

A NAMELESS
KIND OF
PAINTING:
SEAN
STEADMAN,
SCOTT
MCCRACKEN,
DAVID
AUBORN,
DANIEL
SINSEL AND
ERIN
O'KEEFE
TALK TO
MATT
LIPPIATT

Our discussion reminds me of the infamous Stella mantra 'what you see is what you see' and Guston's counterstatement 'what you see is not what you see'. Possibly our paintings are trying to find a form where both statements can apply simultaneously?

Matt Lippiatt: The reason I want to talk about these paintings together is that I'm curious about what appears to be some common ground: the illusionistic evocation of space and volumes, without the depiction of specific objects or scenes.

I see this as a fairly consistent aspect in recent paintings by Tomma Abts, David Auburn, Sean Steadman, Scott McCracken, and Lesley Vance, among others – though I'm open to being challenged on this claim. The mid-twentieth-century idea that there is a special connection between abstraction and flatness, and that flatness is a virtue in itself, all seems long forgotten.

I've invited Daniel Sinzel and Erin O'Keefe to the conversation because, in different ways, their practices also engage with this relationship between illusionism and abstraction.

What are your thoughts on this?

Sean Steadman: For me, making a painting is primarily about trying to stay in an open and dynamic state for as long as possible – one where I can sustain a maximal degree of imagination and concentration.

Sometimes likenesses or shadows of things from everyday life do occur in the work. I have, however, come to realise that the paintings are primarily a transcription and invocation of this state of openness. For now, at least, I feel the use of names or objects as the painting's scaffolding would exchange the gestalt of the process for one of reading signs.

It's clear to me that one finds the 'what' of a painting from its 'how'. The 'figurative' paintings which matter to me greatly, Uccello or Braque for example, succeed by being acutely constructed. This is a paradox when you think about it; the more uniquely plastic the painting is, the further away it would seem to get from its subject. However, somehow, it gets closer.

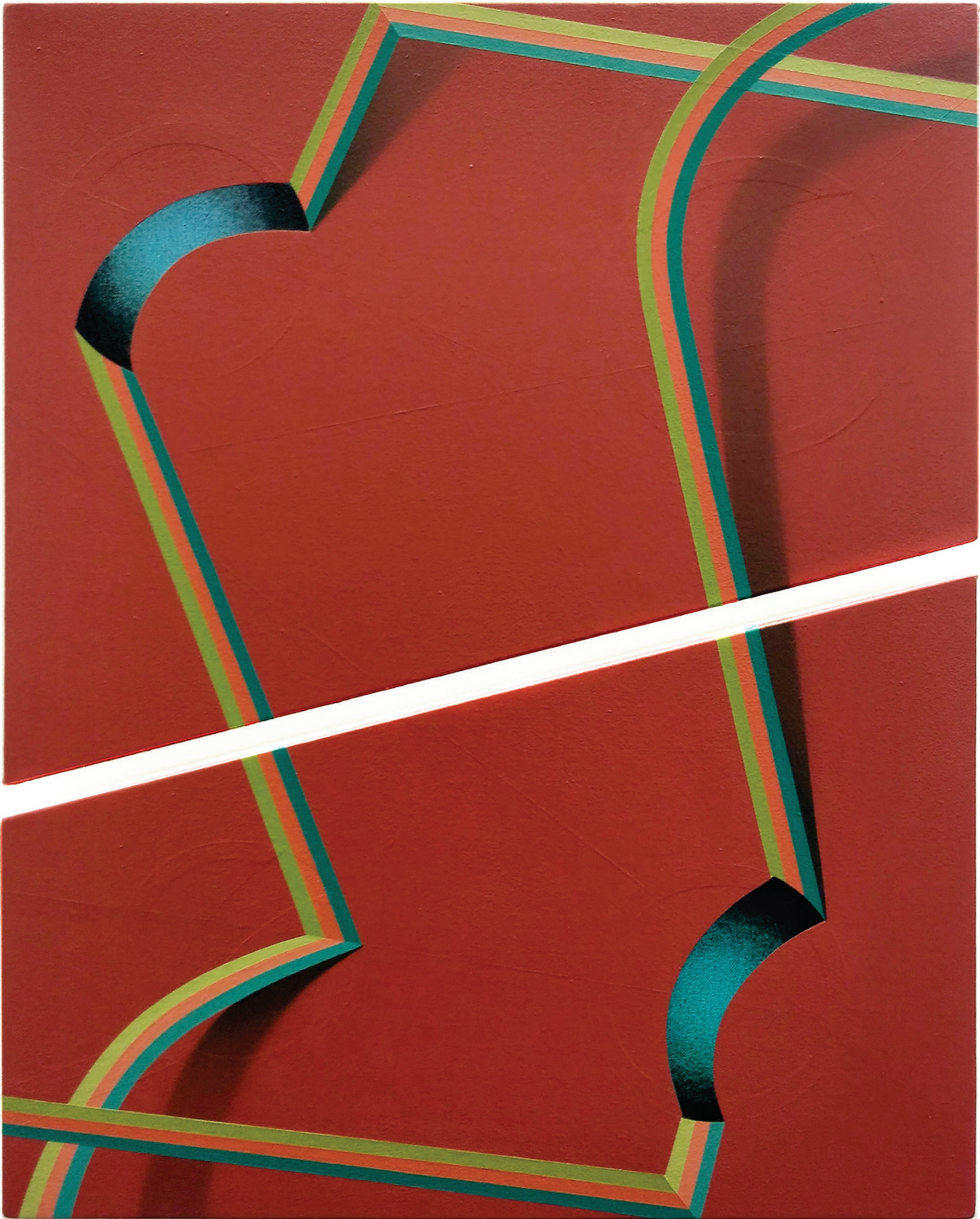
Scott McCracken: The shift towards volume in my work has partly come from a growing interest in still life painting. I found the flat shapes in my paintings were beginning to expand, to inflate. And it gave me greater flexibility to play with the spatial properties of the painting through formal decisions of division, colour, light. This connects to what Sean said about finding the 'what' through the 'how'. You comment on the lack of specificity in your opening statement. However, I think of the forms I paint as very specific. Specific in their shape, in their modelling, in their colour, in their distinction from an adjacent form. You can't name the forms, but you can classify them by certain properties they appear to possess. Roundness, for example. And there is discomfort in not being able to give something a name. There's certainly an ambiguity that emerges. I'm aiming for that ambiguity, but through a type of specificity.

