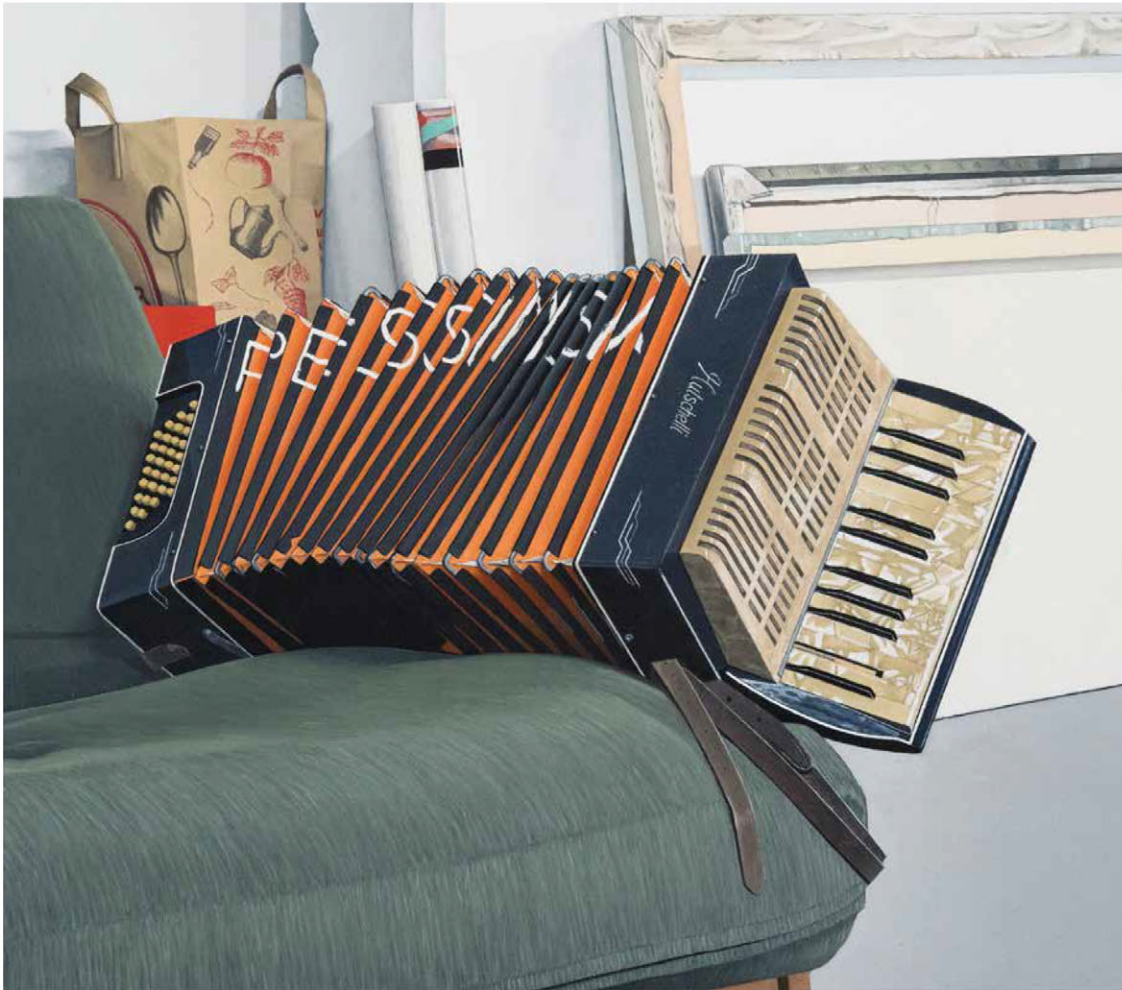


MOUSSE 41 ~ Caleb Considine



Hutschelli, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist, ESSEX STREET, New York

MUTE PAINTINGS

BY ALEX KITNICK

Caleb Considine discusses his practice and its relationship to subject matter and contemporary image culture. Refusing to be hamstrung by today's widespread techno-deterministic notions of painting, he examines questions of process and narrative to open a divergent conversation on observational painting's historical limits and immanent potential.

