

MOUNTAINS OF BOOKS

By Fox Hysen

"If the painter has chosen to prohibit the imaging consciousness from giving itself free reign... it is for the purpose of awakening in the spectator the uneasiness with which the perception of a painting should be accompanied."

Hubert Damisch

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and I live together in Shelton, CT, which is twenty minutes outside of New Haven. We live in a 2,000 square foot loft in an old labyrinth-like brick building that is exactly in the center of town. Across the street is the Shelton War Memorial Park dedicated to veterans of wars fought by The United States of America against foreign countries: The Vietnam War, World War I and II, and the Korean War. Parallel to the park runs the Housatonic River and parallel to the river and the park runs the exterior wall of our loft. A long array of windows, of which there are more than I can easily count, constitutes this wall which must face north-east because for only a short passage of time does any direct light slip past the glass panes and onto the floor. Very early in the morning off to the far right a blazing pink ball of light rises in the sky quickly becoming orange, and then yellow, and then white, before passing out of range.

Our bed faces out to these gridded windows. Molly sleeps to my right and Moses our dog between us at our feet. He is low to the ground, a Chihuahua-Pomeranian mix. When we are not in bed he is still at our feet. The place where our feet touch is at the level of his nose and mouth. Whereas we, with our big heads, glide through the world remote from the ground, he so concerns himself with every inch that he is often compelled to stop and softly taste it with the tip of his tongue. In the morning his need to urinate and defecate pulls us out into the fresh air. Once outside he focuses his attention acutely on finding bits of rotten food to eat, the urine and feces of other dogs, and dead animal smells that he might rub all over his body. Upon returning one of us will say to the other: "It's windy outside today" or "what a beautiful morning." We make such small talk with Moses too, asking him things like, "Is it time for your morning nap?" Often he makes eye contact with us as we speak to him, grins widely, and bobbles his head back and forth as if he is straining to understand the words. Language is an obvious barrier but I imagine that even if he could somehow convey his experiences our concerns would so sharply contrast with his as to be incommensurable. Molly calls him my transitional object. *His* transitional objects are a red ball and a braded rawhide bone, and her transitional objects are books. She has hundreds if not thousands of them. Having moved her books once and while contemplating moving her library stored in Wisconsin more than once (further transitions loom constantly) I began to imagine the weight of

her books in terms of horses. I would estimate she has about 4 horses worth of books—this giant mass of words undergirds her ability for massive transitions.

This morning we woke and she reported her dream to me: she dreamt of working on one of the large paintings in the studio. The studio, which is also in our loft, is organized around two tables and the interior wall. In the past I have chided her for not using the length of the space. She disagrees. She works on the floor, she works in circles and feels space in volumes not distances, not long straight lines. In her dream she built ribs into the fabric of the painting. (see page 11)

Down the road from the War Memorial Park, upriver to the north is another public space—a short gravel trail that leads to a broad sweeping dam. In the post office, which is also within a short walking distance, there is a large, realist, painting of the same dam dated 1940 (A relic from WPA days). On either side of the dam are pictured two white figures, one male holding a pick-ax and the other female in a blue dress holding a Shelton newspaper. In order to get to the raised gravel fire-road flanked by the river and a small canal, and to a view of the massive dam, you have to walk past a newly remodeled apartment building called The Avalon that is less attractive than the many ramshackle factory buildings. For this reason it has taken almost a year for us to find the dam. Now, as we walk by The Avalon, we have a conversation about class. I'm convinced the ugly façade is made from recycled bricks that have been cleaned by a blade, producing a fake, whitewashed effect. I want to believe that the new building is luxury-low-income-housing (as if there were such a thing). However, what is true of Shelton is that it difficult for either of us to make assumptions about the community here. Easy binaries that split the world into conservatives and liberals ring false—political affects and positions of the people we meet are not readily expressed or noticeable. If you ask Joe, who is in a wheelchair and hangs out smoking cigarette butts in front of the house, “how are you Joe?” he will answer, simply and unequivocally: “bad.” Joe makes daily visits to a gym in our building called “Life Designs.” Next he says, smiling, “Is that Mosey?” He delights at sight of the dog. Lauren Berlant writes in her essay, *Thinking about Feeling Historical*,

If one determines that an event or a relation is traumatic, that is, endowed with the capacity to produce trauma, does it follow that it communicates trauma to anyone who encounters it? If one determines that an event or a relation is shameful, must it produce shame in the subjects it impacts? Is the absence of this transmission a sign of some distorting or unethical defense? Is the presence of this transmission evidence that a subject or a society knows itself profoundly? Of course not. *To impute a mirroring relation between affective activity and emotional states underdescribes the incoherence of subjects*, [my emphasis] their capacity to hold irreconcilable attachments and investments, the complexity of motives for disavowal and defense, and the work of the normative in apprehending, sensing, tracking, and being with, the event.