SS: Maybe it's because we live in such an information-saturated culture, prone to reductions and qualifications, that making a nameless kind of painting seems an interesting place to dig around.



David Auburn
Elevated H
2017
Oil on canvas
195 x 180 cm

Courtesy of the artist



Tomma Abts
Hepe
2011
Acrylic and oil on canvas
48 x 38 cm

Courtesy of the artist

David Auburn: We've become so used to rapid information, dissolved into sound bites, that the fertile ground of questioning the unknown in our experience is forgotten or, worse, classified as an indulgence. Maybe painting, for me, is a reaction against that. The paintings that have the greatest hold over me are the ones that are anchored in a physical realm, yet simultaneously take me out of my context; their open-ended mystery carries the promise of somewhere or something other.

The work I'm making now is a yearning for – and an inquiry into – this unknown space. This is a choice as a painter: a commitment to openness and a belief in the immense creative potential that lies within all manner of uncertainty.

I don't attempt to demystify the images I make. That would only highlight the limits of our language and undermine the generosity in their vulnerability. The work may contain echoes of the recognisable, but if specific objects or forms are placed within the image, then, for me, this risks the work vanishing purely into recognition and any potency found in its questioning ends. I'm learning to be comfortable with images I cannot fully comprehend. That experience is far closer to my reality than something fully recognisable, formulated and solid.

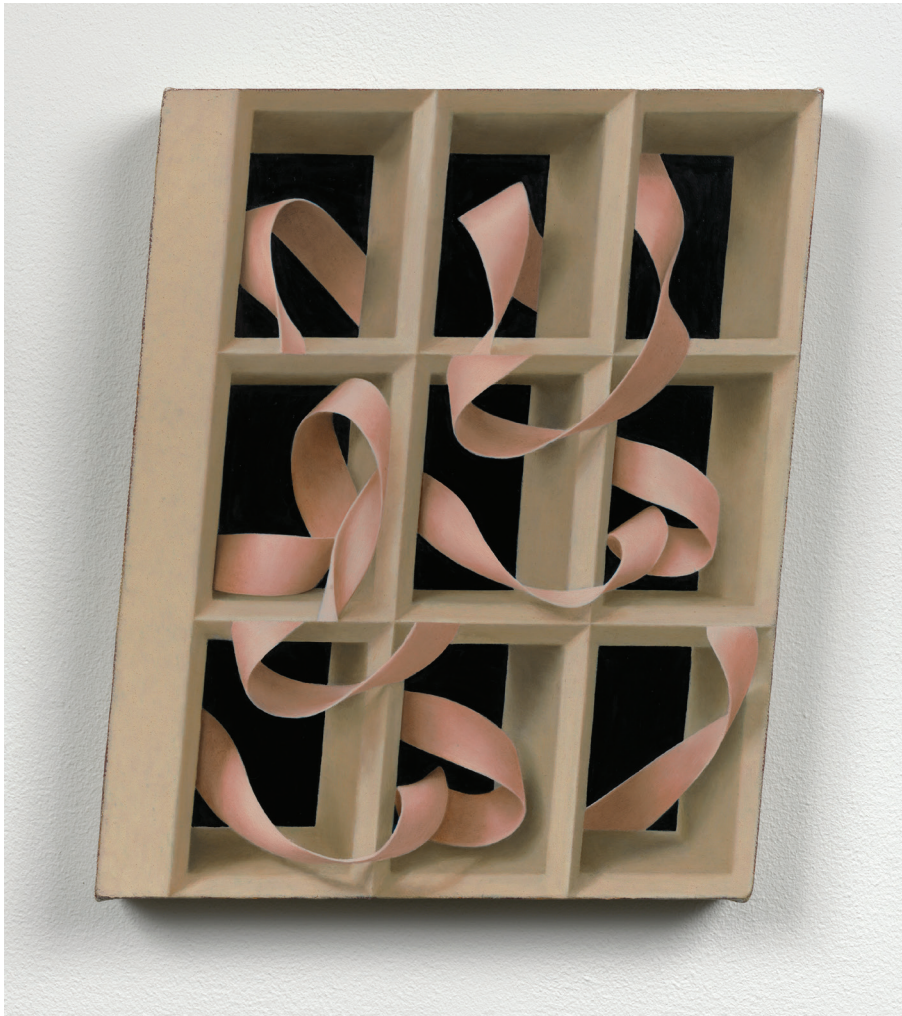
ML: Erin, it's good to have you in this conversation because, in a sense, your photographs approach the same visual ambiguities, but coming from the opposite direction. You begin with actual material objects and then photograph them in ways that introduce the 'illusion' of flatness.