alex kitnick: Alex Kitnick: Your first paintings looked to me almost like hybrids or combinations of Julian Opie and Luc Tuymans. I'm thinking of the massage one in particular, which I think you completed in graduate school or just after. There was a really generic quality to the figures (almost in a Pop kind of register), their edges were rounded, their characteristics sanded down, and yet there was this patina of history to them, almost as if they were hidden behind a blur, lots of tans, greys, browns, colors like that...

caleb considine: Tuymans represents something pretty awful to push against for me—painting as a kind of affective image selection where his role is basically just amplifying a kind of generic melancholia/nostalgia embedded in pervasive tropes about photography and loss. Working from life is really important to me for a lot of reasons, one of which is avoiding these

telescoped notions about technological modernity's relationship to painting, as if you could address the shifts in visual culture by simply applying an impressionistic patina to the photographic fragment. I like the contradictions that arise from indices of an experiential relationship to the paintings' subject and also a kind of remove that results both from the simplifications/abstractions in the individual paintings, and from the groupings that suggest a sort of scanning or selection of "images" untethered to any singular, self-present subject matter.

ak: The search-page untetheredness certainly comes through when the paintings are presented as a group. Could you talk more about the idea of working from life? Because you paint lots of different things from life—people but also people in photographs, drawings of people, magazine stands... Also, I was reading Greenberg, preparing for class today, and I came across this passage that I thought you might have something to say about: "Courbet, the first real avant-garde painter, tried to reduce his art to immediate sense data by painting only what the eye could see as a machine unaided by the mind."

cc: Like many painters from my generation I tried lots of different ways to approach painting in school. I came to the way I make paintings by a process of elimination really. At a certain point the whole history of deskilling seemed to me like it had become a ruse—not just by the constant erection of new scaffoldings of criteria by which to appraise anything an artist might do, but maybe most importantly by the way that social skills had come to supplant all other criteria, wholesale. Working from life is a way for me to allow a sort of non-heroic struggle and even vulnerability into the paintings: that their successes not be in emulation of archaic mastery, and their failures not recouped by the ever permissive logic of pseudo-reflexivity ("its supposed to be bad"). I'd like to apply a little pressure on the "false freedoms" of our culture's omnivorous connoisseurship by throwing myself one hundred and ten percent into a practice of painting whose frame of reference is undeniably and authoritatively real, and yet manifestly absent or elsewhere. Unfortunately, I'm not sure I can say a lot about the Greenberg quote, just because I have to admit that I haven't given a great deal of thought to either him or to Courbet. I suppose I just go right to Cézanne's famous proclamation about wanting to be a "sensitized plate." To go back to deskilling and its problematics, that quote, and the fact that Cézanne was the first 'modern master' who really wasn't such a great traditional draftsman, did make me think about what we call deskilling as a kind of keeping pace with incessant "bourgeois revolutions" of techno-cultural production. I said something along these lines to Cheyney Thompson a year or two ago and he disagreed, saying that Cézanne's position was a challenge: "I am the sensitized plate."

ak: It's interesting because this talk of sensitized plates brings photography to mind, which you ostensibly are trying to keep some distance from. Photography receives impressions; it's the passive art. These ideas are key to Surrealism and they reach their peak with Warhol. I'm interested in the sensitized artist who is working away all the time, who puts in so much elbow grease. You're kind of famous for being a studio rat. Do you go into trances when you're in there?

cc: Hmm, not exactly a trance. I know the kind of artist you mean. I'm more like the crank who chain smokes and snaps at anyone who tries to poke their head in and then after too many successive days or weeks I have to send these sad texts to my friends asking them to hang out with me so I don't forget that I'm a person. I suppose it would be disingenuous if I did not admit here that I listen to a pretty decent amount of sci-fi audio books. Maybe that's just a yes to your question about the trance after all.

ak: What about absorption? Maybe that's a better word for it. I was surprised when I visited your studio and you said you hadn't read Michael Fried before. His whole thinking has been built around absorption. He started off looking at Color Field abstraction but when he traced this tendency back in history he held up figurative painters like Chardin as precedents, people losing themselves in bubbles. There is something really absorptive about your work too. Your paintings demand that viewers get absorbed and lose themselves in them. I'm thinking of your painting of someone pulling toes apart or your recent painting of a hand torquing a piece of metal (?). There is something very much about the moment in these works, a present moment that is not necessarily a contemporary moment—a long moment. Have you read Michael Fried yet?

