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A Conversation with Sky Glabush

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Sky Glabush, Corner, 2013, paper collage on panel 12" x 16"

On "Display": A Conversation with Sky Glabush

By MATTHEW RYAN SMITH, MAR. 3, 2014

Critics have described Sky Glabush as a "Dark Horse" and as "Canada's Most Restless Painter" since he first exhibited "Renting," a series of middle-class rental properties. There, Glabush investigated the meaning of indeterminacy and liminal states of being, both in the context of urban geography and of painting itself. Since then, he has pushed against such representational strategies opting to descend into sculptural objects and illustration as a way to reassert his interest in materiality and art making. Glabush and I discussed his upcoming exhibition "Display" at Toronto's Gallery MKG127.

Matthew Ryan Smith (MRS): Your upcoming show "Display" opens at Gallery MKG127 in Toronto at the end of March. Why the title "Display" for this new body of work?

Sky Glabush (SG): The idea came from an image I saw of a religious display booth at the Toronto CNE in 1963. I

was moved by the difficulty of trying to “represent” a religion. Had this been a group of Christians, the symbolism and language would be familiar, almost incidental, and easy to dismiss possibly. But because this display booth was set up by the fledgling Baha’i community of Toronto I assume it would have seemed foreign, or strange to the people attending the fair. So I was intrigued by the attempt to communicate a system of belief, and also by the impossibility of the task, by the failure of representation.

I scaled up the small image and projected it on to a large roll of paper. Once the image was rendered my assistant and I drew a 2mm x 2mm grid over the drawing. Into each of these 2mm squares is drawn 5 points. The process of drawing these dots took three others and myself nine months. So this grid of dots becomes another form of representation, it enacts another language. In this way the literal reproduction of the image exists alongside this extremely labourious screen of dots. And the screen itself enacts an attempt to perform what I can’t represent.

MRS: Could you map a trajectory of how you arrived at “Display” from your previous show “Background” at MKG127 in 2011? How do they differ (or remain similar)?

“Background” was a fresh starting point. I had had a number of exhibitions in the past, but this show marked a fairly serious rupture and in it I put forward the questions that are really central to my practise. It explored how the language of modernism had been purged of the idiosyncratic, the personal, the specific in an attempt at a global or universal form. I wanted to relocate abstraction within the specific conditions of my memory. So a circle and a triangle lose their general meaning and become specific as the “Alcoholics Anonymous” logo. I located this notion of the spiritual within my particular experiences particularly around the discourse of “recovery.”

“Display” picks up on this in a very direct way. But rather than question the relationship of abstraction and spirituality, I am questioning the general concept of “spirituality” and placing it within the specific conditions of belief. This work highlights the incommensurable languages of modernity and religion. By placing these disparate modes of representation together I am looking for slips and missteps, spill over and cross-contamination.

MRS: “Background” represented an earlier foray into exhibiting your sculptural work, and you’ve been making more in your studio as of late. What does sculpture offer you that painting doesn’t; or, put another way, how does sculpture inform your painting practice?

SG: When I began to exhaust the source material explored in “Background” (family photographs, ephemera from my childhood, etc.) I felt like the work was beginning to parody itself. So I went back to the most direct and physical means of creating an object. I began teaching myself to carve wood and to throw pots. My studio became like a community college craft course. Adopting a position of learning and taking myself out of the familiarity of accumulated knowledge was helpful. It made me more aware and sensitive to the actions of making something with your hands.

So in my painting (even if I am working with an image) I try hard to allow the material processes to assist in determining the subject and the final result. I am more conscious of my body; if I’m making work that feels tight or already predetermined I try to adjust things. This usually involves a lot of destroyed work.

MRS: Thoreau’s dictum “When any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew what we thought we knew before” seems relevant here. Is it fair to say that you’re undergoing a process of unlearning in order to penetrate a different level of engagement with painting and sculpture?

SG: That's well put. But unlearning comes easy to me as I often really feel like I have no idea what I am doing.

MRS: What frustrates you about painting?

