

MATTHEW METZGER

Matthew Metzger (b. 1978) lives and works in Chicago. He received his MFA from The University of Chicago and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Residency Program, both in 2009. His most recent solo exhibition at The Renaissance Society, Chicago, titled Heirloom concluded with a full monograph of the same name published in 2022. Other exhibitions include The Freedom Principle, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; and The Works, Fondation CAB, Brussels; as well as gallery exhibitions held at Regards, Chicago; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; and Arratia Beer, Berlin. He is Associate Professor and acting Chair of Art at The University of Illinois at Chicago.

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ARTFORUM



View of "Matthew Metzger," 2021. From left: *On Holiday*, 2021; *Wedge*, 2015.

Matthew Metzger

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY

For his exhibition here, Matthew Metzger covered the entire gallery floor with oriented strand board, or OSB. The feat was impressive, but not the first thing you noticed. What immediately drew attention were the soaring upper walls across from the entrance, which ascend at a steep incline to the gallery's ceiling. On their surfaces, the artist had painted two large geometric shapes, parts of the red-and-white "diver down" symbol displayed on boats when a scuba diver is swimming nearby. Pitching forward as they rose, the shapes loomed imperiously over the viewer.

Metzger is a painter who toggles between Photorealism, hard-edge abstraction, and the monochrome. Yet his work offers up anything but straightforward statements of visual fact. Viewers were obliged to question first impressions and wait for fugitive content to reveal itself. Four relatively small dark-gray monochromes (all titled *Gray*, 2021) disguised themselves by precisely mimicking the look of ester foam, a material used for both soundproofing and protecting goods in transit. A red monochrome sat on the floor in the unlit corridor leading to the gallery, as if loitering in the shadows. Titled *Wedge*, 2015, it again featured the scuba-diver

had rendered the symbol in such a complex way that its existence remained only faintly visible—visible, that is, if it were properly lit. Given the hallway’s gloom, the work was effectively gagged.

The relationship of the seeable to the unseeable has long been a leitmotif in Metzger’s art. Take the way *Wedge* sat on the floor: Metzger had bevel-cut the bottom stretcher bar so that it sat completely flush with the ground, even as the rest of the painting leaned backward with only its top edge meeting the wall. Of course, to register this you had to turn away from the surface and look at the piece from the side. But Metzger isn’t just chastising abstract painting. What attracts him to the occluded is its link to the occult. Hence the prevalence of goth themes such as death and things lurking beneath the surface. A photograph of a fiberglass mannequin, another lifeless figure, was rendered twice—as a film negative in one instance and as a positive in the other (both works were titled *Still*, 2021)—on floor-bound canvases that shared the same dimensions and leaning posture as *Wedge*. The adherence to the source image in these canvases is so faithful that it was impossible to tell that they were handmade. Here, the act of painting was turned into a mortification ritual, an arduous labor bent on totally erasing itself.

The show’s most eccentric and problematic piece was *On Holiday*, 2021. Neither monochromatic nor Photorealistic, it’s an eight-foot-tall balletic interplay of thinned green and black paint. It hung like a drape from a portable clothes rack, thus boasting independence from the architecture, while its title pointed toward the uncharacteristically lighthearted topic of vacationing. So much for first impressions. As it turned out, the work is based on a photograph Metzger took while on a pilgrimage to the grave site of Billie Holiday; specifically, the picture focuses on the grass in front of her tombstone. By bringing up the renowned singer of “Strange Fruit” (1939), Metzger puts in play an obscenely trivializing analogy between his freely hanging painting and lynching. More blunt is the perverse suggestion that while looking at the image one is standing on top of Holiday’s interred remains.

Where *On Holiday* succeeds is in the meaning it lent to the wood covering the floor. Unlike oak or hardwood, OSB is not meant to be seen; it’s a purely functional material buttressing a more aesthetically pleasing facade. In this way it’s similar to the wood Metzger uses as backing for some of his canvases—one notable exception being *On Holiday*. Indeed, *On Holiday* proposes through its very lack of wood support that what we, and it, are standing on is the backside of an enormous painting. We couldn’t apprehend this fact since the work’s front was turned away from us, facing instead what was submerged, underground. It’s a painting for the dead.

—Lane Relyea

The Renaissance Society

June 13, 2021

THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY



MATTHEW METZGER, STILL, 2021. PHOTO: USEFUL ART SERVICES.

Matthew Metzger's paintings often closely replicate not-quite-familiar images, cultural artifacts, or common objects that for him relate to nauseating conditions of power—conditions that leave self-expression feeling inadequate or corrupted, requiring a different way forward. While rendering each painting with an obsessive focus, Metzger relies on abstraction to more than formal ends, using it as an active means of distortion that mirrors the effects of our information ecologies and other aspects of culture today.

In *Heirloom*, Metzger presents a new ensemble of works, conceived as an installation for the Renaissance Society and its space. This exhibition strategically brings together a collection of “odds and ends,” paintings that echo and invert motifs shared among many of Metzger’s ongoing series and beyond. Whether political regimes, or expressive vocabularies, capitalism, or simply the heart’s ability to pump blood, what do we do with the systems we inherit that fail repeatedly? This question has continued to unravel slowly in Metzger’s studio over the past four years. Recognizing the breadth of such a question, Metzger considers the ramifications and aesthetics of learned behaviors and ideologies, and their impacts on traditions of expression.

“Modeling” and repetition continue to reinforce inherited, restrictive systems of meaning making, governance, and influence. From the atelier tradition in painting to the power of a dictator, to patterns in public education, violence, and even speech, models proliferate and become a form of constraint. Thoughts and actions, from childhood and throughout one’s life, in part become a performance of the systems we are taught to use and trust. For Metzger, abstraction has become a way around this paradox, albeit a convoluted one. On the one hand, abstraction in painting today is yet another performance of an iconic system of expression, bound up by taste and the market. On the other hand, abstraction in language and image remains a core method for personalizing meaning that in fact welcomes subjectivity, allowing the artist to find intimacy in politics, privacy in symbols, and individuation in everyday commodities.

Heirloom is further guided by Metzger’s manipulation of surfaces and grounds. These are familiar concepts in painting, but in practice they can become complicated points of pressure on the body that simultaneously orient and distort. Metzger embraces this in the exhibition through varying methods of representation that weigh how abstraction is used and deployed by systems of power and also by individuals who desire to speak.

Artforum
February, 2017

ARTFORUM



Matthew Metzger, *The Condition*, 2015, acrylic and oil on fiberglass honeycomb panel, 26 × 26". From the series "The Condition," 2015.

Matthew Metzger

ARRATIA BEER

What is the relation between abstract and figurative painting, and how do we read abstraction some fifty years after the twilight of Abstract Expressionism? These questions seem to be at the heart of Matthew Metzger's practice, and they connect the quite diverse works in his recent exhibition "The Shade of a Line."