At the entrance to the trail are a series of wrecked locks once used by boats to

enter in and out of the river from the canal. Another maze of giant brick buildings teeters above the waters edge. Way off in the distance, along the face of the dam, a bunch of men with ladders and equipment seem to be cleaning or doing repairs. In the painting from the post office the light concrete of the fresh new hydro-electric dam gleams white. Now, it is covered with large cascading patches of black mold and thick furry moss. Suddenly, a giant swan, big enough to dwarf the size of the men, flies over the dam. In the water is another swan with its two brown cygnets, they share the space with a couple of dark-brown monochromatic water birds. Between the two of us I am the outdoorsy one with a compulsive need to walk and feel space around me but I have to admit that Molly has a better, slower way of looking.

Anoka Faruquee is co-faculty with Molly in the Yale Painting department. Before all painting critiques at Yale a student is assigned to give a brief and detailed visual account of the work. Recently, there has been an issue with some students in the role of the “describer.” Anoka wrote the following email to the students to address the problem:

The description is an exercise in slowing down your looking and experiencing-
-and reserving commentary or opinion. (That comes later in the crit!) Close attention paid to the physical qualities of the work may include any of the following:

- Material and structural qualities (heavy, light, hollow, full, self-supported, woven, etc)
- Surface and textural qualities (tactility, matte, glossy, smooth, rough, reflective, transparent, etc)
- Processes (types of processes used, such as extruded, milled, cast, layered, sanded, printed, machine made, readymade, wrapped, poured, etc)
- Gesture (speed of making, kinds of marks- such as fluid, masked, indirect, direct, etc)
- Supports (type and quality of of paper, canvas, panel etc)
- Composition (figure/ground relationships, depth of field, scale and location relationships of elements in the work)
- Color (contrast, saturation, value and hue relationships)
- Imagery (types of images presented and ways images are made- illusionistic, rendered, outlined, graphic, detailed, simplified, etc.)
- Scale and proportion (size of works in relationship to the viewer, to the space, to each other)
- Installation (placement of works in the room, in relation to viewers’ movement in space, and/or works in relation to each other.)

Can descriptions become propositions?

One of my favorite recent pieces by Molly is a print of a flower. There are a few of these prints but I will describe one in particular. The process by which the

print was made seems self-explanatory—a large flowering plant, stalk and leaves included, was sandwiched between a metal plate and piece of watercolor paper and wedged through the heavy press. A mostly green residue is left devastated across the paper. Up close some delicate lines tell you something maybe of what this bit of life once was; I want to guess a peony, but it is hard to tell. Its juices have leaked out of the bottom and down the sheet of white paper. The flower on the right looks like it was inverted before it went through the press because a bit of pink marks the lower right corner and above is a robust impression of the stalk. A flower print seems like the most common thing in the world, so utterly basic but this one makes me want to cry. Things that come to mind: *Of Mice and Men*--Lennie's mouse friend whom he crushes accidentally in his pocket; an image of a Jackson Pollock painting next to post war photographs of Dresden; George Bataille's idea of base materialism and the dissolution of high and low; and of course the end of the world/death.

Walter Benjamin writes in *Aphorisms on Imagination and Color*, "The gaze of the imagination is a gaze within the canon, not in accordance with it; it is therefore purely receptive, uncreative." I do not know what it means to "gaze within the canon," but I'm interested in what it means to be "purely receptive," and "uncreative." Along the gravel we stop every few minutes to admire something. Molly stops at a confetti white shrub and grabs it with both hands in the way a child might grab handfuls of sand or the way a pirate might delight in a chest full of gold pieces. She breaks off two handfuls and finds on closer inspection they are paper-like white pockets with black seeds inside, she will add them to an ever-growing collection of found objects—another model for thinking about forms.

Back in the house I cook us some lunch while she putters about the studio, moving things around, organizing. Almost everything in her practice happens horizontally. Around the studio there are countless little tubs and boxes with bits of metal, buttons, shells, seaweed and birds nests. There are stacks of fabric and paper and drawing and piles of books. Marks are made through spills, drawing with ink and bleach, running fabric through a sewing machine, and most recently by cutting wood on a band saw.

