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Paul Cowan at MCA Chicago

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART CHICAGO

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Paul Cowan, installation view at Young Art, Los Angeles

What do you consider to be the earliest mature works that led you to your current paintings and installations?

I imagine most of my work is always in progress or provisional. I first noticed something like this—and embraced it—in these paintings I was making of music notes. They are just the iconic five-line stave, either accompanied by a music note, or absent of a note, but “colored” in with paint. Either way they served as a template for composition. They consider the quickness and leg-

ibility of both those spaces (sheet music and abstract painting). A humorous conflation of their relationship, it offered something fast, concise and familiar. It was thinking about economy, legibility, latency and decision-making, all through the notion of painting.

Many of your works address the long history of painting through seemingly naïve means—fishing lures hooked to monochrome canvases or minimal abstract compositions painted by commercial sign painters. To call them readymades or found objects feels inaccurate. How do you think of them?

It's definitely something in the vicinity of readymade or found object, but I haven't felt a complete urge to worry about that. It's something that suspends that specificity.

Painting with paint is beautiful, something I love! I wanted to perpetuate and celebrate painting's model. It's always been a playful strategy to remove the actual paint and still use its structure: the fabrics offer a synthesis of a monochrome or the printed fabrics a compression of an all over patterned painting. It's like the moment after you push the "flatten image" button in Photoshop. That conflation of layers is important. It's a way to still share them, but not meditate on them as a process of painting or to fetishize painting. It's a subversion that is not meant to discount the tradition of painting, but one that wants to skirt that zone. Flatness is important to me. It's retardant or resistant in a way, making it harder for one to invest in that traditional notion. There is an economy to that flatness, like how a jpeg, once flattened, has a new finite state and a new ability.

How does collaboration fit into your practice?

Jose is one of the sign painters I work with who physically makes the paintings. It started out and has continued to be a point of exchange: hiring him to produce his traditional signs, which are usually intended for grocery stores, sans text. The paintings use his set of motifs that he has developed and mastered over the last 30 or 40 years, celebrating them in a new space, in a realm of abstract painting. The work teeters between collaboration and fabrication by dispersing the creative act among more individuals than just me. It's a way of pawning off that creative act on to another who takes pride in that position: Jose receives instruction and translates that in "his" way. To me, that way is far more eloquent, economic and beautiful than I could ever do.

This winter you will exhibit a monochrome wall mural infused with fragrant, essential oil at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. How is this installation to be experienced: literally through the eye and nose, or does it reside more in the imagination?

I've done this piece a number of times recently. It is very much experienced through the eye and nose, though peripherally. It's a futile gesture at best, mostly humoring the idea of giving paint agency, or allowing it to "perform" in a way. Sometimes it consists of simply painting the walls of the gallery white and mixing in an essential oil. Other times it uses a colored paint with the oils, making it more blatant and frontal. At the MCA, I imagine it will have the effect of full disguise; a wall painting by Martin Creed has been up for quite some time. It's really great! But it's time for it to come down, I guess, so my work, in a way, restores the main entry walls to the white that they once were, and assumedly always will be. It's like the mural is multi-tasking! It's covering an old piece, restoring the wall to its standard, and acts inadvertently as another piece. It's a time piece in a way, playing out its obsolescence, rendering the experience of it to be more speculative.

Your latest works are metal dividers commonly used as privacy screens between urinals. What place do these have within your overall practice?

They point to the concerns of distribution and circulation that is maybe less apparent in other works. They're very literal demonstrators: the collected handprints and smudges inherent to the install process are purposely left on the metal surface. It's a humorous nod towards the way that a utilitarian task can pose as a creative gesture. I suppose it's also a way to show a loss of authorship or a more collective one, so that in their next install and exhibition they will most likely continue to gather the prints of those handling them. They advocate for a sort of thinking around my practice, a cue to those approaching the other works. It also shows how these interests are not bound only to painting, but can be found as an agent outside of that, again as a way to alleviate that strict painting posture. *(Paul Cowan interviewed by Christopher Y. Lew)*