

FROM HUMAN RIGHTS TO THE STAIN ON THE FLOOR

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Wouldn't it be nice to live in a moment when art still mattered? Not just because it was worth a lot of money, or produced a certain number of celebrities every few years, but because it was important in some way. Even the most pretentious critics have a tough time convincing anyone that art matters anymore, that the decision to place a line to the left of center or shape a canvas carries moral weight. Of course, people pretend that art has some special capability – or worse, responsibility – to weigh in on large political issues of the day (as if it were some nominally leftist B-list celebrity telling us all about acid rain). But the truth is that now we have movies and photographs and the internet, art isn't the dominant cultural form anymore, the one where important ideas are worked out. In fact, when an artist does become important in a broader sense – Cindy Sherman, Matthew Barney, Andreas Gursky, Takashi Murakami – it is almost invariably because he taps into issues from those more dominant cultural forms of ads, horror movies, industry, cartoons, etc.

Wouldn't it be nice if painting were just *bigger*? Instead, it is entertainment and commercial images that loom large in contemporary culture. Images are literally large-scale at the movies and on billboards, and also high-impact, whether the images depict a beautiful nude woman, or a ghastly scene from a war zone that slipped by the blandizing censorship machine. You can take in the whole scene all at once by looking. Touch and materiality, on the other hand, tend to be small and localized: a handprint, a brick, a wave. These things happen one piece at a time, even when they grow to be the size of a building or an ocean. Fabian Marcaccio mixes the spectacular and the local, image and material, together in *complex* ways, making art that manages to be both big and specific.

The best way I can describe it is that looking at Fabian Marcaccio's paintings is like the experience of reading the newspaper on the subway. There you are, zooming or jerking along, reading about and looking at pictures of death in the Sudan, fighting in Gaza, governmental investigation in the U.S.A. At the same time, you are jostling against the people around you, bumping thighs and briefcases, smelling overripe flesh, avoiding the smear of coffee or ketchup on the floor, sweating, drooping, making eye contact and avoiding making eye contact. Both things are happening at once, and you are dislocated, moving back and forth between imagining the global currents and monumental happenings, and stuck there in a very particular, particularly small space heavy with insistent physicality. It's hard to put the two things together.

In Marcaccio's early work, image and material were often split. Works like "Transcodification Model #2" (p. 42) have an almost arrogant, tortured ambition. Rather than gently tweak the conventions of traditional painting structure, as generations of shaped-canvas painters have done, these paintings explode. The stretcher bars are carved and exposed, interrupting the canvas, pulling it into odd shapes, violently intruding upon the smooth surfaces. At the same time, unusual for an artist who is obviously broadly challenging "painting," each work is very specific, each one an individual.



(Marcaccio used to follow indigent people on the back streets in New York, trying to get a sense of the individual and the particular distortions that a difficult life wreaks on body and soul.) The painted "image" or design doesn't match the breaks between patches of burlap and fabric in the piecemeal surface, and the over-painted silicone strokes contradict the colorful oil paint. Image and touch operate independently and irregularly, as in Jasper Johns' late work.

This almost violent conflict takes place as well in his site-specific paintings. Some, such as "Wall to Painting Eclipse" (p. 44) build the wall out to invade the painting. Here, a plaster extension of the wall that looks almost like a fist reaches out to enter and cover the lower right hand corner of the work. When you look more closely, you see the white scratches on the painting surface that seem to issue from the *fist* – and you realize that the plaster protrusion has bristles on its underside that etched the painting's surface when it was being installed, disrupting its landscape-like blues and greens. The relationship reverses in "Paint to Wall Activation" (p. 46) where the painting scars the wall. Here a conventionally stretched, rectangular raw canvas has only one mark, a brushstroke cast in a three-dimensional pigmented material that sits on the surface, slightly overhanging the canvas' edge. The artist then takes the canvas and uses the edge of the green *stroke* to draw a large square on the wall, finally hanging the painting at its starting point. Obviously the painting creates its own specific environment on the blank wall. But even more than a rather inventive variation on site-specificity, I see a tension here between the physical thing and the drawn or painted image.