In two works from the series "The Condition," 2015, we see the image of a machete, with the aged metal blade and wooden grip rendered in fine detail. The knife is positioned in the paintings' middle, stretching to the panels' left and right edges, forming a horizon and cutting the paintings in half. In both works, it appears against a gray background; the dark shadow underneath exaggerate the more-or-less curved shape of each machete. Metzger came to this motif while reflecting on the physical gestures that are involved in mark-making—how some painters, such as Morris Louis, work from the wrist, while others, notably Jackson Pollock, work from the shoulder, just as one does with a machete. Metzger's research thus focuses on the physical movements involved in painting. Paradoxically, he presents his reflections on the physical vocabulary of abstraction in the form of refined representational paintings.

The seven works in this show offered different opportunities to rethink the nature of abstraction. Two small square works, *The Shadow of the Cover* and *The Shadow of the Mailer*, both 2015, show a play of shadows. What casts them we do not see, though the titles give a clue (the cover of a vinyl record and the mailer it was sent in, respectively). Only the shadows themselves are depicted, ranging from dark at the top to lighter and transparent at the bottom of the painting. Though geometric in appearance, the shapes are representations of the actual figuration caused by the play of light on an object. The graphic impact of the paintings and the fact that the images are hard to read make them abstractions of a kind, even though they are still delicately executed representations.

In *La Patience*, 2016, abstraction has to do with the breaking-down of a composition—in this case, the scene of a girl in an interior playing solitaire—into essential compositional lines. The painting is based on a 1943 work by Balthus. Metzger saw it repeatedly in his hometown museum, the Art Institute of Chicago. In place of the girl leaning over the table in Balthus's original, Metzger shows us a zigzag of three black diagonal shapes, echoing the direction of her physical position and shadow. In the upper part of the painting is a pattern of vertical white and brown stripes, just as in Balthus's painting, where it is part of the wall decoration. For Metzger, such a pattern points to Daniel Buren, who made it a trademark of his painting critique in the 1960s. In Metzger's painting, the stripes are presented as an isolated fragment and thus come across as painterly abstraction, even if their form did not change.

Metzger's paintings create a short circuit between abstract and figurative painting, disrupting a distinction that seems less and less useful even if many critics (and artists and curators) still cling to it stubbornly. He develops his canvases with elements of both, and thus creates a common ground. His paintings are stylistically polygamous: What they share is their precision of execution, as well as the fact that each is related to an external source that even determines its size and shape. Despite their visual virtuosity, they embody a sense of restraint. They are abstract not stylistically but in the sense that, despite the logic that informs their genealogy, there is something about them that cannot be grasped.

—*Jurriaan Benschop*

Figure / Ground
December 21, 2015

FIGURE / GROUND

ISSN 2292-0811

A CONVERSATION WITH MATTHEW METZGER

Your hyper-detailed painting of a machete, *The Condition*, was the standout work for me this year at **Expo Chicago**. Why did you think it necessary to rework this painting?

Paintings are never finished. Sometimes I accept that and move on. Other times, the painting is rather demanding in its need for labor, and in turn, labor's need to be amplified as a concept for the work. One question that has been generating this series of machete paintings is about whether one can express oneself at the very same time one is laboring over something. At each moment this painting has been exhibited, afterwards I want it to do more, so then I begin to do more.



© Matthew Metzger, *The Condition*. Medium: Acrylic and Oil on Honeycomb Fiberglass Panel, Size: 24 3/4" x 24 3/4"
Date: 2015, Courtesy of Arratia Beer, Berlin and Regards, Chicago.

The knife in the painting runs from one edge all the way to the other and it splits the painting into two halves. The knife represents separation, orientation, and is undeniably connected to political violence as well?

The project stemmed from a Michael Fried essay in 1965 called *Three American Painters*. In the essay he is writing about post-painterly Abstraction. At one point he remarks that Morris Louis' work comes from the wrist. It sparked these ideas about how one thinks about the body and its relationship to expression, and perhaps the location on the body where expression originated. If Morris Louis' work comes from the wrist, then perhaps Jackson Pollack's comes from the shoulder. I began to ruminate on what is that relationship was about, going from the shoulder to the wrist, and what's the function of the shoulder now? At points of intense labor where the shoulder is being used can one also express oneself simultaneously? Or is there a paradox between working and expressing? Do they ever find their way together? And if they did find their way together where might it be found in the body today? So it became a location for thinking through a simultaneity of labor and/with expression. Quickly in this rumination, expression for me lingered in 'the political' and labor was found in the echoing of a thing absent the hand, labor. Either way, where they meld and what sort of tool houses both sides of this binary, of this division line, is of a particular interest to me. The machete is the one blade that is deeply rooted in the shoulder, a personal, domestic, and political tool that always and already severs and joins.



You can appreciate a good painting in a superficial way, but there are always several deeper layers beneath it. You can admire the technical ability that it took to make this and maybe a fancy chef like Paul Kahan would see it and connect with the subject and buy it. But the knife, it's a red wheelbarrow; it contains everything.

These paintings have been an ongoing meditation. When I'm painting them [the blades] and I'm standing here this perspective is right, but when I come over here and I'm painting this [the handle] this perspective is all wrong. The condition is dependent on where you are in relation to the thing. The perspective is always distorted to some degree. The paintings are inherently always distorted and abstracted because the body can move and the painting can't.

When you make work that is so real, it starts to fall apart in front of you. It becomes abstract again.

That happens all the time when you think about how far to push things. I am tied to the belief that paint can be alchemic in a way. I think the illusion that paint has the capability of reconfiguring itself through becoming something other than itself has always been fundamental to painting. We often think a painting is either figurative or abstract and on a circle, figuration is at one end and abstraction is on the opposite end, and the painter/painting is always somewhere on the circle in proximity to both, but at the end, I realize it's not a circle at all, it's actually a corkscrew. I know it sounds ridiculous or perhaps a little too dogmatic, but in painting today there is just not enough insistence on forcing paint to do what the artist wants it to do. It's a material like anything else in the world and you can make it do whatever you believe it can do.



© Matthew Metzger *That Which Can't Be Played (Composition #7)* Medium: Acrylic and Oil on MR MDF Panel.
Size: 11 7/8" x 11 1/8" Date: 2015, Courtesy of Arratia Beer, Berlin and Regards, Chicago

It's a fear-based thing. A lot of artists are afraid to fail. I'll never be as good of a painter as Caravaggio, so why try? It's also a huge commitment of time. It takes years to learn to paint well and in the meantime your friends and family are watching you make this awful work and somehow not judging you for it. You have to not feel embarrassed by your own past (bad) work and to accept that it takes years to figure this stuff out. It's a good thing actually, because you will have this pursuit that will sustain you throughout your entire lifetime. Older painters have told me that even after everything else ends, marriages, jobs, relationships, they always have painting and that it is endlessly interesting and that there are new things to learn and do.

