ED MOSES: Cross-Section

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As early as 1940, Clement Greenberg – the arbiter of American High Modernism – had denounced the literary tendency in painting as a “confusion of the arts.” Since the 17th century, one art form – literature – had come to dominate all others, he claimed. And in doing so, “the subservient ones [were] perverted and distorted; they [were] forced to deny their own nature in an effort to attain the effects of the dominant art,” as he put forth in “Towards a Newer Laocoon.” It was thus the modernist painter’s task to hunt painting back to its own medium, whereupon it would uniquely and ontologically just be. Ultimately, this entailed making the picture plane more and more shallow until it flattened out completely, emphasizing nothing but the real and material plane – the actual surface of the canvas itself.

Ed Moses’ resin paintings – conceived at the tail end of Abstract Expressionism’s run – seem to fit the Greenbergian bill. Which brings us to the work’s process of making. First Moses laid down un-stretched canvas in the sun to achieve discoloration, after which time the canvases were applied to the wall – still un-stretched – where he applied masking tape and snapped colored chalk lines onto the painting’s surface. The final step was applying resin to the back of the canvas, where the liquid was allowed to seep through to the paintings front, preserving – and showcasing – the canvas, lines and tape. By submitting to the chemical reaction of the resin, the work’s front side literally became its back side. Hence the painting became a self-contained thing, a tautological object constructed by a process – or constraint – related to the material nature of the canvas.

It would appear, then, that Moses had produced a self-referential object, an art form in and of itself, just as Greenberg had desired. But as Roland Barthes argued about Pop Art – a movement that reactively sought to abandon all reference to Modernism – meaning is clever. Drive it away, and it comes galloping back. In the resin paintings, what returns is the reference to Native American culture in the form of Navajo textiles, which we see not only in the pattern of the lines but also in some of the titles which were derived from Elizabeth Hegemann’s book Navaho Trading Days. But as John Yau has noted of the resin paintings, this reference is not a simple act of appropriation. Rather, the motifs Moses chose closely represent the act of weaving. And so we circle back around to the blurring of aesthetic boundaries, as the resin paintings present impossible objects to pin down to one art movement or form. They are, at once, Greenbergian and beyond.
Throughout the 20th century, the grid, according to Rosalind Krauss, announced “modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.” As she put it, the grid “is what art looks like when it turns it back on nature.” Tautologically redoubling the woven canvas upon which it is painted, the grid points to the ground-zero of culture. However, because the grid was a readymade for abstract painters, it could only ever be repeated not invented. The pulse beating at the heart of this modular repetition was thus the quest for innovation. Paradoxically, how does one do the same thing over and over again without ever repeating oneself? For Moses the answer was to diagonalize the grid. And in so doing, Greenberg's dreaded illusionism seeps back into the picture plane, even though the picture plane tenaciously remains flat.

In Moses’ case, the grid further indexes the rule-governed process of the painting’s own making. As in building construction, Moses starts by establishing an existing standard: a wooden straight edge, along which he runs his tracs of standardized widths. Like a two-by-four, this standard convention is deployed to lay down methodically layer upon layer of variously colored grids. The systematic laying down of the grid – the building up of the surface while flattening it – allows for depth and surface to signify simultaneously. There’s a precedent for the use of standardized tools in Marcel Duchamp’s Three Standard Stoppages. His work produced a joke about the meter, one made through a chance operation: when a thread one meter long falls straight from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane, twisting as it pleases, it creates a new image of the unit of length. Which is to say, the only thing standard about Duchamp’s “units of length” is the gravity that determined them.

By laying down the grid onto a canvas placed onto a horizontal plane, gravity is also indexed in Moses' painting. But the resulting paradox is not to be found in the tool of its own making, as with Three Standard Stoppages. Inversely the paradox in Moses' grids is to be found in the contradiction of what his standardized tool produces within the visual plane. For what rises back up from this ground-zero of culture – from this diagonalized grid that turns its back on nature – is the tried and true architectural structure of the trellis: that open framework of lattice of interwoven pieces of wood normally made to support and display climbing plants. This returns the contraction that the abstractionists preceding Moses repressed: turn your back on nature, in search of culture’s origin, you will only ever come face-to-face with nature again.
In “Sense and Sensibility,” written in 1973, Rosalind Krauss famously held out against reading an artwork’s meaning solely through its historical context, that is, “within the logic of paternity – of the sets of aesthetic lineage that make up the history of modern art.” What this paternal mode of interpretation eclipses is the intellectual and material investigation that artworks might share even though they look quite different. For example, sequential art movements – Minimalism and Post-Minimalism in this case – tenaciously obscure what the naïve viewer can clearly see: that Robert Morris’ mirrored cubes make the same phenomenological investigation as his felt pieces, even though the mediums are dissimilar. In the same vein, Moses’ apparition paintings – produced in the 1980s – would suffer the same fate of misinterpretation, should they be read sequentially vis-à-vis the grid paintings of the prior decade.

