New Bodies for Old Walls

Painting's fresh new faces might help a city overcome its own irony. by Travis Diehl

"My grandparents refused to live in bleak empty rooms and decorated everything."

—Robert Rahway Zakanitch (1)

At the Los Angeles art school where I taught last fall, a patch of astroturf near the grad studios was suddenly torn up, braced with rebar, and paved with Quikrete—all in an afternoon. When I returned to campus the next morning I was surprised to find a pristine, nearly dry surface. Had not one of the forty MFAs succumbed to the temptation to make their mark? Was mark-making that passé? In fact, a vigilant Facilities had already resurfaced the initials and diagrammatic genitals. By the time most of the students woke up, the second coat was already too hard to scratch.

The problem of quick-drying concrete is something like what these young artists face. What if, in 2015, you find yourself a painter, confronting a blank canvas? How to make your mark before the palimpsest of styles and movements hardens forever? Put another way, how to make it new? The pressure is such that few can come up with more than penises and monograms, brushstrokes and drips: the clichés of the genre. "Make it new," said Ezra Pound. But Pound was a modernist, and this dictum also seems passé. The Brooklyn-based painter Jaya Howey says in an interview that his previous paintings batted around the conventions of abstraction. He describes a series "made in the tradition of slow, torturous, 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."(2) If you're a painter, not painting isn't an option. Each "move" provokes the next one; these accumulated gestures all defy that intolerable initial blankness; and each finished painting provokes the next painting. And as the discourse hardens, as the chance for expression passes, the grounds crew of the zeitgeist tears up the scarred old pavement and pours fresh. For a while the only paint Howey used was Torrit Grey, an oil paint mixed using pigments gathered from a paint company's filtration system and given away as a promotion.(3) This move evokes the scrap or institutional gray used in cities to overpaint graffiti.

When a city wants to freshen up, a coat of paint is a start. But urban blanknesses are as intolerable as bare gesso. In Los Angeles these days, the default solutions to downtown's industrial emptiness are galleries or, if your building has good bones and several stories, artist lofts. 356 Mission Rd., the first, if not the original, of the reclaimed industrial spaces anchoring LA's latest boom, opened with "12 Paintings by Laura Owens." On refinished white walls hung canvases patterned with grids, blown-up newspapers, and oversize blobs of paint with drop shadow—seemingly scaled up in the Adobe suite before output in oil, acrylic, and Flashe—a painterliness at warehouse size. Three years later, a show by Rebecca Morris revised painting yet again, with big, quilted compositions of spray paint and oils—largely abstract, except insofar as they depict, in patches, interior décor or paint. In a talk at the gallery the curator and writer Hamza Walker framed Morris' work in terms of the Pattern and Decoration movement, or P&D, whose practitioners in the 70s and 80s pursued both Western and Eastern idioms of repetition, color, and design—sidestepping, rather than confronting, the modernist drive for self-expression. According to Walker, "The sources from which these artists drew their inspiration, even modernist sources, were revered. P&D, no matter how anti-modern, was *never ironic*." P&D's sincerity went against the pervading irony of postmodernism, which borrowed freely and derisively from the styles and moves of terminal modernism. "Under the aegis of postmodernism," said Walker, "painting's history is a finite collection of styles readily offering itself up for quotation." If modernism prized feats of heroic expression over depiction, postmodernism promoted a knowing use of the old art's naïve self-regard. Today, new canvases are as blank as ever, but no new gesture seems possible. Painting, said Walker, no longer features "a dialectical tension between abstraction and figuration" but, representing only itself, the tension lies between painting and its own irony. "Abstract painting has nothing to overcome but itself."(4) Hence Morris, by way of P&D. Against irony is set an informed, decorative pleasure that might supersede a more cynical discourse.