cc: I haven't. For a while now I've just been reading Marx interspersed with fiction. The last art book I read was Devin Fore's *Realism After Modernism*, which was great, especially the Heartfield chapter, but not actually very rel-

evant to what I do. So yeah, I really should read Fried, a number of people have told me to. The recent painting with the hand that you mentioned is a particular case in terms of absorption though. The hand is holding a "No-Shank" pen for inmates, that bends so as to prevent its being turned into a shank. I was listening to a news story about Guantanamo when a reporter asked the military official something about a prisoner strapped and locked to a gurney—this was during the hunger strike—and he quickly corrected that the prisoner was in "humane restraint." This sounded like a quintessential fascist euphemism to me, but when I looked it up I saw that it was the name of the corporation that makes all the dungeon gear for Gitmo. On their website there was a subsidiary called "No-Shank" that made all sorts of personal products for inmates that could in no way be turned into weapons—razors, mirrors, toothbrushes and pens. So I bought some of the pens and made that painting.

I was hesitant at first about treading into a kind of politics that is largely instrumentalized in the context of art. What made me decide to go ahead with it is that while I do in fact agree when people refer to the American prison system as a "slow-motion holocaust" that's beyond the possibility of reform, there's actually nothing evil about those pens per se. I suppose it's a part of prison privatization, but a fairly minor one, and people do indeed make weapons in prison. As such, it's an inadequate symbol, which is also, I think, why most people would not necessarily read the painting's title and go home and Google and end up on this company's site. This blatant failure of the image to conjure that from which it was derived (massive state violence) seemed like a way to approach my relationship to something like politics in the context of art—at a necessary and real distance.

Maybe most often I approach painting as a form of veneration, particularly in portraits, but I like to integrate paintings that have somewhat buried references or meanings. The absorption/theatricality split does seem like binary thinking to me, but the polarity that is most meaningful for me is process versus narrative. These terms are tied to facticity and mimesis, abstraction and representation, but process and narrative are obviously not axiomatic opposites, and they really occupy an identical role in painting. I like to think of the narrative potential embedded in the paintings (which keeps the door cracked open for paintings like No-Shank) as emanating as much from the signs of facture and process on the paintings surface (a story of hours logged staring and working) as from the content of the image.

In a way this is what was really important for me about Vija Celmins' early observational studio still lives—she seemed to be taking certain aesthetic trappings of the factographic approach that was starting to become important at that time and refract them through their formal opposite. It bugs me when those paintings are compared to Morandi (who I also love), because there's absolutely nothing fetishistic or 'obsessive' about the way they are made. I do think they are incredibly beautiful paintings, but weirdly it's because of a curtness in how they are painted. Everything about them seems to suggest she is merely indexing these bare bones commonplace electrical presences in her studio, yet somehow they are vivified through this portrayal steeped in the doubt and tenuousness surrounding painting at that particular historical moment. They're deeply confounding paintings to me.

ak: Alongside your interest in persisting in painting, in continuing to make a certain kind of painting that is in itself rather than beside itself, and which doggedly holds on to some established criteria as a way of casting a skeptical light on "bourgeois revolutions"—I am reminded of Richter's great statement that since he is still bourgeois enough to use knife and fork hence paintbrushes should suffice too—one notes that you have also held onto certain genres as well. In particular your portraits of young male artists like Patrick Price and Mathieu Malouf stand out to me—more so than your paintings of women for some reason. They remind me of Wyndham Lewis's portrait of Ezra Pound. There is something scary about them. Can you say something about their hard surfaces, their bloodlessness?

cc: It's funny that you say those paintings are scary; other people have described them in similar semi-morbid terms. Mathieu and Patrick are good friends of mine, I would not have asked them to sit for me otherwise. I really just wanted to make them look good. Maybe we're all trapped a little bit in adolescent moodiness, but honestly I wouldn't have let them out into the world if Patrick, Mathieu or I thought they were unflattering. I never try to paint people with any particular expressivity in mind, but this involves more than just treating the figure as an object for formal exercise, which I categorically dislike (Beckman, Freud, Diebenkorn). I think what you describe is largely a result of surface, the paintings are treated pretty roughly, lots of sanding, scraping and turp pours. I suppose there is inevitably an amount of pathology in the evidence of this somewhat arduous process, but my hope is that some of the simplified drafting characteristics are disarming or even friendly. I'm not sure it matters to me that they are artists some viewers might know; it's more just that they are people with whom I have a relationship. I want the paintings to remain mute.