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Economy of Means: Robert Storr & Denzil Hurley

In the Seattle Times, Robert Ayers reviews the current exhibition at Francine Seders. Ayers focuses primarily on the biography of Storr, and places great importance on the externals such as his successes as a writer, critic and curator, and incidentally fails to say much about the work. In doing so, he gives inadequate attention to local artist Denzil Hurley, who happens to be of national importance and a great contributor to Contemporary painting. As an artist, who believes in the work which painters do, it is my goal to share just a few of the possible insights which may arise upon viewing the work in this group show.

In the polemics of Modern Art, Conceptual art has often been misread as a movement based purely on ideas. However, in actuality, it owes much of its self-reflexivity to Minimalism, which not only aimed to reduce the elements of art to its most economical means but to bring emphasis to the stuff it is made out of, its materiality. In doing so, both schools of thought make visible the purity of form. The current exhibition at Francine Seders features key examples of language-based artists Denzil Hurley and Robert Storr, who share in Minimalism's extreme reductionism and emphasis on materiality, while underscoring its analytical dimensions.

Upon entering the gallery one is immediately confronted with five multi-paneled paintings by Denzil Hurley. Hurley's concerns begin with the formal properties specific to painting. First, by emphasizing materiality and the painting's surface, Hurley reveals the facture of his paintings, by adding and removing layers of paint which leave behind a rich tactility and evidence of subtle color shifts. Second, through the insistent layers of paint, Hurley reiterates Greenbergian notions of Modernism by dissolving the "easel picture," in exchange for the flatness of an all-over painted surface- which creates an optical space.

Over the last six years, since Hurley's last show at Francine Seders in 2006, the artist has been developing his current body of work. In the previously exhibited *Glyph* paintings, Hurley explored the elements of writing which were constructed through the individual marks on the painting surface. While the work explored a writing system within itself, the emphasis on the medium of paint reminds us that painting is a language in itself. In this particular series, where varying canvases depicted a wide range of yellow, yellow-orange and orange hues, Hurley's abstractions resonated like the varying African and Latin rhythms that make up Caribbean music. (Denzil Hurley was born in Barbados, West Indies).

In the current work, Hurley pushes his concept deeper by lifting the grapheme marks (which are individual traces that do not carry meaning by themselves) out from his paintings and arranges them into individual signals of the writing system. In a sense each panel itself becomes a grapheme and by joining them together, they contribute to the meaning of what is written by formation of a glyph (which as a composition carries elements of meaning). Through the scale, configuration and placement, the paintings engage with our senses, our bodies in an active way such as in old Egyptian hieroglyphic bas-reliefs.

(<https://contemplativeprocess.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/hurley21.jpg>).

Beneath and above everything in ancient Egyptian art was spirituality. Expressing nature worship in their mythology, Egyptians believed that all aspects of life were controlled by supernatural powers. One important religious concept was the creation of the universe. As the Egyptians considered the



repetition of the rising and setting of the sun an act of creation (which was eternal and ongoing), one could draw a parallel to the working artist who believes that the daily practice of painting will create order in the continuum of a chaotic contemporary existence. In the presence of Hurley's dark sweeping surfaces, which evoke the formless and empty, we are reminded of an elemental universal unity through the interdependence of forms.

Bridging form and content, the liaison

between sculpture and painting is witnessed in other elements such as in works where sticks are attached to some of the canvases, almost like poles of a sign. The difference being, the artist leaves the surface blank of written markers, keeping it open for interpretation. In another piece, Hurley constructed four narrow, horizontal canvases which are configured into a rectangular frame. At first it appears to be made of painted 2 x 4s, but then one notices that illusion of mass and volume is produced by oil painting. Here, Hurley plays with the viewer's notion of painting by removing the picture window to peer through, creating the impression in the sculptural frame itself. In doing so, we are left to contemplate material as well as the clean white slate of the gallery wall. As a result, the epistemological notion of a tabula rasa experience comes to mind, allowing the viewers' interpretation to come from their own experience and perception rather than through built-in mental constructs. Consistent with Hurley's intention of resisting the placement of any fabricated meaning onto the work, the new paintings remain untitled. By refusing the viewer an "in" through the syntax of titles, the viewer is left to explore the contextual forms of the typographic ligatures on her/his own.

(<https://contemplativeprocess.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/hurley4.jpg>).