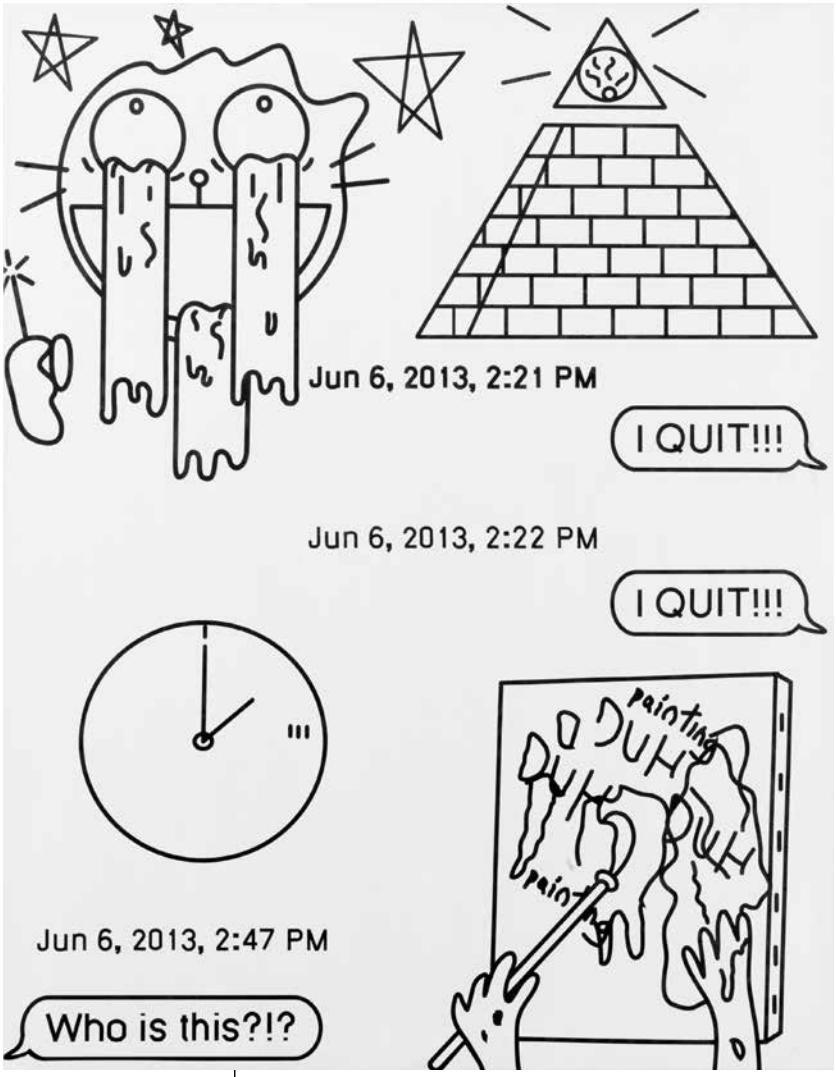
A period of "conscious unproduction" followed Howey's experiments in Torrit Grey. Staring at a blank canvas, Howey suddenly began making circles with a compass; these soon became faces and other symbols, and led to a new series of diagrammatic or cartoonish line paintings. Howey drew in Adobe Illustrator, then output vinyl stencils; but filled in the lines with a brush. These "screened" paintings, sometimes in blue but mostly black, have the quality of ballpoint pen doodles made on a screen. Themes

1_ Robert Rahway Zakanitch, interviewed with Charles Sabba. Quoted in Arthur C. Danto, "Pattern and Decoration as a Late Modernist Movement," in Ideal Vision, Ed. Anne Swarz (Yonkers: Hudson River Museum, 2007), 8.

2_ Jaya Howey, "Jaya Howey + Greg Parma Smith," == #2 (New York: Capricious Publishing, 2015). See <http://www.bureau-inc.com/mainsite/News/JH.2015.Capricious.html>.

3_ See <http://www.gamblincolors.com/torrit.grey>.

4_ Hamza Walker, "Rebecca Morris and the Revenge of P&D," 356 Mission, 15 October 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TB-w2-rtWKo>.



ABOVE_ Jaya Howey, Painting Narrative, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 ¼ × 35 ½ (115 × 90 cm), courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

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of work and time are common: clocks, sweating but grinning emojis, an hourglass (always running out), a water level, and what looks like a fortune-cookie fortune but is an invite for an afterparty—presumably, we missed it. Several works feature a fretted-over canvas in the lower right corner: in one, two cartoon hands render in drippy slashes the text "PAINTING / DUH / DUH DUH / PAINTING" falling down the painting-in-painting. iMessage bubbles read, "I quit." Faced with defacing an invincible surface, who can blame the painter who quits? Paint can be painted over, vinyl peeled, even concrete buffed and poured again. But it's not the medium itself that has been calcified, but the discourse, which may as well serve as pavement or bricks. So Howey stacks up styles and canvases; he labors against himself. When he quits, he says it to painting, but he says it in paint. Painting has worked itself from progress to pastiche, but its mark-making compulsions remain. Each blankness, each vacated style, must be confronted and made new; and if history bears itself out, new painters will rise to the task. In the course of quitting and unproduction Howey works himself back into a job.