"What does it mean for a painter to think?" This is how Yve-Alain Bois starts his essay, *Painting as Model* from 1986. The question is a quote from Hubert Damisch, author of *Theory of /Cloud/*. What is so important about this essay—and this is very important to me—is the distinction he insists on between mimicry and thinking. Mimicry is basically a function of image, and for me, the important thing about paintings is that they are *not* images. In 1986, the year Bois is writing this essay, he must be sitting in slide show lectures, darkened rooms with maybe two carousels of slides running side by side—click-click, click-click, click-clicking. Bois, learning from Damisch: "Damisch teaches us to rid ourselves of the stifling concept of *image* upon which the relation of this kind of text to art is founded—arrogant, ignorant, predatory texts that consider painting a collection of images to be tracked down, illustrations to be captioned." Painting, at its core is a poetics of forms: color as form, material as form, experimentation as form,

opticality as form, paint as form. Molly is thinking about the curve as form, feeling as form, words as form, book as form, line as form, and color as form.

On different walk in a nearby forest Molly describes the field of vision through the trees as non-hierarchical. “It’s like the kind of looking I do in a thrift shop or a used bookstore,” she says. She bounces from one small spot of color to another, pointing out small details in trees or certain combinations of colors or distant animals; she notices herself making visual choices. I think about how you can learn about being a reader from the way Molly looks. As I walk down the forest path I notice myself tracking where I am in the space. I have a more nebulous way of looking; I like the feeling of the encompassing space—unlike Molly I look in a diffuse way. She, always focused, takes in every small detail like words on a page. All those mountains of books she surrounds herself with, provide a vast field of thoughts, contradictions, poetics, voices, time periods, and jokes, each sentence of each book is a tiny part of this vast whole, like Moses’ ground, it’s a whole universe that she devours bit by bit.

On the walks we talk and talk and lately, because I have been writing this essay I have been trying to explain something big about painting and abstraction. With the advantage of the cathedral-like spaces, the dappled light and the symphonic autumn color things get clearer that are more difficult to say in small cramped paragraphs. The big thing that I want to say is about Alois Riegl, an art historian from Vienna who died in 1905 who was interested in moments of historical transition from one way of making art to another. He was interested in these transitional moments because of something he termed “Kunstwollen.” This is a hard to translate word but what I take it to mean is an interest not in *what* people were painting nor the *technology* of how people were making paintings but their *will* to make what they did. Kunst in German means art, and wollen means “to will.” Why and how did entire civilizations change the way they made and looked at art?

At the beginning of the 15th century Filippo Brunelleschi, architect and inventor of linear perspective, devised a hand-held instrument to demonstrate his perspectival space. Six hundred years later Hubert Damisch published his *Theory of /Cloud/*, a rethinking of Renaissance art, based in part on Brunelleschi’s experiment. Damisch is reading Riegl; Bois and Krauss are reading Damisch and Riegl; and they are all thinking these really grand thoughts about why artists look at the world the way they do. As Molly and I walk these forest trails we talk about why abstraction is important and what it means to reject mimetic ways of making in favor of formal models.

Molly made some high-relief paintings that can be seen as either breasts or mountains. These small objects flip easily from vast topographies to close, intimate, sexual, or nurturing places. There are five large paintings in the studio now: four are sewn, three stretched on wooden stretchers, one hangs freely and the last is on a wooden panel. The space shifts between them, contingent upon the material support. The thing about Brunelleschi’s device that interested Damisch was the problem of the clouds—you can’t fit clouds into linear perspective. Brunelleschi’s solution to this problem was to fix a mirror atop the picture to catch the reflection of the clouds, in this way the clouds were, to borrow a term from Rosalind Krauss’s essay about Agnes Martin, “objectively

optical,”—what you saw in the mirror was optical and real; unlike in the painting the clouds in the mirror are unfixed. The reflection of the clouds changed in appearance according to the position of the viewer.

Whereas a cloud hovers above the perspectival lines that connect a “man-made” construction of the world to human eyes rodents gnaw at it from below. The War Memorial Park is inhabited by a group of groundhogs. From our windows, if you are lucky, you can spy their large soft bodies surreptitiously stealing out from their holes to gather food. We learned that groundhogs hibernate for an entire seven-month period so to prepare they must consume food immodestly. Molly feels an enormous kinship with these small beasts. Perhaps she experiences a healthy transference with them—as she works and digs and burrows in her studio they hold up a mirror. Burrowing is good. Phenomenologically, her paintings pull you to the surface and resist a cool or distant viewing. Her paintings are objectively optical but the space they occupy is not transcendental. Like a bookworm or a groundhog she pieces the world together from the ground, from inside it.