Your work made me think of Mark Rothko's paintings. He was looking for some sort of universal truth that would exist in any time and anyplace. Rothko had a pretty traumatic life and even though he wanted to make paintings that transcended politics, he was still responding to the fact that WWII had made the world a terrifying place. His paintings were about expressing basic human emotions – depression, ecstasy, terror. I feel that in a way, even though you are at the opposite ends of the spectrum, the extremes of representation and abstraction, you are both after the same thing, and that your work slides back and forth between the two. He was deeply depressed and made this **untitled piece** shortly before he killed himself. It was painted in 1969, the year of the moon landing. I look at this and I know this is the surface of the moon. It's abstraction sliding back into representation. There is that horizon line, just like your painting, and the same palette too. The moon was the coldest, loneliest place imaginable and we got there using military technology. This came from the same funding and research that was meant to keep Russia in check after the war. Rothko was a Jewish painter born in Russia who immigrated to the United States and he must have felt this event in an extremely personal way.

He was after something that preceded language, a thing that can't be located until after the fact.

In Paul Virilio's book **The Accident of Art** the idea that all art comes from trauma is discussed, and that even surrealism for example is a type of coping with the War. The idea is mentioned that you can't look at stacked objects without seeing stacked bodies, post-Holocaust for instance. I am very interested in this. Especially what generates the production of work in an artist's studio and is it really that direct as to say that *trauma* is a common denominator? I don't know, but I think it has certainly stayed with me since I read it.

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Going back to the horizon line idea, the horizon is the end of something. In our emails you wrote something like, *The Condition* [the title of the painting] is living in a state of awareness about the limits of perspective and language.

Yes, for a long time art making has had a tendency to privilege intellect over feeling. And only recently in the past few years, by breaking down my own anxieties, I've realized that even though we don't have very effective language to describe our feelings, they're always there, and usually in full force. Feeling is so much more present and dominating than a kind of idea or theory. Attempting to figure out how to cope with those feelings is a universal dilemma I think. My own curiosity is embedded in knowing that my understanding of my feelings are often embedded in theories.

Yes, that's the thing Rothko was after.

When I'm researching ideas, they're always embedded in the question of how you translate an untranslatable experience. In that often untranslatable experience is that which precedes language, that which is made manifest in the body. It can be a lot of feelings crowded into one. A theory is never going to be as interesting to me as the person developing it. There is a selfhood that is lacking in a lot of contemporary work—it's vacant.

I don't know if culturally we live in a place anymore that privileges trying to figure yourself out. Perhaps we never have. I always thought I had a very systematic, removed process of making in the studio as I attempted to explain everything and figure everything out before I actually started making work. Slowly I'm realizing that the work is becoming more embedded in questions about *how* to express. And maybe after I move through those questions I'll find a language with which I can express myself. Right now it's making images of our limitations. And from there, where do we go?



Barthelme writes about this in an essay called **Not Knowing**. He wrote that artists make work without knowing how it will end up or even why they are making it. They have a style that comes from limitations and setting up some sort of parameters— in your case it is the gray primer background you always use, the length of the knife dictating the height and width of the canvas. But then after you've finished the work, you realize why you did it. You figure it out later, but it was in there all the time and you didn't know it as you were doing it. You have to work that way if you want to uncover, as Barthelme put it, "the as-yet-unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken."

Not knowing is also about privileging vulnerability, about being okay with not quite understanding. We have a tendency to jump to terms like failure, but maybe it's not as binary as success or failure, knowing or not knowing, but rather just accepting an unavoidable incorrectness / inaccuracy while doing, and the vulnerability that results. It means that if you fail, you are failing in the aesthetic of being vulnerable versus confident vulnerability.

It takes a lot of maturity and patience to get to that point. I think that's a good place to be and a good place for us to stop.

Regrads
December 21, 2015

Regards,

Karsten Lund interviews Matthew Metzger

Ten questions from **Karsten Lund** for **Matthew Metzger** regarding his exhibition **Figures of Speech : An/other version of Be-longing:**

1.

KL

Music is a recurring touchstone in your work, whether you're replicating a record cover or more covertly riffing on musicians—AC/DC in this show, for instance, although you also turn to saxophonist Anthony Braxton for a set of recent works that we'll show at the MCA this summer. Either way this involves a kind of transformation, or reinterpretation, or displacement, or refraction perhaps, just based on the very different attributes of painting and music, or the different ways they engage the senses or register time. (And yet neither are these Ab Ex-style paintings that want to capture the improvisation or expressive feeling of music through action or gesture for instance—quite to the contrary.) What draws you to music as a visual artist, whether as a subject or area of exploration in your work, and what prompts these particular approaches?

MM

Music *demands* patience and acute attention in order to really understand what all is at work in a given piece. Visual Art on the other hand, more often than not these days, *relies* on the *assumption* that a viewer will give it their patience and acute attention. I think visual art might be too confident in itself. Music also complicates and often negates the value of it's material counterpart, thus positioning music's packaging as always and already ancillary, decorative, and market driven. The music I most often listen to and think about is European Free-Improvisation. I am drawn to it for inspiration because it is a place where sound, language, time, and instinct are all made present by the performative body. But to be clear about your question above...I am not sure I have ever yet in my work dealt directly with music. Most of my music related projects I have done in the past are actually focused on the nuances of language and the unconscious. I would love for that to happen one day but so far music has functioned only as a springboard for me to be able to find ways of grappling with ongoing ontological questions / doubts I have about expressivity, belonging, death, translation, and perspective.

2.

KL

And then of course these paintings are silent, which is a major difference from music. It seems notable that in recent shows you're starting to introduce actual sonic elements—something for the ears, not just the eyes. At *Regards* you have these 'sound machines' or white noise makers that huddle in the corners of the room. They're these beige, innocuous objects, begging to be overlooked, but they subtly add sound back into the equation. What led you to this addition here? Do you see the sound machines playing a certain role in this show?

MM

I look at the same white noise machine while I sit in the waiting room of my psychotherapist's office. I initially began to think about the possibility of sound also functioning as a wall (in this case not allowing me to hear the conversation occurring in the other room. Real walls are made far too thin these days.). The white noise machine itself became a location for me to think about the moment a wall is erected (the machine as the screws that hold the wall in place and the sound as the wall itself) and therefore the moment a space is transformed from being an open and shared space into the public / private binary we all know so well. It was a way for me to further dimensionalize, albeit in a very subtle and abstract way, my feelings around the *Be-longing* project. I'll refrain from mentioning here all the additional and more critical positions the machines take on in my use of them with *AC/DC* as a pop cultural icon.

3.

KL

After those sound/music questions, I want to ask a more painting-centric question, one about *color* in your work. In this show color seems to play a number of roles. On one hand you have the understated palette of the shadow paintings and the dull beige sound machines, and on the other, the red banner and the vivid pinkish wall upstairs. And *AC/DC* is back in black of course. But in your work you clearly think about both the visual impact but also a color's cultural lineage or associations. (Here I'm also thinking of the mint green Braxton paintings, or an early work of yours that still sticks with me: just a yellow rectangle surrounding a gray field, which is instantly recognizable as part of the visual identity of National Geographic.) How do you tend to think about color in your work, and can you elaborate on the choices in this show?

