

Language in Abstraction

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“Language, incontestably reveals the speaker”

-James Baldwin, *If Black Language Isn't A Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?*, 1979

Writing about abstraction feels like an exercise in abstraction and an exercise in failure. By definition, abstraction is the freedom from representational qualities and yet, here I am trying to define it within my practice in 800 words. When I was an undergraduate student, embarking upon art seriously for the first time, the sheer idea of creating an abstract painting was anxiety inducing. Most artwork I had seen from Black or Brown artists were figurative, nostalgic and romantic. So naturally, I began my formative art years creating similar works. I wanted to be the Carrie Mae Weems and Kerry James Marshall of painting. Everything I made was figurative because everything that I saw concerning Black or Brown people was figurative. Let's be honest, the market loves figurative works from people of color. It loves the song and dance of our tragic histories, precarious present and unknown future. But I digress.

Back then, I saw abstract painting as a space for old white men, slinging paint, smoking cigarettes and waxing bullshit. Don't get me wrong, I was still intrigued by the bullshit! I wanted to know how they could achieve this level of freedom, to make paintings simply about the paint, the color or the stroke. It would be a few years before I introduced myself to non-white male abstract painters. Not without effort but without access. But through good ol' fashion studying, reading and being a classic introvert, I learned how to move past my fear of abstraction because everything is an abstraction. Whether through the manipulation of color, texture, scale, proportion, space, rhythm or pattern, abstraction was everywhere. I learned to think of abstraction on a scale, versus black and white. It was not until many years later, that I began to see language also as a form of abstraction.

“Like desire, language disrupts, refuses to be contained within boundaries”
- bell hooks, *Teaching New Worlds/ New Words*, 1994

My work explores the language, signs/signifiers that mark our landscapes. Through the materiality of painting and drawing I embody the sense, shape and experience of discovering these markers. My studio practice is peripatetic and reliant on objects that cross my path during my day-to-day travels. Once in the studio, through the manipulation of formal elements, I work to highlight how the markers are often tied to the various social, cultural, political and economic circumstances under which we labor. My translation of a marker becomes an investigation between manifesting a memory, legibility and illegibility. Therefore the work points to the enduring signifiers of shared space, double meanings/readings, and the residues of class while guiding viewers to recall their personal and collective memories.

Signs such as Black Star Hardware (Philly, PA), Ain't She Sweet Cafe (Chicago, IL) or Plantation Furniture Co. (Houston, TX), have slippages between the etymology of the individual words, their grouping, multiple uses, historic connotations and physical site. ALL of which are fodder for creating an abstract work. And if you really want to get nerdy, individual letters are abstracted symbols that individually have their own slippages and signifiers. They too cannot be contained or limited. From pidgin English, to shorthand, to acronyms, to dialect--letters can be the subject, the shape, and the medium.

“ What gets lots...is not what gets lost in translation, but rather what gets lost in language itself”
- Alastair Reid, *Lo queue se pierde/ What Gets Lost*, 1978

This constant existence in abstraction has allowed me to utilize language and letters as the medium and subject. Their shapes are extracted, emphasized, repeated, highlighted and redacted. And often the work is less about what is legible and more about what can be implied. I use strokes, erasure, rubbings, layers, periods, cursive, capitals, underlining, bold, and italics to make marks, and push space. In my work there is no sentence structure. Good and bad english remains a myth. And the idea of right or wrong words is a lie. I make language and letters DO what I want it to do in my work. Therefore utilizing the abstraction of language for affirmation and possibility.