(<https://contemplativeprocess.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/hurley2.jpg>).

Connecting the recent work back to the older, Hurley says he, "put it all in a pot and mixed it together." Through this amalgamation, the artist dissolves that which is no longer necessary and retains only that which is. This time, it is the element of color which becomes of importance. The various hues of yellow, yellow-orange and orange of the earlier work have now been buried underneath a field of scorched blacks and deep umbers. Due to their chromatic austerity, the paintings weigh heavily on us to contemplate the absence of color. Yet, the occasional appearance of brighter undertones reveals the alive process of the making and assures us of their presence and perhaps our own.

Also working in a reductive manner, which emphasizes the temporality of the present moment is one of America's most influential contemporary art critics, curators and writers, Robert Storr. What not everybody knows is that Storr is also a painter who has exhibited his work in many group shows in New York and is



also collected by the Museum of Modern Art and the Nelson Atkins Museum. In a sequence of four paintings, Storr's work hangs in conversation with Hurley's paintings.

Respectful of an economy of means, Storr's paintings are limited to the elements of color and shape. In a sequence of four moderate size panels, he limits shape to the rectangular structure of the canvas, each, divided into two positive and negative rectangles of white and black. Keeping this division of space consistent in all four panels, the top quarters are painted in an opaque white surface, and the remaining three quarters are solid black.

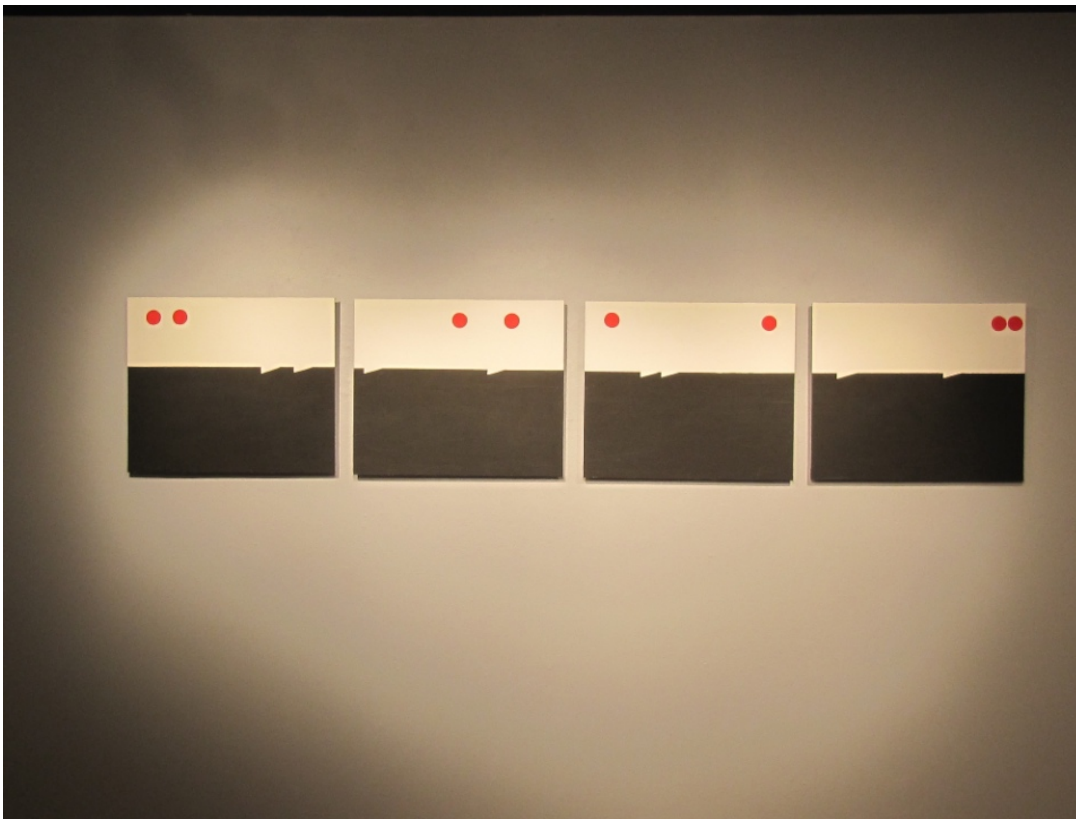
On the white section of each panel, he places two red circles. The relationship of the circles shift in their placement as if one were observing a dialogue between two people who's positions change according to the dynamics of the conversation. In the first panel on the left, there is a head-to-head distance between the



communicating circles. As tension escalates, the circles move further apart and yet further by the third panel. Finally in the last panel, the circles come together in near proximity, bringing the dialogue to an intimate closure. Yet the vibration which occurs between these shifting dots continues to bring the viewer back in, captivating our attention to experience it all over again. In doing so, Storr keeps us present in the experience of observation.