MM

I don't believe color can exist autonomously. Nor can paint exist without color. So I always begin by asking what color will something be by asking what reference, and in turn what discourse a color will bring with it once deployed. Some colors I use are in order to expand on the painting's history and my intentions, such as the National Geographic yellow, the white noise machine cream, or the Braxton green. Other colors, I have been lucky enough to use systematically across multiple works / projects, in order to embed them with my own lineage of ideas like the scuba red and white. The more they are used the more history they retain. With the Regards exhibition, the pink that is upstairs comes from mixing exactly 50% white and 50% red of the scuba flag (which is the reference for the large banner hanging vertically in the downstairs area). That project has always been about occupancy and approaching the notion of figure / ground relationships from an ontological perspective. So in order to provide a 'ground' on which the AC/DC painting would hang, I wanted to conflate the 'figure' with the 'ground'. So the result of that is what you see. I NEVER deploy color as an aesthetic device. EVER. Color for me always functions as an index of varying *real* surfaces in the world that each cites a location / object, its history, and thus a complicated set of politics usually.

4.

KL

At Regards your use of the space seems highly calibrated too: first there is an obstructed view as you enter, with a work hanging from the ceiling; and the sound machines are tucked away in corners; then all the work is installed across two levels, with a stairway in between; ultimately there is a progression crowned by the act of looking back from above over the works on the 'ground floor'. How were you thinking about the installation here and the ways the layout affects the experience or even the meaning of the work?

MM

The space seemed unavoidably like a concert stage set. The stage where the band performs and the pit for the audience. I couldn't resist. It was also important to amplify each viewers 'perspective' while in the exhibition. So upon entering the exhibition your view is blocked and from the other end of the space your view is privileged, raised up. I would prefer not to say here why that matters. But that for this context, just that it does. If the sound machines echo for me the location of erected walls, it seemed necessary that they then go in corners where two walls meet, at the site where the sound is amplified most. If the white diagonal of *Zombie* for me serves as an abstracted embodiment of Manet's dead bullfighter, then in order to hoist the dead man back to his vertical, and most alive position, the painting had to be rotated and hung from the ceiling. Because the space reiterated the hierarchy of the band overlooking its audience, It was necessary to find a way for the ceiling and floor, the exhibition's architectural limits, to sandwich the body between the roles of idol and idolizer.

5.

KL

Springing from that last question, it's interesting that you use the phrase "vantage point" in the press release, in the context of the AC/DC anecdote. It's a phrase that has both literal and more figurative meanings: it can mean both a spatial position (a certain grounded perspective) or it can be a way of seeing (a personal outlook, so to speak). The spatial arrangement of the show offers certain vantage points in a spatialized way, in the first sense. Were you also thinking about vantage points in the other sense?

MM

Yes absolutely. In relation to ones imagined, psychological construction of their identity, both through objects and their sociological proximity to others.

6.

KL

In the press release you use the AC/DC anecdote to introduce the twin notions of belonging and disconnection. And woven in among that rock n' roll story are all these short brusque sentences, all of which trace forms of *relationality*, and maybe specifically two different kinds: proximity (e.g. aside from, left of, etc.) and causality (e.g. because of, out of, etc.) Do you see similar relational dynamics at work in your paintings, or in this exhibition at least? Are you starting from certain thoughts about belonging or disconnection, or discovering them along the way?

MM

I am starting from certain thoughts for each show. I learn a lot from each show and move on into other domains after. For the press release I wanted to use the archive of all my past press releases (two previous ones) for this project but interjected with an alphabetical use of two word prepositions (since prepositions for me always seem to speak to body / object relationships) throughout. The first press release was the basic Be-longing project statement. The second press release was a series of nouns that I felt necessarily abstracted / blurred an oppositional split. So here I felt that the preposition was the next in line, functioning like the white noise machines, only from the perspective of say Humpty Dumpty before he falls off the top of the wall, being able to see both sides but never quite telling you which side housed which, good or bad, public or private, dead or alive. Left of _____, Aside from _____. Of course once plugged into the other press release, each preposition is coupled with a noun by a type of "chance operations".

7.

KL

You're deeply attuned to the nuances and details of each individual painting (with a highly demanding style that requires this), but at the same time your works seem to exist as constellations or groups, or at least they're often exhibited that way. At Regards we have a series of clearly related works, the shadow paintings, but there are also more implicit ties between works that don't share an immediate resemblance. Can you tell me more about how you see works interrelating? To what extent are you conceiving different families of works in dialogue, or does that happen later?

MM

For better or worse, all aspects of a work, a project, and an exhibition are decided upon before anything is made. I never relate anything with another based on resemblances in my practice. There are 5 paintings in the show that resemble one another but that is a condition of continuing on with a project I started 3 years ago. I consider all the work in the show to be pretty tightly tied together despite any visual differences or similarities. I like your use of the term family here, families being tied together by blood and ethics more so than appearance necessarily. I think my privileging of that which is below / beyond the surface (skin, paint, and otherwise) is where I find a contemporary location for both abstraction and expression.

Blood > < Abstraction | Ethics > < Expression

8.

KL

If we track your work over time there is a larger sense of progression, too — an unfolding, or a process of revision and augmentation perhaps. For instance, you have returned to certain subjects in multiple shows (e.g. AC/DC). In other cases you have exhibited a single work repeatedly but in different manners (e.g. the red and white 'banner'). How do you see this aspect operating in your work? Can you talk about the long game versus the short game?

MM

Abstraction is inherently a long game. Design is a repeated short game. This of course needs to be unpacked which I am not going to do here. I think our thoughts and bodies require a lot of time to process experiences and their meanings. I also think that the culture we live in today does everything it can to refuse this requirement by us for making sense of things. So having said that, I have recently been thinking about abstract painting today more as distortion, the *act of distorting*, something that requires time and duration for its legibility, along with a hint of its origin always in a state of transformation. Just as things / meanings / acts become more distorted, naturally abstraction must become more nuanced and sophisticated. It's not as easy as just a pedal anymore.

9.

KL

The title of the red and white banner is *Zombie*—something both dead and alive, or paradoxically alive but lifeless. This title suggests one thing when we learn that his work was created for an earlier show (and site) and is being exhibited again. At the same time, calling an abstract painting “Zombie” today also brings to mind the term “zombie formalism”, the charge being leveled by Walter Robinson and other critics at a generation of abstract painters that have become market favorites recently. I won’t ask whether this title was a direct reference to that, but I am curious as to how you see your work in relation to other currents in painting today. Do you feel like your own methods, your vantage point (to return to that phrase), or even what’s at stake for you, stand against some of these trends or their attendant discourses? Antipathy or affinity or both? (I’m kind of hoping I can get you to say something provocative.)

