

Will Heinrich, 'Paintings that Embrace the Impossibility of Painting,'
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Paintings that Embrace the Impossibility of Painting

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Jaya Howey takes painting very seriously, and so, like every other committed and intelligent American painter mindful of the long and unremittingly self-reflective history of modern painting — not to mention our infinite glut of empty digital images — he finds himself in a very serious corner.

But his latest escape plan is as simple as it is difficult: in a cultural context that makes genuinely spontaneous creativity nearly impossible, Howey makes that impossibility itself his subject.

Edifying Lines for Sensitive Readers at Bureau gallery consists of 11 white canvases, each just shy of four by three feet, and three installations, each comprised of a narrow wooden bench; seven, eight, or nine custom-made cushions stacked under and upon the bench; and one or two rectangular pieces of fabric attached to the wall behind it. The cushions, like the hangings, are vividly colored and vary widely in pattern and texture. All except one short, round fuchsia bolster are boxy in shape — they read as gift-wrapped presents with nothing inside but themselves.

The canvases, by contrast — and in saying “by contrast,” I mean, “in an absolute, Cartesian divorce that reveals how profoundly beside himself any asthetically attentive person must feel these days” — are painted with nothing but Torrit Gray. This color, whose tone varies from nearly black to an occasional brownish, is made by Gamblin with the miscellaneous pigments reclaimed every year from its factory’s air-conditioning ducts. The paintings are neither figurative nor abstract. Instead, they simply replicate, in Times, Helvetica, or Franklin Gothic Book, the syllabi, material lists, grading rubrics, and attendance policies of three undergraduate and graduate courses Howey teaches at Boston University.

There's something almost self-destructively vulnerable about this. Howey is confronting his position and values as a painter with a nearly medical clarity, then revealing them with commensurately pathological candor. The painter maintains a foothold in New York, but he teaches for a living somewhere else; the painter believes in the importance of a "rigorous and consistent in-studio working schedule," however monotonous that might sound, and "an informed awareness of contemporary art in all media," however bleak that might appear to make him feel. And while Howey the teacher takes account of the financial straits of his students, conscientiously noting the prices they can expect to pay for Titanium White, Phthalo Blue, Strathmore canvas paper pads, and other materials they'll need for his Painting 1 class, Howey the artist also knows the deadening perils of this kind of professionalization, which risks reducing human expression to a rote list of tasks and references (check!) and assigning everything a dollar value (check!). He's also hip to the irony of painting these modest figures on a canvas he hopes to sell, because even if the whole thing is just an exceedingly dry send-up of conceptual tedium, the joke remains on him, as a person who's committed his life to painting, as much as on anyone else.

At the same time, one given painter's vulnerability only serves to highlight the indestructibility of his medium. Howey has taken everything people typically mean when they say "painting" — the rectangles, the colors and textures, the easily available aesthetic stimulation — and put it on the floor, leaving nothing on the walls but his idea. He even removes most of what used to be painting's ordinary process, plotting his compositions on the computer and using a special kind of printer to cut out vinyl stencils he can simply paint over.

But the fact remains that while the cushioned installations merit only a glance, Howey's stark idea, as a series of paintings, remains worth looking at. His letters stand up from their bright white backgrounds as sharply as a series of tiny mesas, but their subtly ridged brushstrokes record their maker's time and attention as thoroughly as any van Eyck or cuneiform tablet. Moreover, their modestly straightforward simplicity deemphasizes their conceptual character, so that, in the end, the viewer is left to experience the pure appeal of nothing but paint and canvas.

Required Materials List:

OIL PAINT
 Student-grade paint like Blick, Gamblin 1980 (which is distinct from the standard Gamblin line), Grumbacher Academy, and Van Gogh are the least expensive and will be sufficient for what we'll be covering in this class. Alternatively, brands such as Gamblin or Winsor & Newton produce higher quality paints that are still reasonably priced. If you're planning on painting after this semester is through, I'd suggest making the investment in one of these higher quality, better performing, and typically more saturated brands of paint. The final call is up to you and what you can realistically afford.

Large Tubes (150-225ml): Titanium White (\$16), Ivory Black (\$16)
 Small Tubes (37 ml): Cadmium Red Light or Medium (\$18), Alizarin Crimson (\$10.50), Cadmium Yellow Medium or Light (\$15), Ultramarine Blue (\$7.50), Phthalo Blue (\$7.50), Burnt Umber (\$6), Burnt Sienna (\$6), Sap Green (\$7.50) (Approximately \$115 for all the above colors; student grade will cost around \$60)
 Other Colors (nice to have, but not required): Yellow Ochre, Venetian Red, Cadmium Orange, Dioxazine Purple, Viridian, and anything else that catches your eye

BRUSHES
 -Blick Scholastic Sable & Taklon Set (\$12.59) or Princeton Brush Set Value Pack (\$11.20)
 *Ultimately any set of six or more brushes under \$25 that includes the following:
 #2 Round, #6 Round, #4 Flat, #8 Flat, #4 Filbert, #10 Filbert

PAINTING SURFACES
 (2) Strathmore canvas paper pads (at least 16" x 20" — 10 sheets each) (\$14.04 each x 2 = \$28.08)
 (8) Canvas board/panels (at least 16" x 20") (\$3.93 each x 8 = \$31.44)
 (12) Lightweight stretcher bars 16" (\$1 each x 12 = \$12)
 (12) Lightweight stretcher bars 20" (\$1.25 each x 12 = \$15)
 (1) Unprimed canvas blanket 60" x 3 yards (Blick brand is \$43.66)
 Arrow JT21 stapler (\$12)
 Box of 1000 JT21 staples (1/4" or 5/16") (\$2.50)
 Canvas pliers (\$16) (optional)

OTHER REQUIRED SUPPLIES
 -Palette knife (\$10)
 -Box of 50 latex or vinyl disposable gloves (preferably unpowdered) (\$10)
 (Most art supply stores sell these in a box of 50, as does Walgreens & CVS)
 -Masking tape 1-2" (\$2-4)
 -Pencil and ruler
 -Scissors
 -16 x 20" White foam board
 -Roll of plastic wrap (such as Saran Wrap)

ALSO
 -Carrying case for supplies—an art box from an art supply store, a tote bag, shopping bag, suitcase, etc.
 -Smock, apron, or old T-shirt—it's best just to wear clothes to class that you don't mind ruining
 -Lock for locker

Art Stores

Blick (Fenway - Closest to BU) 401 Park Drive - Landmark Center Phone: (617) 247-3322	Blick (Central Square - Cambridge) 619 Massachusetts Avenue Phone: (617) 441-6360
Blick (Symphony) 333 Massachusetts Avenue Phone: (617) 262-4948	Artist & Craftsman Supply (Central Square) 580 Massachusetts Avenue Phone: (617) 354-3636

Jaya Howey: Edifying Lines for Sensitive Readers continues at Bureau (178 Norfolk Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 23.