The longer we stay in conversation with the piece, we begin to notice a third shape Storr introduces: small angled triangles which hang in reverse connected to the white plane. At first glimpse, it reads as if it were the mouth piece of a cartoon bubble, which holds the conversation that the dotted characters are engaged in. Yet upon further observation, one notices Storr resists the literal reading of a comic by introducing two of these triangular shapes. By varying placement, they too come into dialogue with the red circles, as well as to the lower portion of the painting which is black and void of any other form. Playing back and forth between formal concerns with an implication of humor, Storr strategically places the triangles at the viewers mouth level, moving us beyond a passive observation of the shapes and, invites us in as an active participant into the conversation.

Through the use of “half-tone” dots, the multi-paneled storyboard format of his paintings, as well as the confident use of techniques that creates an “anti painterly” illusion, Storr elicits reference to the Pop Art paintings of Roy Lichtenstein. Exaggerating the half-tone dots that were used to print comic strip panels, Lichtenstein employed humor as a way of addressing the present. By drawing a connection to this style, Storr’s work also points to the awareness of being in the contemporary moment. He does so by reducing the animated characters of Lichtenstein’s paintings into their most basic shapes. He also places emphasis on the materiality by creating the illusion of flat painting, where actually the paintings are made of thick chalky brush strokes of acrylic paint which are stripped of its plastic shiny surface (perhaps by means of a matte varnish). Through appropriation and innovation, Storr creates his own original and contemporary paintings.



(https://contemplativeprocess.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/storr_11.jpg)

The question which comes to my mind, after having taken part in this dialogue with Storrs’ work is: do his paintings move beyond a formal arrangement of shapes and colors which engage the history of painting itself, and do they further invite us to reflect on how we either engage or disengage in dialogue with one another? For a man who has wholeheartedly dedicated his life to the examination of art and culture, it is

unlikely he would be able to dissociate himself in his own paintings from participating in the dialogue of the politically minded artists he has curated and written about.

In a press conference about his largest show to date, which he curated in 2007 at the Venice Biennale, “Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind: Art in the Present Tense,” Storr was quoted having said, “It is not a political show, but a sober show at a time that lots of people are intoxicated by cash. The cash will go away some day. I hope the works in this show will not.” Although the exhibit was laden with political works (which I had the opportunity to see myself teaching a summer course in arts, with students from

Seattle University) perhaps Storr was speaking more to the psychology of the human experience. This assumption may be corroborated by his own statement: “Such exhibitions are not for people who experience uncertainty as an ordeal. Indeed, those for whom doubt, inquisitiveness and effortful self-questioning are exceptional or unbearable should spare themselves the disorientation and discomfort of a situation where precisely these states of mind and spirit are required.”

In yet another important show Storr curated, “Modern Art Despite Modernism,” he acknowledged artists who had made contributions to twentieth-century art outside of modernism’s avant-garde, in subjects including images from depression era realism and the American scene. Did Storr foresee the inevitable economic down spiral which our economy has taken? Did he try to show us the consequences of what could occur again if we continued to be in denial of our material excess and our polarized ideologies? It is most definitely not by chance that both these large exhibits speak to the role American culture has played in the economic and political strife of modern and contemporary society.

For a man whose paintings speak in the language of sparsity, their economy of means make a strong punch for the need to pay attention and become more present to “just this,” which includes that which lacks the allure of aesthetic beauty. In James Panero’s article, “Making Sense of Robert Storr” (2007), Panero asks, “When the audience for art accepts assaults on taste and on aesthetic achievement, what does this indicate about our culture?” In return I would ask, and I think Storr’s paintings ask just that: If the audience only accepts art for its aesthetic achievement, what does that indicate about our culture?

Clearly both artists reviewed here do not only share certain artistic traditions and techniques but also questions about the place of the spiritual in the 21st century.