MM

I neither feel nor think about anything when I look at the majority of painting today, especially self-proclaimed “Abstract Painting”. When I choose to look at “Abstract” paintings they appear as though they were made in a vacuum, as though they were made without any care for the history and politics that produced such avant-gardes and even worse...doing this while assuming uniqueness! I feel neither Antipathy nor an Affinity to the work of the artists that have been labeled as “Zombie Formalists”, and perhaps that is what gets me the most disappointed... being confronted by utterly innocuous work. I can’t make a claim to whether what is at stake for me in my own practice stands against, or holds hands with, such trends as you mentioned. But I can say that perhaps my desire to find a new lexicon for my practice and to craft my intentions with *other* tools is why I turn to music often. If one can comfortably claim their self as an Abstract painter then they are not, and can’t possibly be, making Abstract paintings. They are illustrating an abstractionist aesthetic, re-performing the givens, the familiar. Which then puts a viewer in the position of simply deciding whether they *like it* or not due to having already intuited the rules of the game from design catalogues, shopping malls, and boutiques. Even *having* the desire to picture that which is already nameable is a problem for me (such as the intention of “making an abstract painting”). I think that often, Abstract painting today is not so much that, but is rather design work, designed objects, designed surfaces, that await client judgment. Which should then be addressed from a completely different critical lens. I think it is really crucial that painters stop deciding to make a _____ painting and instead, paint.

10.

KL

Lastly, I want to ask you about legibility and illegibility, or accessibility and "difficulty". I get the feeling that your paintings operate in this canny, yet shifting manner in relation to these qualities, or they collapse different spots on that spectrum at times. On one hand, you offer us the instant pleasure of encountering a rich illusive rendering of something, the real satisfaction of these immaculate object-images. But there is a certain defining opaqueness as well, which is perhaps related to a certain conceptual depth, like an iceberg. Your works are often pulling from very specific sources, or they have a scaffolding of precise references, and yet these aren't always clearly evident or explicitly conveyed. How do you think about these various terms or qualities? How easily, or not, do you want them to be parsed or 'read'?

In some sense it also brings me back to the classic avant-garde question of whether there is value in art being "difficult." That idea seems most embedded, historically at least, in modern music, voiced by a composer like Schoenberg (if I remember correctly), who at times took an openly antagonistic stance towards his audiences, basically challenging them to wise up or walk out. What do you think?

MM

I don't think my work really *requires* it's sources to be known in order to be understood. It is surprising to me that in most cases if 'art' is not utterly aesthetic then it's assumed there is something we have to know in order to be invested in it. As though it's a murder to be solved, a puzzle to be assembled, or a book to be read. That there is, no matter what, some dense system one has to wade through in order to 'get' a work of art. I don't subscribe to that. Being confronted by art is at most simply that. We all have the agency to invest ourselves, to dig a little, to wax a little, and to ultimately give ourselves over a little. The reasons I have in place for the decisions I make are in an effort to establish some alternative criteria for making choices, and accepting with each choice that is made, that they come with a lot of baggage, sometimes productive, sometimes oppressive. I think there is certainly a reason why we use the phrase "to make meaning". Meaning is not a static thing to acquire. It must be built, constructed, through collaboration and negotiation. So the attitude of "wising up or walking out" I can't endorse because it proposes a kind-of hierarchy of meaning, an elitist way of knowing. Alternatively however, I do think we are slightly lazy and slightly shy viewers of Art with little to no criteria for what makes something Art or not. I'm working really hard to remedy this at least for myself.

Regrads

2015

Regards,

Ten questions from **Matthew Metzger** for **Megan Greene** regarding her exhibition Jelly Sandwich:

1.

MM

Would you say that the works in Jelly Sandwich capitalize on the paradox that absence here potentially embodies: The picturing of the absence of a center, the absence of a subject to be looked at as the works' very subject?

MG

That's part of it for sure. Turns out I am most often cutting out the middle, where the subject would generally have been found (and was, in the case of the pieces where I am using found imagery, e.g. a poster). And the act of removal isn't hidden either—most often it's a sloppy cut out. Like at a sporting event where a player jumps through a banner. The paper afterward looks jumped though. As the viewer of this work, you are arriving after the jump; i.e. the promised thing isn't there and has made a hasty exit at that. It logically follows that what's left becomes a kind of archeological site. I'm interested in the extent to which a remnant can be, well just that, fragmentary, referring back to what was removed and the act of removal, while at the same time serving as a new whole, the new full story. It's that tension between enough and not quite enough that interests me, hence the show title. Though I'll add that I do hope the work feels more generous than deprived.

2.

MM

Similarly, the wall, both literally and discursively, retains the same sort of paradox upon looking, that which simultaneously presents and divides, shows and hides. Is this something you think about when utilizing the wall in your works?

MG

Admittedly that set of concerns is new for me with this body of work and something I am just getting a handle on. It's true that with many of these pieces, namely those with parts removed, the wall becomes a surface at play within the work. Upon initial viewing, some people have thought that I had painted large white shapes onto the paper. (With "Audiences Have Kept Me Alive," for example.) Additive or subtractive; either way I'd be obfuscating some piece of information. In the case of parts removed, the wall behaves as a sort of white wash. I'll also mention that I learned about John Divola's "Zuma Series" in the course of making this work and was really blown away by them in their own right and by their relevance to what I am trying to do. In those photos, the burned and spray-painted walls and window frame are as much the thing, perhaps more the thing that the beautiful view of the ocean. The window does its job of offering a view, but the walls around it are what pull you back from the oblivion.

3.

MM

Are the surfaces of your works important to you? Why?

MG

Yes. I have been making collage-based work on paper for some time. I finally arrived at a place where I had to be more open to the properties and capabilities of my materials. Paper is infinitely mutable. Sensitive, in other words—it doesn't take much to affect a piece of paper. So in that spirit, I have become a lot more interested in welcoming the incidental and accidental condition/marks of the paper I am using. (In #8 I talk more about non-art marks). The paper I have been using in my work isn't special; it's often pretty low quality. I use art paper but also a lot of the everywhere-all-the-time paper that is just a step from being garbage. And then, I do use photographic imagery in my work—including movie posters, the images of which are often goofily climactic—and like how a sanded or faded surface can refute the intended immersive quality.

4.

MM

What do you see to be the function of the surface in a given work (overall and compartmentalized) for you? I am thinking in particular of the work "Everything everything else" for example.

MG

Funny, this is the one I was just going to talk about vis a vis the surface issue. So there's a case where the images are of the cosmos/limitless space, the verisimilitude of which largely depends on the seamlessness of the dark. But, in this piece, the cosmos is taken from a few old posters that were likely in a box for the last thirty years and are not in good shape. So those fold marks form a worn grid and keep the paper from laying flat against the wall, thus thwarting the illusion. I like that. To repeat some of what I said below, folds suggest interiority, a state opposite to the cosmic. (Note that I know nothing about astrophysics. For my purposes, I am using "cosmic" to mean expansive and open).

5.