It is this tension that separated Marcaccio from other artists who appropriated images when he began to use photoreproduction in making representational work. When Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince photographed photographs, they rendered the original physicality intact, or rather unimportant; immateriality, the thinness or groundlessness of the circulating image was the point. When Marcaccio began using photographic images, he took most of them himself, mixing them with photos found in newspapers and on the internet. He then altered them radically, giving them a rich physicality with oil paint, acrylics, silicone, sand. His touch ranges across the large-scale works based on a ground of digital printing that are now the mainstay of his work. Hand-painting emphasizes and clarifies a patch of green or a floating dollar bill. The artist believes in the continuity between appropriation and specially-made images, cast material and directly painted materials. He believes in degrees of originality rather than didactic lessons about its non-existence.

More than ordinary indexicality, density is the dominant physical experience of these paintings. Packed with information, they defy the usual low-resolution vagueness of big ideas as well as big images. As brilliantly as Marcaccio thinks about politics and art, his work is oddly not conceptual, not sketching theoretical conceits or master plans. Even if the overall scene he depicts is a spectacular, global image of guerilla warriors, arms dealers, and civil unrest, Marcaccio uses both the computer and his hand to saturate the painting: swirls of people, waves of refuse, lush jungles, and rainbows of mass-produced goods fill the atmosphere. You can almost smell these paintings, viscous and teeming with flesh and jelly and oil paint, all of it violent, ugly, and swooningly beautiful, like "After-Human Rights" (p. 49) which ties together the vanished women of Juarez, Mexico with candy, luxury guns, U.S. dollars, into a field of "All-Over Decoration," as the painting's label reads.

These works were partly inspired by a long convalescence in the mid-90s that led Marcaccio to play with the computer. He was excited by the way it allowed him to put together very different images, calling the computer a "passage machine." He isn't interested in collage, however; the abrupt juxtapositions and collisions of the early work fade out. The later paintings, surprisingly, are about continuity, much more than those of postmodern painters, such as Jonathan



Lasker, who eschew digital techniques but emphasize artificiality and sudden change. According to Marcuccio himself his paintings look like "healed collages," as if a collage was riddled with wounds that had to close up, covered and bound by a layer of skin. The seamlessness comes from flow, from motion, the kind that de Kooning had. Here too there is a sense of heavy reworking, a breadcrumb trail (however untrustworthy) left behind by the artist's process. In addition to this by-product, the artist deliberately creates flow in the way he puts things together; often two things that look very different – say an additive and a subtractive mark – somehow become each other. Despite the naked limbs and mysterious fluids that run into each other, this is not surrealism, not an art of juxtaposition, but one of analogy and closeness, of finding common ground and connections. The crowd is like the ground of the painting, the black hole is like Fontana's slash but also like an amnesiac patch in the collective mind. Ketchup is like blood. Beanie babies are like cells.

The sense of movement, as well as the big picture and the local material, culminate in Marcuccio's architecturally scaled environmental paintings, like the one he showed in Documenta 11 (pp. 55, 56, 58–61). Like a super-sized Barnett Newman painting, the monumental work surrounds us, becoming our bodily reality as well as a projected image. Because they stretch and wind through rooms, even buildings, we experience an environmental painting in time, animating it with our own movement, aware of our bodies. The images zoom in and out, alternating between long views and close-ups: a distant panorama in one section might quickly shift into a hugely magnified look at the canvas weave. The painting itself seems to move us even as we move it, rocking us back and forth between material and image, here and there. Between the stain on the floor and human rights.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, artists and critics emphasized difference, the imperative to see people in their own light, as products of their particular experiences. Not to make false analogies, or to assume you knew how other people felt. This makes sense, I guess, or at least it made some sense to a lot of people. But, at least for people living in the modern city, which is most people, it leaves us with the problem of the newspaper and the subway. When you are in two places at once, split between thinking and feeling, or looking and touching, how do you have both experiences? Even more, how do you make sense of them together? You might notice that oil paint looks like soy sauce, that soy sauce looks like oil, and that the guy across from you looks like the guy in the paper. And maybe a little bit like you. Put yourself in the big picture.