The un-ironic proposition of Walker is a justification and a means to move—if not forward, then somewhere—a permission to dance. What's useful in the un-irony of P&D is what drives it: a visual and procedural pleasure: if not the progressive pleasure of successions of "movements," then the pleasure of painting moving in place. It's no accident that Bruce Hainley's 2014 monograph on Sturtevant is not only definitive and genre-bending but also an overtly sexy act of art history. The chapter on Sturtevant's *Felix Gonzales-Torres Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, a three-act play set poolside at the old Hollywood Chateau Marmont, has a young hustler sum it up: she's looking for the New Image.[5] So what if the Sturtevant painting looks just like the Johns. The Sturtevant is new; the Sturtevant rekindles lust. The chapter ends with a sequence of "stagings" that result, at each point, in a new image: the go-go dancer of the Gonzales-Torres original, the dancer in Sturtevant's redux, and then, in Hainley's book, a third played by the model Rick Genest in full zombie tats dancing forever on a candlelit table. Hainley reiterates the need of fresh new bodies to perform the image. Painting, un-ironically, craves the sexiness of the young and the new. The desire to paint and repaint, to rework old styles as new ones, figures a desire for new painters—new bodies to dance in place.

In 2014 four paintings from Howey's breakthrough series debuted in a booth at Art Basel Miami Beach. The wall they hung on was not quite white; instead it had been prepared with a blue vinyl pattern of graphic waves and drops of water. These strokes were fat and sign-like, legible at great distance—unlike the paintings, filigree in contrast. A few months later Howey tried something similar for his solo presentation at Frieze London. This time a curling, slashing motif, which could be rain from clouds, decorated one interior booth; two paintings hung there, while the rest occupied white walls. Again there were clocks; the relentless progress of a train down flattened tracks; sweat and knives and cartoons laughing themselves to death. But the painting jokes were gone—perhaps subsumed by process—or else the fretted-over paintings-in-paintings had outgrown the corner to reach 1:1 scale. At any rate, nobody had quit; and in fact at Frieze was a single all-black abstract composition of rounded, jaunty rectangles and lines—as if, having passed through irony, Howey returned to form.

Fielding a question after Walker's talk on her work, Morris admitted to resisting irony. "I felt like the early work wasn't ironic," she said, "but I understood that it was read that way. So I remember really having to rethink how I wanted to go forward… And I think that moment actually coincided with moving to LA." It's no accident that Morris chose this town to make it new. From its origins as a sunblasted fantasy, Los Angeles grew into pastiche—first denigrated, later championed for its haphazard heterogeneity. In the second half of the 20th century the city began to enjoy the irony of its reputation. No longer imperfectly modern, Los Angeles was perfectly postmodern. The 80s and 90s brought the boom that gave LA the skyline of a world-class city. The current struggle, indeed, is the post-ironic embrace of one's own ironic history. When LA's boosters speak of the current boom, in the twin idioms of real estate and art, they speak of its Renaissance. Like painting, Los Angeles is attempting to fashion a new, sincere image from a century of successive, calcified styles. Perhaps this navel-gazing city might take a cue from what Walker un-ironically proclaims is painting for painting's sake. With straight faces, Downtown's freshly reno'd Artist Lofts promote themselves as "close to DTLA's Art Walk." One imagines a Burning Man bohemia passing by your door one Thursday a month: a parade of artful new bodies. Cold, white, rectangular rooms become sites of desire. This desire is perhaps cynical, maybe ironic, always mediated, but also perfectly, desperately sincere. The post-postmodern city would pose itself as desirable by association; a new, same, un-ironic urbanism; a new, same, un-ironic body. Always young, always hustling, always LA. ■

5_ Bruce Hainley, "The Hounds of Love," Under the Sign of [sic] (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), 160.

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