MM

Is there any relationship or correspondence for you between the crease (the index) and the frame (your compositional limits) in your works from Jelly Sandwich? Especially in "Cubit" and "Popsicle".

MG

Well, the crease and the frame are both givens of the paper, at least in the case of the ones where I am using posters, which I assume are those you are referring to. The creases are clearly the result of a paper being folded and forming a grid that reasserts the larger rectangle and creates a general uniformity. The folds incrementalize the space. Though I didn't think about that much while working really—they became like the dirty windshield I was looking through while driving. But often, as I would be drawing away, I'd happen upon a fold and have to decide how to manage it. To answer your question, I don't think I was often thinking about the crease relative to the edge, at least not as a rule. Re: "Popsicle," the creased nature of the paper is a very conspicuous aspect of the work. It's a weird one in terms of weight, because the poster paper is so flimsy and unwilling to lay flat to the wall (because of the folds), whereas the drawing in the middle, glued over the image of a placard, feels heavy. I think part of that heaviness comes from it being a single thing affixed to an unruly grid.

6.

MM

Similarly, is there any relationship or correspondence for you between the hole (the imposed window) and edge (the manufactured border) that you juxtapose with one another? Such as in the three larger works from the installation in the upper room: "Sleepwalker" to "Audiences Have Kept Me Alive" to "Cubit".

MG

So the general precepts here are the edge directs our gaze and defines where we look and the holes in the surface act as the contrary parts, the unauthorized views. And the clean manufactured edge is the counterpoint to the messily cut or ripped stuff. So I'm aware of that, though I work in a pretty intuitive and exploratory way. In "Audiences Have Kept Me Alive," the most recent piece in the show, I created the outside edge and the holes simultaneously. They determined one another. The space between them—the drawing—became a DMZ of sorts. In this piece, unlike the other two you mentioned, I am not taking the manufactured edge (and rectangle) as a given.

Speaking broadly of the holes—in many cases they offer a kind of rudeness, like someone jamming a finger into an untouched birthday cake. (Which every kid does). When some part is missing, we think about the missing bit and why it was taken away. It becomes important because of its missing-ness. Like looking down into a volcano and thinking about the fire. (You can see I enjoy metaphors.) Though, in the case of a piece like "Cubit", I am not so sure. Maybe there was nothing before and I am being generous with the bit that is there. I like the alternate notion that removal might yield revelation.

7.

MM

Do you have certain strategies in the studio for developing and maintaining your instinct and intuition for what is necessary in your process of making? If so, can I be lucky enough to know what they are?

MG

That's the millstone, isn't it? Thanks for even suggesting I might have this figured out. So I know by now that my drawing hand wants to make certain things. For good and for bad, I have my tropes and tendencies after making a lot of work over a lot of years. (To be clear I am not hinting at any kind of mastery here—I'm exclusively talking about what it means to contend with one's habits). So I have had to figure out how to challenge the marks, shapes, etc. I seem to gravitate toward. I'm always trying to make work that feels surprising and somewhat confounding to me. The use of found imagery has been instrumental in this—it's a gift, using images and surfaces your hand/mind wouldn't have conceived of and clearly didn't. It's an inherently reactive or conversational way of working that I like a lot. It's also maddening when you have committed to a given piece of material for some reason but it has text on it you don't want and say, Eddie Murphy's head. (No disrespect.) What has been new to me in this work has been finding that I cut and rip in a way that is different from the way I draw. That may be obvious, but broadening my approach to the material, i.e. paper, and allowing for its mutability has meant welcoming a countervailing voice in my practice. I can surprise myself far easier with a pair of scissors these days than I can with a pencil. That's me working against my own limitations. I'll also say that my instincts can be really unreliable—time and again I have made pieces that I thought were really solid completely fall apart for me a few months later. I've gotten somewhat better about this but it is still there. My only way of contending with it is by being a prolific maker in the hopes that I'll get smarter as I go. Plus if you make enough you can always hide the shitty stuff.

8.

MM

The works in Jelly Sandwich seem to float between two poles of subjectivity, honest nostalgia and the diary, or in other words, between the cultural production of an imagined otherworld (80's sci-fi films, green / blue and TV screens, sleepwalking, fabricated outer space, etc.) and the intimacy of a private, felt self. With this in mind I wonder if the exhibition could perhaps function as a love letter to the longing teenager?

MG

I love that. I'll first say I was a huge letter writer for a good two decades of my life; subsumed by the email unfortunately. Incidentally, a lot of those letters went to my now husband—we each have a big box of correspondence received from the other person during our many years of being friends. So that format is very familiar to me: as yet another folded surface—i.e. given an interior and thereby made private—that once opened still bears the mark of its containment. Perhaps the folds themselves suggest the intimacy of the content.

As for the found materials I have used lately: I've gathered scraps here and there from the arts high school where I teach, mostly unfinished notes of some kind that weren't even important enough to be thrown away. (I wrote/passed a lot of notes to friends in high school too...). I suppose I was drawn to how unedited/un-self-conscious they are *and* supremely edited/self-conscious, since high school is so much about fashioning the self. I was chaperoning some students on a trip to the Anderson Ranch a few years ago and recall Jackie Gendel talking about the appeal of non-art marks. That stuck with me—marks of the hand that aren't made with art production in mind. I welcome those into my work, always as found material, since my hand is incapable of making them. (Unless it's a grocery list or something). As for posters—I hung them on my wall when I was younger like everyone else. Salon style, before that term meant anything to me, tacked up wherever there was space. And poster paper is pretty crappy but I still remember trying to pin the corners carefully and trying not to rip through the holes, which invariably did and needed to be re-pinned. The spirit of that, the earnestness and the act of testing one's allegiances—I think that is in this work, though I admit I hadn't quite thought of it like that before. In a few places in this work there are scraps that my twin toddlers had ripped out of their books. It's not important that they are the ones that did that per se. But, it's probably apt that being a mother of young children means a loss of control in many ways, of stuff, substances, even of how one moves one's own body (often awkwardly when dealing with a heavy child). It's constant surprise and re-negotiation. That can be maddening as a human being but is desirable as an artist. A simpler way of saying this is that my work may have loosened up because I often have food on my clothes.

9.

MM

I was told in my health class in college that when the U.S. military drops food from helicopters into starving countries, one of the staples is a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. A student in my class asked why that, since it was such a crappy and cheap food. My teacher said because it surprisingly had an immense amount of nutritional value for those who were starving, and that between the protein in the peanut butter, the carbohydrates and fiber in the bread, the sugar in the jelly, and that the sandwich when falling held its form and required little 'packaging', that it was perfect under the circumstances. So to keep with this, would you consider the work in Jelly Sandwich to nourish to some degree the contemporary art viewer's appetite? If so, in what way? Or would you consider the work in "Jelly Sandwich" to come out of some aspect of you as a contemporary art maker / viewer that is starving? If so, for what?