Erin O'Keefe: Spatial perception and representation are the central issues in my images – which began really with the experience of 'misreading' in architecture. In painting, these



Sean Steadman
Rive
2020
Oil on canvas
203 x 113 cm

Courtesy of the artist



situations are deliberately conceived and constructed, without the need to abide by any real-world condition. In my own work, I'm interested in finding/discovering/choreographing moments of uncertainty that exist in the image, but not in the 'real' spatial condition. You are left with just the image and its wrongness – you can never backtrack to compare, although the question of how it was made is still present. I think the sense of an open question is something that feels really fruitful.

I make the objects I photograph: painted boards, cut wood blocks. The vocabulary of form that I am interested in working with tries to thread a line between an abstract geometric language and one that is more sensuous and

particular. I want all of the objects and surfaces to carry with them their imprecision, and evidence of their making – that feels very important. I love that the image distortion/flattening magic is always at odds with the intimacy and materiality of the objects.

I think in all of the images you shared, one (as a viewer) wants to create a logic – something that can hold together the pieces in a decipherable way – but things keep slipping away. One legible spatial condition breaks and gives way to another and another, and we feel those moments always in relation to the surface of the picture. In all of the pieces here, there is also a kind of tactile specificity to the objects depicted – so those things are very known, and very particular, but also completely open-ended and without specific associations. So, there is this double-edged uncertainty, in both the spatial structure of the image, and the subject.

ML: For me, the spatial ambiguity in your recent photographs ties in with an oscillation that you're creating between two familiar types of image: photographic documentation of 'modern abstract sculpture', and photographic reproductions of 'modern abstract painting'. I'm tempted to say that modernist abstraction is the nameable object represented in your images, which is ironic given that you're cutting entirely against the grain of modernist medium-specificity by hybridising painting with sculpture and photography.

There is also a connection to conceptual art in that, you complicate the distinction between artwork and documentation. For example, the presence of your image in this article heightens my awareness that all the other images here are also photographs of paintings. Not only that, but they are representational photographs of non-representational paintings. The two mediums are combined in a very

Daniel Sinsel
Untitled
 2012
 Oil on linen
 32.5 x 29.5 x 3.2 cm

© Daniel Sinsel
 Courtesy of Sadie Coles HQ London



Erin O'Keefe
Blue Boy
2019
Archival pigment print
127 x 102 cm
Courtesy of the artist



Scott McCracken
Falsecut
2020
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 45 cm

Courtesy of the artist

conventionalised way: paint producing an image and photography reproducing that image. Yours is the only one here that complicates that convention. It's something I'd usually take for granted.

Daniel, you use a wide variety of approaches to both paint and support. Can you say a little about the relationship between *trompe l'œil* and abstraction in your paintings?

Daniel Sinsel: I am attracted to craft and technique because it requires dedication to material. *Trompe l'œil* technique uses realistic imagery to make painting look like it exists in three dimensions. It's seductive and pleasurable for me to render and perceive this illusion. In my work, the illusion usually has a shallow depth of field (grids, alcoves, frames, winding ribbon, etc.). My paintings are theatrical in that they try to present something: a bit like a box of chocolates or a decorative plate – It's where nuts hide and ribbon winds. Material is presented, sometimes straight up, sometimes queer. When I don't use realism but abstractions, many of my paintings still present an event or a narrative – like snails crawling or a tree bearing fruit. Sometimes the events are embedded into the material itself through weaving, sewing, cutting, or carving.

SM: Our discussion reminds me of the infamous Stella mantra "*what you see is what you see*" and Guston's counterstatement "*what you see is not what you see*". Possibly our paintings are trying to find a form where both statements can apply simultaneously? Painting relies on such contradictions and oppositions, the illusionism/abstraction dichotomy is another extension of that. Information has been touched upon already, but paintings have the greatest capacity to transmit different types of information at different speeds depending on how active we are as viewers. The process of perceiving and interpreting a painting

becomes a multiplicitous experience, particularly when the subjects depicted and their relationship to one another can't be so readily named or described. Painting and language are often at odds anyway, where words become insufficient or incompatible to the primacy of looking. Which would make you think that titling a work would be problematic, but I think titles can amplify this equivocality.



Matt Lippiatt
WW2 Pilot
 2020
 Collage, ink, and gouache on paper
 59 x 84 cm

Courtesy of the artist