SG: I struggle with painting. I find my work is often tight and precious. I have a hard time letting go. I admire painters whose work seems like a natural extension of their minds and hands. I am always second-guessing things, tearing them down, remaking them. I am not a natural painter, and it is frustrating that after 20 years or so of doing this I still feel like a beginner.

MRS: "The Carpenter" (2011), shown in "Background" is a sculptural, abstracted portrait of your father, once a carpenter himself, in basswood with and a steel plinth. I would argue that much of your recent sculptural work maintains a strong focus on the plinth. In this sense, it's Brancusian. Brancusi spoke of capturing essences—of form, of idea, of being—and it seems that your work follows this logic. Does he fit into your recent work, and if so, for what reason?

SG: "The Carpenter" began as an exercise: trying to allow the grain of the wood and the dimensions of the chisels to determine the outcome and logic of the piece. But the action of making a wooden carving reminded me of my father as he works with wood and I grew up around it. But the "Carpenter" was also a reference to Jesus Christ. The work was triangulating abstraction, religion, and memory, so the concept of a carpenter seemed to work on a few levels.

All of these forays into object-making are deeply indebted to the language of early modernism. For it was here that people really began to highlight the physical and material processes of making as a subject for work. And of course Brancusi is the modernist sculptor par excellence. One of my favourite artists. Impossible to shake.





Sky Glabush, "Porte-fenêtre à Collioure," 2013, paper collage on panel 12" x 16

MRS: To return to painting for a moment, you've been quoted as referencing painting's capacity to exist in a "moment," as something that is experientially as fleeting or as ephemeral as other visual media such as Tumblr. This seems, at least to me, a way of distancing painting from its monumentality, from its static grandiosity, and perhaps, most of all, away from its Modernist history.

SG: In the past I would begin a painting in a fairly procedural way: I'd locate and image, lay it out on the canvas, begin layering, tweaking, adding, subtracting and moving the constituent parts around until I arrived at finished composition. It seemed to me that the most important moment was the choosing of the image and everything else

after that was a form of refining. In my new work I try to let the methodology emerge as the piece is being made. In other words, I start with a very open idea and try to let the image or subject emerge as I am making it rather than starting with a clear plan. And rather than a kind of tableau where many characters are performing their roles, I have been trying to make paintings that are more like a snapshot, a frozen moment, an incident. Like rather than painting the whole restaurant scene I might just use the pattern of the tablecloth.

As for painting and Modernist history: I think that everything is up for grabs. There is no longer the deep suspicion of grand narratives. People pick and choose from anywhere and everywhere. The history of modernism is as relevant as any other history. Competing and contradictory movements are cast into a work at the same time. The teleology of modernism has certainly lapsed, but modernism as a language situated historically seems totally available.

MRS: How closely does your concept of cultivating the fleeting moment of a painting hold any relation to the digital image? Has the digital image revoked the monumentality of painting in some way?

SG: I think we digest images on screens. Even in the studio I will often photograph my work and look at it on my phone to see how it translates. Most of my looking at art is online, and fast. I may start off patient and tentative, but within a few minutes images are flashing by and my attention becomes less and less. This “fleeting moment” you refer to seems characteristic of the time we live in. Painting falls prey to this lack of concentration, as does communication in general.

But since images are so easily and completely proliferated and shared I think the context in which they are shown becomes the determining factor of their worth or currency. What I mean by this is since everyone has access to almost every exhibition and almost every image, the physical context—who is in the room, whose space it is, which city it’s in, becomes the commodity of exchange. The work of art is far less important than the context in which it is shown. So for me images have become almost totally disposable. Little flickering lights on a screen.

MRS: Do you have a sense of where your work is headed after this upcoming show?

SG: Not really. I’m open to suggestions.

Endnotes

See: David Balzer, “Brain, Body, Hands: Meet Sky Glabush, Canada’s Most Restless Painter,” *Canadian Art Magazine* (Spring, 2013), <http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2013/04/26/sky-glabush-canadas-most-restless-painter/> (accessed 3 March, 2014).