

THE PHOTOGRAPHY POST

Le 3 juin 2010

Q+A: LUCAS BLALOCK VS. JAMES HYDE

This is the third installment in a conversation series initiated by Lucas Blalock with contemporary artists concerning materiality in regards to current photographic practice.

James Hyde is a painter living in Brooklyn, NY, who pursues his painterly ethos into furniture design, sculpture and photography. Hyde received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2008, and has had numerous solo exhibitions internationally over his 25+ year career. His work is in the collections of the Guggenheim, the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC among others. His practice has long explored the physicality of pictures through a series of interventions that expose materiality while exploding the picture plane. Hyde has an installation of large paintings open until June 27 at the Pierogi Boiler Room space in Brooklyn, NY which is a MUST SEE!



James Hyde, RECLINE, 2009, acrylic enamel on archival inkjet print on stretched linen, 70" x 115.5"

LB: I think this picture is a great one to start with because it's elements seem central to your recent photo based works. I am thinking of your recurrent use of 1) the skeletal architecture of a partially erected building and 2) the colored blocks of paint that obscure part of that image. I know that your work has long been engaged in mechanical and structural questions in painting and I am wondering if the (structural) transparency of the architectural image relates to this? and if so what you see as the mechanical/structural composition of these hybrid pictures?

JH: I think the first thing I'd like to say is I don't consider these hybrid pictures. *Hybrid* implies a sort of blending – these works are oil & water in terms of painting & photography. I'm happy to talk about this work as painting or as photography but they are two distinct discussions. Since this is a photography forum let's go the latter route? The piece we're talking about actually isn't a single photograph but some 60 digital photographs taken over ten minutes then stitched together in the

computer. You could say the resulting image is a constructed site. I believe sight is constructed, and with all my works I try to make that understanding palpable. Turning this picture of a building on its side and painting on the surface was an attempt to interrupt habits of seeing; to create an awareness of the the structure of looking.

LB: In talking about this piece as a photograph it becomes interesting to me that you have chosen to pursue these interruptions in such a physical way when the computer promises to accomplish a similar task with a greater economy of means? Further, I find myself relating to the 'constructed site' as the piece itself instead of in terms of an indexical relationship to the photographed. Do you feel that this reading misplaces the emphasis?

JH: In terms of image, yes, the computer would pop those rectangles over the photo far less laboriously than applying layers of paint. But, as you have pointed out, with these works I'm particularly interested in the physical qualities of the photographic print. As a photographer (and painter) I'm interested in the material thinginess of the support and surface of my works. With *RECLINE* I wanted to emphasize the physicality of the print (it's printed on thin ink-jet paper and glued to layers of paper-mache on stretched linen). It's a bit hard to see from the reproduction of the piece but the surface is bumpy. While the printed image tends to camouflage surface qualities, gloss paint reveals the contingencies of surfaces. Maybe even more important, at least to my process, is the adjusting of shape at actual scale. I wanted the print and the painting on the print to relate to the size of the human body. I wanted to find a fit where the the photo would frame the bars and the bars could propose a type of framing of the photograph. There was a fair amount of trial & error; painting and covering (at actual size) to come up with what felt right.