MG

Interesting you bring up the part about deprivation. Mike Schuh and I talked about this, because I had some worry that my show title would suggest I was making fun of those at subsistence level who can't be picky about their food. I'm certainly asking for a poetic exception on that count. I should also mention that I was someone who wanted (and got) a PB&J sandwich in my lunch for all of elementary and high school. Though that's more of a coincidence with my show title, it is a sandwich I have spent a lot of time with. However, I think it is critically different from a jelly sandwich (which to continue the health theme, is basically a sugar bomb). I have almost no experience with the latter, because I believe firmly in the presence of all three constituents. But I like how the jelly sandwich just squeezes under the wire of acceptability while failing to rise above suspicion. That's part of what I like—the question of how much the incomplete, the fragmentary or the misbegotten can carry the day.

The other thing I wanted to add which might be a non-sequitur is that I am someone who has a pretty intense degree of garbage guilt. I am always visualizing the stuff I throw out sitting in a landfill, just sitting there, not decomposing at a remotely satisfying rate if at all. Even paper, as I understand it, sticks around a lot longer than we think.

So, to continue to not exactly answer your question, I talk about the sandwich in my artist statement because it's a common food of humble parts yet has a lot of unspoken rules around its assembly and consumption. It was a useful metaphor to me while making work that, to belabor the metaphor, is missing its crusts, is missing its middle, is half eaten, half un-eaten etc.

10.

MM

Lastly...for you, what is Art?

MG

I'm going to answer this in the lowercase since the uppercase feels too vast for this somewhat secluded and insufficiently read person to answer well. For me, art is going down to my basement everyday and talking to myself, with pictures, with the hope of them speaking to someone else. I think it's more than marking time. And I hope it's more than whittling wood, but I can't be sure. I try to squelch my doubts with discipline as much as I can.

New American Paintings

2012



MATTHEW METZGER'S "BACKDROP" AT TONY WIGHT GALLERY

There's no getting around the fact that [Matthew Metzger](#) makes difficult paintings. His may be among most difficult paintings I have ever seen, though the act of "seeing them" or "looking at them" is certainly not the difficult part. In his current exhibition at [Tony Wight Gallery](#) entitled, "Backdrop," the artist presents a succinct seven paintings, rendered in the artist's trademark, impeccable trompe l'oeil. Metzger's practice has long employed this unwavering stylistic approach, depicting objects that also speak to the history of painting, like [Duchampian rubber bands](#) or the [faux-monochrome](#) of a Sharpie-d cover of The Eagles' *The Long Run*. -Robin Dluzen, *Chicago Contributor*

Matthew Metzger | *Guard (version 1)*, 2012, acrylic and oil on MRMDF, 36 1/4 x 24 1/4 inches, Image courtesy of Tony Wight Gallery

In this exhibition, the artist has selected semi-trailer mudflaps as the armatures for manifesting his conceptual goals. The five mudflaps are each painted on a MDF support true to the original scale of the actual object; each are depicted as attractively worn and dirtied with scuffs, splashes and drips in a dryly humorous reference to Expressionism, an iteration of the artist's longtime engagement with combining the two extremes of painting history: realism and abstraction. For an informed viewer, deducing this doesn't take long, but one soon realizes that there is much more still to figure out.

Metzger maintains a robust reading practice and [writing](#) practice, which is not surprising considering the rigor of the artist's gallery text –arguably the eighth piece in the show, given how crucial it is to understanding the intellectual depths of the paintings' origins. With the text, we discover that the exhibition has been built upon a vast perception of "linearity," the beginning and endpoints of painting, and indeed the work of Daniel Buren, as referenced by the red and white stripes in *In Situ*, a depiction of Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* with The Boss "cut out" of the LP cover. In the shadow of this context, viewers are able to draw lines between the production culture of the semi-trailers and Springsteen, and the institutional critique of Buren. Even the long rectangle of *Kick Plate* can be seen as a line in itself, anonymous and removed from its original context.

Matthew Metzger | *In Situ*, 2012, acrylic and oil on MRMDF, 24 3/4 x 12 1/4 inches, Image courtesy of Tony Wight Gallery

Matthew Metzger | *Kick Plate*, 2012, acrylic and oil on MRMDF, 8 x 34 inches, Image courtesy of Tony Wight Gallery

Perusing the rest of the text, a viewer begins to realize that almost every detail of Metzger's paintings has been justified, and that each is a clue leading closer towards the artist's allusions. Metzger's words are as measured and masterful as his brushwork, but where the painting hand is strictly specific, his concepts are of a much wider scope. Though the artist seems to have remarkable control over the path by which viewers interpret his intentions, he also leaves plenty of room between the endpoints for the viewers to discover what they will.

Matthew Metzger | *Guard (version 2)*, 2012, acrylic and oil on MRMDF, 36 1/4 x 24 1/4 inches, Image courtesy of Tony Wight Gallery

Chicago-based artist, [Matthew Metzger](#) received his MFA from the University of Chicago in 2009. The artist has participated in the Skowhegan School of Sculpture and Painting residency program and has exhibited at the Smart Museum of Art, Chicago; Sikkema Jenkins & Co, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Catherine Bastide, Brussels and Arratia Beer, Berlin. Metzger is also the co-editor of *Shifter Magazine*. His second solo exhibition at [Tony Wight Gallery](#), "Backdrop," is on display 20 April - 25 May 2012.

[Robin Dluzen](#) is a Chicago-based artist and writer, and the former Editor-in-Chief of [Chicago Art Magazine](#). Dluzen's writing can be found in such publications as *art ltd. magazine*, *i4design Magazine*, the *Chicago Reader* and the *New American Paintings blog*.

New American Paintings

January, 2012

ARTFORUM



Matthew Metzger, *The Dead Man (The Dead Toreador)*, 2010, oil on panel, 29 7/8 x 60 3/8".

CHICAGO

Matthew Metzger

TONY WIGHT GALLERY

845 West Washington Boulevard

January 8–February 19, 2011

At least since Georges Braque first plied a house painter's comb to create *faux bois* (fake wood grain) in his *Homage to J. S. Bach*, 1911, artists' applications of decorative and

artisanal painting techniques have introduced a level of self-reflexivity to our received notions of artistic labor and medium-specificity. "Three Specific Works," Matthew Metzger's solo exhibition of new paintings at Tony Wight Gallery, also engages with the craftsmanship of faux painting in varying registers. *Anthropometry*, *Untitled* (all works cited, 2010) is closest to what we most commonly associate with the methods of this genre. In the work, the artist has, with preternatural skill, created a facsimile of the surface of a distressed Home Depot steel shopping cart—a succinct conceptual amalgam of the object and the subject of craft. Alternately, *Performance Corridor* pays oblique homage to the work of Bruce Nauman by way of a trompe l'oeil cane floating in a quasi-Suprematist landscape.

