more general consideration of the validity of attempting communication through something as contrived and yet unavoidably personal as art making.

I've been emphasizing here a certain duality in my work, and I'm curious to ask you a bit about the role, if any, that duality plays in your own. Your show "Melancholy" opened here in New York a few weeks ago, and there is certainly an overt importance placed on the idea of the split—the folded

canvas that creates a mirroring effect, the Janus butterflies and the listing of opposing concepts in the press release. I'm wondering if you could talk a bit about this symmetrical and asymmetrical splitting that you're choosing to highlight in this newer work.

**GREG:** To be honest, I think using two-faced Janus as a structure first came from thinking about how people experience my work. Some viewers, I guess, hesitate over the relationship between my technique and my subject matter. Take the origami paintings, for example, where I've painstakingly rebuilt in paint this perhaps banal art-store aesthetic, inventing patterns, swimming around with apparent joy in the orientalism and craft. It's easy to see that the attitude in the technique is very earnest, but the attitude toward the subject matter is harder to parse. As though the stuff I'm painting is so dumb I couldn't possibly "mean it." For me the work actually succeeds in that hesitation, in trying to create a little bit of social discomfort around irony and taste. I sincerely want my work to be beautiful, but it needs to be a beauty that doesn't purport to transcend ethical problems.

I like that the figure of Janus seems to synthesize a supposed opposition .... One face looks to the past, one to the future, so in ancient Rome the God represented not time but flux and metamorphosis, gateways. And also conflict, exchange, etc. Also, Janus is unique in that it wasn't derived from an early Greek God.

The asymmetrical complement to the above is that symmetry also represents a recursive closed loop ... an inwardness or anti-dynamism. The canvas flaps that create the butterflies become visible by folding outward, but they also could be folding inward. To me that compositional symmetry was analogous to the social and discursive inwardness of the alt-underground 'zine culture that produced the stylized comic faces that comprise the butterflies.

**JAYA:** Your observations regarding the way you work elicits a bit of hesitation, and brings me back to conversations you and I have had in the past regarding legibility. I feel like your work demands an active flexibility from the audience—since a rigid interpretation of the individual parts of your multifaceted approach would, I imagine, leave a viewer somewhat displaced. Your work successfully asserts a very specific kind of content that I think is enhanced by the interpretive rupture you knowingly playing with. So I'm curious to hear your thoughts on navigating an approach that precariously balances a discernible interest in conveying specificity, while actively side-stepping gestures that provide easy assurances.

**GREG:** I don't want to naturalize too much, but the approach we're talking about just sort of developed. It comes out of being faithful to various impulses that aren't always working in harmony. To aim for precise legibility and beauty, while also trying to avoid being a slavish echo to the viewer's understanding. To think admiringly—but also critically—about ways of making art that aren't defined by the art world power structure. I do reflect on the viewer's

experience of this, as I just said regarding duality and the Janus emblem, etc. Now that I'm aware of it, why keep displacing the viewer? It's at least partly to give expression to the class tension that often gets smoothed over in the world of contemporary art—that you risk being owned by the prospective audience when you think you're just doing "your" thing. If people like what I end up doing, that's the best possible outcome, but I want to be sure my content remains a living force with its own space. Although I'm not a hundred percent sure that's a realistic goal. *Haha.*

**JAYA:** You've occasionally framed your use of classical representational techniques—as well as your appropriation of graphic novels and your use of graffiti lettering—as a way to reference attempts by the artists who typically engage these formats to work against the inevitability of history and to form reactionary, somewhat hermetic art communities around that resistance.

We've been speaking about anticipating a certain amount of interpretive dissonance within the very specific subsection of the art world that we both tend to work within. I'm curious, though, as you've made these paintings and they've had a chance to circulate somewhat free of context via digital reproduction, has another sort of displacement occurred, where you've received positive responses within the creative circles you're intentionally referencing? I think that's less likely in the graffiti and comic worlds because, among other things, your use of oil paint on canvas removes them a bit from their proper context. Your figurative work is different, though, because it plays the part and occupies the format completely. It would be much easier for those paintings to end up on some figure painting blog or hung in the sort of gallery that puts a premium on work made from observation.