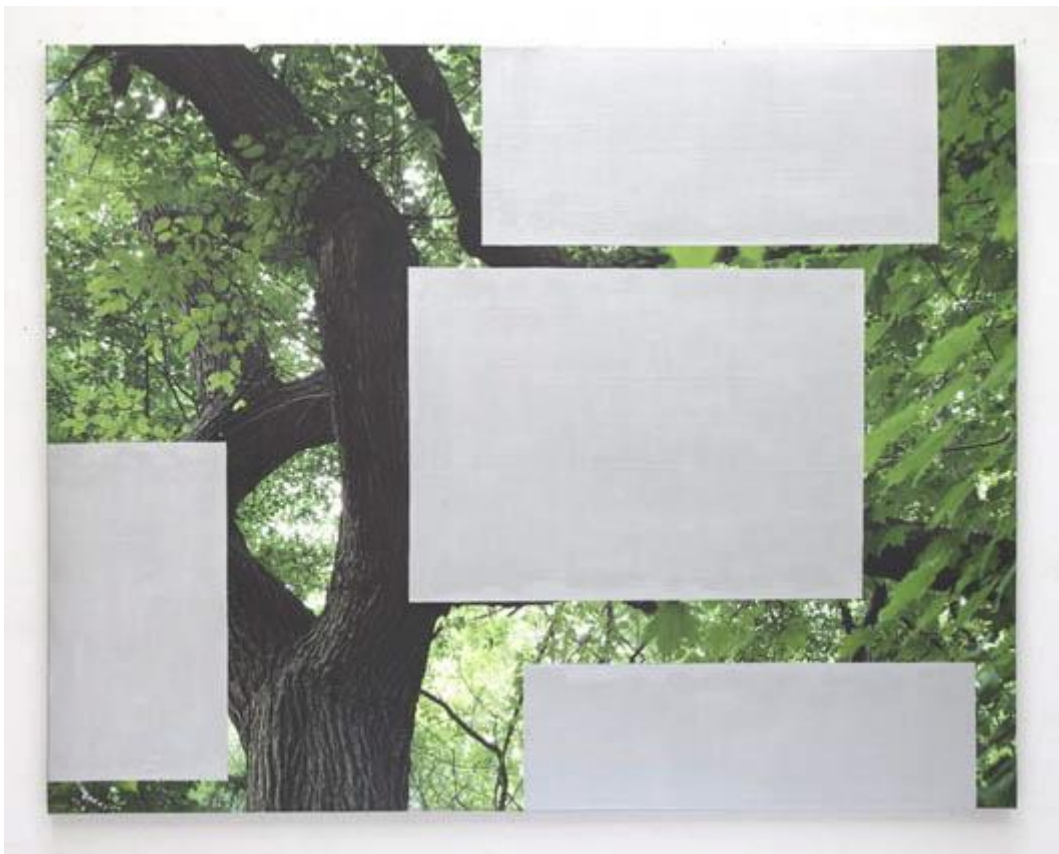


James Hyde; NOTICE, 2009, acrylic enamel on archival inkjet print on stretched linen 42" x 70.5"

LB: Not to belabor this point about image content, but it seems to me that I can think of a number of recurring themes in this body of work. Besides construction sites, pictures of paintings and pictures of trees come to mind. In one way or another all of these promote very structural readings?

JH: With these pictures I'm less interested in the readings that are available than in the experience of the picture itself, although I like the way you make reading plural, opening possibilities for distinct

even contradictory readings. Szarkowski used the term “undiscovered meaning” to describe the visual portent of photography which seems about right to me. In *RECLINE* the detail is so relentless it’s impossible to take in the density of information and the overall image at once. Shifts between big picture and detail give a sense exploration and discovery, of looking and thinking. Interestingly, that density of detail gives the surface the taste of materiality. The work’s horizontal orientation is again intended to defamiliarize and to make exploration more particular. This brings to mind Bernd & Hilla Becher whose pieces have a magnetic attraction for me. Their photography seems to me deeply structural even structuralist, but not in a verbal or literary way. They can have the same set of photographs in two different orders and each of the two different pieces mean different things, but not in a way I can explain. I really like the way the Bechers set up typologies and steadily made their pictures. The grids don’t say much but do show the Bechers’ trust that the world is intelligent. Their particular intelligence is that they trust the world is intelligent and articulate. You could say there’s a type of reading involved, but I think it’s more like they engage the world with an understanding the world itself thinks and speaks. For me there’s an intelligence in unfinished buildings that is more expansive and particular than when they are covered and decorated – that’s what draws me to photograph them.



James Hyde, *SCREENING*, 2009, aluminum paint on archival inkjet print on stretched linen, 68" x 86.5"

LB: I would like to turn towards this notion of physicality and body. I feel that this is something photography has a notoriously hard time dealing with. As you say, the print tends to camouflage it’s own material. Yet, unlike someone like Walead Beshty whose “multi-sided” folded pictures seems to be about this materiality, your pictures seem to develop this relationship without focusing on it. In Flusser’s *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* he talks about the material of the photograph printed on paper as a unique link between the modern (material) world and the post-modern (informational) world. Is this the kind of thing you are interested in, heightening the physicality of the image?

JH: You mention Walead Beshty in relation to photography's materiality, but to me those works seem barely material, especially if you compare them with paintings of similar processes of fracture – Frankenthaler, Louis and especially Hantai. But perhaps that's precisely the point. As works that are about process, the only thing that makes them photographs is their material – darkroom processed photographic paper. In a way their material is more of a sign of their identity as photographs than an investigation of materiality – and that material is itself a nostalgic process perched on the edge of extinction. The darkroom process does not essentially define photography: photography always finds different processes to materialize its visuality (see Richard Benson). I find these works of Beshty's deeply melancholic in their withdrawal of materiality to the status of nostalgic sign. Their bright and chipper colors only highlight that condition, a mournful aesthetic that the folded photo-paper works share with his shattered Fed-Ex glass cubes and the photo-documents of Beshty abjectly stuffing his head into products and shelves in shopping malls. But these photographs of Beshty's do signal materiality and that does make them unusual. In photography, often the material surface is sublimated in order to make the image seem unmediated and natural – almost as if the picture were a flash of vision. I think Flusser's division of photography into two parts; (1) information (photographic image) and (2) the physical surfaces it's printed on seems right. In practical terms one is the product of the camera and the other is the product of the darkroom or printer. He calls photographs' printed surfaces "loose leaves" which I particularly like. Flusser refers to the photograph as a technical image – an important reminder that the photograph does not see the way social, biological humans do. Painting over photographs calls out the technical artificial nature of the photographic image by demonstrating its material existence. Applying paint (or other materials) to a photograph brackets it. Touching and leaving traces on these surfaces that aspire to invisibility (or more precisely the control of visibility) can be either transgressive or sentimental. It's also a bit funny, like the photograph is being tickled. I think of my works that emphasizes both the surface and what the image is printed on as engaging he the classic problem of framing in photography – not just the four perimeter sides but how to frame front and back. Touch and framing are my methods for holding the photograph accountable as a way of seeing and as an object for consideration.