It is in *The Dead Man (The Dead Toreador)*, however, that Metzger upends his own methodology, signaling something of a shift in his oeuvre. Here we have "sign painting" proper, grounded in allusion rather than illusion. The painting is indexical, like the scuba flag from which it is derived, pointing not to a physical diver but instead to an artist searching through earlier modes of artistic representation that speak to our present moment. It is perhaps an unfathomable depth Metzger has chosen to plumb, but when the work achieves a certain rightness, we do get a sense of having come up for air and a relief that the labor of painting goes on assuredly.

— Zachary Cahill

Chicago
April 22, 2012

CHICAGO

Painter Matthew Metzger Takes on Reality at MCA with 'Nocturne'

DOUBLE TAKE: The Ravenswood artist, who is gaining international attention with his combination of trompe l'oeil and abstraction, is featured in a solo show at the Museum of Contemporary Art

BY MONICA WESTIN
APRIL 22, 2011, 10:03 AM

Inside Matthew Metzger's Ravenswood studio and living space, half a dozen paintings line the walls around his kitchen. It's jarring to see the same minimalist canvases that have garnered him international attention hanging so near a refrigerator. If Metzger's rise continues, they won't grace his walls for long.

The Houston native, 32, who completed a master's degree at the University of Chicago in 2009, is as serious as artists come. He responds to questions with thoughtful precision, and when explaining his work, displays a mind-boggling knowledge of art history. Not surprisingly, a Borges anthology and shelves of critical theory books sit nearby.



"The works I usually go back to are ones that in a way operate as maps. They provide an axis for me to locate my own practice," says Metzger, whose solo show this past February at Tony Wight Gallery was a critics' choice in *Artforum*. This spring brings shows at Arratia Beer in Berlin and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, which will feature his paintings in its emerging artists series, UBS 12 x 12.

Metzger has piqued the art world's interest with his unique combination of trompe l'oeil and abstraction. He creates optical illusions of material surfaces: A torn label, a worn Home Depot cart, a cutting board, and a peeling advertisement all appear to be real objects—until you look closer. "What keeps me coming back to these pieces are the double takes I have when I suddenly realize they're flat surfaces," says Timothy Grundy, the curator behind Metzger's MCA show, *Nocturne*.



The exhibition will feature monochromatic paintings based on the spectrum and surface of commercial construction paper. Metzger says these works are strongly rooted in Ellsworth Kelly's explorations of the relationship between shape and color. But where his earlier paintings were direct reactions to particular objects—an idea common in modern abstract art—he's becoming more interested in the bigger philosophical questions that 21st-century art raises, such as the role of the artist, his audience, and the interaction between the two. Says Metzger: "If I painted in 1950, there would certainly be no place to work in the manner that I do."

Matthew Metzger's *National Geographic*, 7" × 10", oil on panel, 2010

Newcity Art
March 15, 2010

NEWCITYART

Eye Exam: Matthew Metzger in Detail

MARCH 15, 2010 AT 11:59 PM BY JASON FLOUMBERT

By Rachel Furnari

Matthew Metzger's paintings address themselves directly to the history of abstraction, but they're also astonishing and accurate representations of the discarded objects of everyday life. They are about both the lives of things and their renewed vigor on the flat surface of a painting. The opening of his new exhibition at DOVA Temporary, "The Interrogative Remainder," brought up a number of questions about Metzger's process, motivations and the importance of 1970s arena rock.



For the most part, your paintings are fanatically illusionistic, reproducing the surfaces and two-dimensional forms of various ordinary objects and ephemera with great skill. And yet you are not interested in the painting "passing" for the object itself. I am tempted to describe your realism as entropic—always undoing its own illusion or betraying its artifice. Can you talk about your paintings' relationship to the real, to the thing itself?



Before the photograph, illusion was part of painting's vocabulary, spatial illusion that is. After the photograph became common currency and after texts like [Clement] Greenberg's "Modernist Painting," spatial illusion lost its potency. But currently I see illusion having a revitalized voice regarding paintings "medium specificity," but the illusion I am speaking of is one of surface. A surface is always and already flat. When you render an object's surface in paint, something really tricky happens. The two surfaces—that of the object and the painting—collide in what I hope to be an endless oscillation in how one encounters the "real." Naturally, in order for this oscillation to occur a viewer has to be conscious of the illusion at work. Therefore, the "break-down" is necessary. Through this collapse, the painting is exposed without any more mystery, re-inscribing the deceit and negotiations of what's "real" that is at play in the viewers' own psychological manifestations.

Let's take an example like "Other Criteria," a painting of the Eagles record cover for the album "The Long Run." The title has been blacked out with a Sharpie marker. Can you explain how you get from your encounter with the used object to the almost completely black square we see in the gallery?

When I saw the Eagles cover in the thrift store all I could see was the exhaustion of monochrome painting. Its edges were as worn through as the framework of abstract painting. At the time, I was thinking a lot about [Leo] Steinberg's essay "Other Criteria" as well as the cover of that book, and I felt that "The Long Run" album cover harnessed a stunning resemblance to both. So I began to concern myself with conflating the act of aggressively marking out the text (of the title) with the "reflection" perpetuated by that gesture. The effect of the Sharpie on the painting produces a literal reflection of light which at one angle renders the text illegible and at another legible, a highlighting through erasing. I see it as an effacement of one author in order to make permanent the mark of another.

You have said that you grew up loving abstract painting and that part of your project as an artist was to figure out how to make abstract paintings now, how to be relevant without being ironic. Can you talk about your continued faith in abstraction as a representational strategy?



I am primarily interested in fundamental philosophical problems of seeing, experiencing, understanding and trying to issue some specificity to such vague terms as reality, truth, or faith. Abstraction, when employed as just another convention of art making, offers painting a contemporary language for elucidation on broader subjects such as phenomenology, culture, linguistics, identity and the trace (particularly in Derrida's use of the word), etc.

What is the meaning of your exhibition's title, "The Interrogative Remainder"?

I think all the paintings in the show depict objects that are cultural remainders in one way or another. They are discarded objects that no longer contain their original use value. Somewhat displaced. Yet I find each object to provoke questions about both abstraction and the abstract illusions we construct for ourselves about who we are. I see my painting "National Geographic" as illustrative of the frame that so much of our vision is haphazardly filtered through. The yellow border operates as a lens, speaking to the politics of National Geographic's highly problematic means of aestheticization through photographic representation. The painted ground of the painting mimics an 18% photo grey card used to calculate tonal evenness in photography.

You have mentioned the importance of Michael Fried's discussion of "shape as form." What does that mean to you in the context of this exhibition?



It allows me to see one dominant convention of painting (the rectangle) in extreme tension with the objects that are represented on the surface in paint. That is why the panels are made to the exact maximum size of the objects painted. Frank Stella used paint as a means of submitting to the frame, as a recitation of the support structure in the early sixties. I want to use it more to antagonize the painting as a separate substance. I prefer to amp up the tension between paint as a separate material from the rectangular support that hangs on a wall. Paint as a surface that exists independently, always shifting, always rolling over itself to dismantle the perceptions and thoughts of its viewers.