**GREG:** But on the other hand, nearly all of my realist-type work has had some sort of interruption of surface, usually bas-relief. The first time I glued a mask to the canvas and painted over it, I wanted it to serve as exactly this kind of signal, something to inherently mark the border with the proper space of realist painting. So in the scenario you mentioned, where my work is seen out of context, I still don't think the realist painter, or zine-comic author, or graffiti writer would ever mistake my work for the pure form of what they do. However, were one of those artists to appreciate one of my paintings in terms that correspond to "their" focus on realism, techniques, style, etc? I'm very happy with that; I would think that's a genuine shared interest.

Ideally people would recognize or agree that I'm not just absorbing a more hermetic form of art making and trying to glean some alt-credibility for myself and my elite audience, but rather trying to increase the tension between sets of artistic values. The art world is a good platform for thinking about this: the process of inventing value from the entropic and nonhierarchical field of art products. I'm obviously implicated, but for me there's some kind of indefinite ethical obligation that the genres I'm combining remain visibly distinct in my work, in the sense that they aren't becoming abstractions. ▶

**JAYA:** The shows you make often continue the stylistic thread from the previous exhibition, while simultaneously introducing an entirely new kind of painting into the fold. While the breadth of your visual vocabulary continues to widen, you also are making more and more paintings that incorporate the motifs of your previous work into the space of a single canvas. I've heard you call these works "GPS Paintings." Can you talk a little more about how you see these catchall works functioning? Will they continue to accommodate the constant arrival of new manifestations of your output into what will eventually be a cacophonous GPS painting mode? Or are the GPS paintings a solidified and fixed project playing the part of a signature style that offers the viewer some sort of sense of footing amid your continual exploration of new methods?

**GREG:** I just wanted to challenge my habit of thinking in systematic groups of dialoguing paintings and try some stand-alone paintings, which meant they needed to contain disparate pieces. I was concerned that the compositional nature of them would steamroll the elements into meaningless graphic equivalence—the abstractions I mentioned before. Then the paintings would just become an index of some of my characteristic moves—GPS paintings. But fortunately that merging isn't as deadening as I thought. Rather than just accumulate old ideas, they open up new ideas for me, and sometimes I feel like they are actually more effective. So we'll see. ==

MAX PITEGOFF + CALLA HENKEL =

8.



*On the farthest wall Michael works the lights of the club. The switchboard is vertical behind the DJ booth so he has to look backwards to see the lights change. Sometimes when people make out on the balcony over there, he'll grin, point, and flash the fluorescents.*

*CORRECTION March 2, 2014: The business relationship between Michael and Dan had been misstated. The photographs were too dark, the metaphors too easy. I was misquoted. You see, I'd been standing outside screaming, "You don't even know me."*

*This layout is perfect for arguments. See, over there Mia decided not to go home with someone, just there, on the ledge adjacent to the steps to the platform. It was light out by the time she'd decided.*

*It was light out when the reporter from the New Yorker sat down with Sam and asked him about Berghain. He was putting on an attitude I think. Sam or the reporter? Sam. Sam was putting on an attitude. Anyway the reporter had tried calling Berghain to let them know he was coming, a reporter from the New Yorker, tonight. They said no. So he called Sam. Sam had advice, and many stories about rejection. I think most of them were moral affirmations, like rejection is all a part of it. You can't always get in, it's like heaven. No, hell, no, I can't remember. Whichever it was, it was worth the wait. Anyway, Sam's in the article. "The young guy who may have had trouble getting in." He was furious, says it wasn't him.*

*Over there is the smoking room. No one really uses it, it's small, the blue light is weird.*

*But back to the story, the story about the stories. Like describing dreams, it's very hard to make it interesting, reporters in clubs.*

9.

*Beer is \$2.50. No, I don't know if there's wine, I've never had it. Shots are \$2 but they're small and come in cough syrup glasses.*

*If we're all reporters, yes, that would work nicely with a metaphor about smartphones. But the story is Dan Bodan once took a picture of his feet and got kicked out.*

*Did he get to keep the photo?*

*Dan?*

*Bodan.*

*Of his feet?*

*Like I said, I don't know. ==*