James Hyde; *STREAM (SILAS)*, 2007, wood blocks and acrylic on paper on archival inkjet print, 28" x 43"

LB: I like the notion of a 'control of visibility' and think that *framing*, as you put it, is a super prescient issue in photography. I am wondering how your methods in *RECLINE* relate to other artists who engage in similar practice like Gerhard Richter or John Baldessari (both of whom come to photography through painting)?

JH: By framing the six sides of the photograph I'm seeking a presentational strategy for my photographic works so that they are both of the world and in the world. You mention Richter and Baldessari, their works roughly break down along the lines I was speaking of, sentiment and transgression. It seems to me that Richter focuses primarily on the image content of the photograph which he commonly transcribes in paint. The image of photography for him is primarily nostalgic. His emphasis is on the fact that when we see a photo it is a picture of something that is past (i.e., sentiments of history and family). His most transgressive works, the Baader-Meinhof series are less so in the way the photograph is handled (it's enshrined in paint) but in its imagery. I prefer him when he's less romantic. Baldessari, on the other hand, literally pokes holes in the picture plane of the photograph. He is performing slapstick on the photographic screen that maintains its efficacy (and power) though an immaterial transparency. I think if you are working with pressing the physical, material nature of photography you end up working between the poles of sentiment and transgression. I'm not as up front about my sentimentality as Richter (I bury it mostly) but it's there. Nor am I as gleefully comedic as Baldessari, but both of their projects make it easier for me to see possibilities of work and play within a territory of artmaking that negotiates these issues. *RECLINE* looks mostly like work, but adjusting the colored bars (and tipping the picture) was much play!



James Hyde; CASTLE 2008-9, acrylic & Flashe paint on paper on archival inkjet print, 43" x 64"

LB: At once 'of the world and in the world' is a really good turn with which to talk about photography, though as you've touched on, most photographs remain occluded in their material quality (or in recent exceptions, the other way round). I am attracted to the binary you draw between work and play. Your investigations into mechanics have long been quite playful, managing to avoid the pitfalls of didacticism similar projects often fall into, and yet, as you say, I don't feel a slapstick to your investigations. The punchlines can be quite elusive and this puzzling by the viewer seems to contain something of the meaning of the pieces? I am interested in this in terms of photography (how it's inherent slipperiness works for you) but also in terms of your greater practice. In my own work of late I have been thinking about failure a lot. I mean this in the way that when the pieces really work is when they undermine my own expectations in their making, and my way for

generating these ‘failed’ endeavors has been to make a whole lot of pictures. It seems to me this principal is at play in your practice as well but I am really curious to know how it is you think of it?

JH: I think what you’re talking about, a failure of expectations, is more a function of play than the aporia of failure that can shut down a work, a line of work or even a career. When in play, one’s work is given enough weight that it can push back against the artist’s expectations. This has the effect of shifting the boundaries and rules of play. It’s an imaginative opening up. If you are in the midst of that, you’re in the sweet spot of artmaking! There can be no stakes or success without failure. The failures and the adjustments in response are what defines the values of a work of art (and for that matter the artist’s sensibility). On another level I build a bit of failure into my photographs. I don’t want my photographs to be brilliant like Cartier-Bresson’s or Walker Evans’s pictures, instead I need them to be basic, generic. I take pictures of nature, buildings, my children, and paintings I care about. Their basicness emphasizes not just the photographic object but the objective of photography – to see and remember segments of the world. Importantly where there’s failure there’s an opening. And that opening where my photographs fail becomes the place where I can begin to paint.



James Hyde: FAST FORWARD (DAVIS), 2007, acrylic Flashed paint on paper on archival inkjet print, 44" x 58 1/2"

Lucas Blalock is a photographer and writer living in Brooklyn, NY.