At first glance the meaning of the apparition paintings would appear to be the swapping out of the structural element that characterized the grid paintings, giving us instead a “semitransparent watery world” as John Yau has put it. But looking closer, one can see that the grid is still in there, under multiple aqueous layers of paint. As such, the apparition paintings still adhere to the structural process of the diagonalized grid – moving toward the trellis structure by building layer upon layer of fugitive liquid – all the while falling short of the architectural referent one had come to expect in the prior grid paintings. In so doing, the apparition paintings dissolve the expectations of arrival so common in modern geometric abstraction. This staining of the canvas furthermore harkens back to the resin paintings, as the waterlogged grid is produced without the standard convention of a tool or ruler.

Ambiguously sited between the resins and the grids, both returning and departing from the process of their making, the apparition paintings enact a type of becoming: that indeterminate, formless state between the philosophical oppositions of being and nothing. In this way, the apparitions stand in relation to Philip Guston’s burly yet illusive abstract work of the early fifties. Made up of a loosely discernable lattice of orthogonal architectural marks emerging from an ethereal ground, Guston’s abstractions seem to be on the verge of becoming or, on the other hand, on the verge of collapse. As such, they reflect Guston’s concern to have his paintings occupy a shimmering space in the center of a disintegrating and reforming referent. Likewise in Moses’s apparition work, one discerns the structural presence within the painting in-as-much as one senses the grid fading away into nothingness.

Antman, 1987
oil and acrylic on canvas
courtesy of Dallas Price
Should we think of the stain paintings within the tradition of mark making – as historians have positioned Cy Twombly’s work – we then discover a rhizomatic character to the work. Simply, Moses’ paintings defy any narrative arc that conventional art historians are trained to impose on an artist’s corpus. Rather, the work produces multiplicities. This is most evident when Moses recounts his process: “...I learn by repetition, and if I can’t get it right, I do it over and over and over again. And I think this is how bodies of work appear. I’m not satisfied, so I try it this way, then I go left, I go around, I go behind. Often when I’m engaged in that process – this is where the rub comes – I’m working along and something outside wiggles and says ‘Look at me.’ ‘Yes I see you,’ I say, ‘but I’m going in this other direction.’” With Moses, it’s a matter of continual reorientation.

With the stain paintings, this reorientation is exactly what has occurred. To be sure, the grid is still there. However, it’s gone in a different direction. Now it is reduced to a gesture, constructed of two axes produced by two movements. First paint is laid down vertically on the canvas, moving from top to bottom. Then the surfaced is squeegeed horizontally, moving from left to right. A performative call and response is thus enacted. For the initial gesture of laying down paint on the canvas is something Moses can then react to, establishing a one-to-one relationship between the painter and his work. But we must be careful not to confuse Moses’ gesture – another operational constraint – with self-expression. Rather, this constraint is intended to eliminate the capriciousness of projecting one’s ego onto the act of painting.

In this way, the stain paintings – like the resin, grid and apparition paintings that preceded them – are again a repetitive exploration: painting as an act. And yet, with the stains a new destructive aspect enters the picture in that something is set up with one gesture that is subsequently wiped away with another. This act calls to mind the creation and destruction of sand mandalas within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition; after colored sand has been meticulously laid down it is then ritualistically destroyed. In so doing, the intention is to symbolize the transitory nature of life, not to mention the effacement of the creator’s ego. The stain paintings’ evocation of sand mandalas instances, yet again, Moses’ interest in referencing cultural traditions through an abstract process or operation – a repeated act – never through the appropriation of a design element associated with a given tradition.
In the streets of Paris – over the course of the 1960s – Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé perfected the art of décollage: those “recordings of the gestures of the anonymous lacerators of [advertising] billboards,” as Benjamin Buchloh has put it. Simply, the artists would tear down multi-layered chunks of poster board that had been built up for more than 15 years. Bringing them back to their studio, they would continue to tear away at their surface to produce what Villeglé coined “inaction painting.” And yet, this term is misleading because there was indeed an action at hand: “Tearing removes [the poster] from its context and transposes it from the realm of the event to the realm of the absolute,” Villeglé argued. Likewise, Moses’ formless paintings are produced by first building up the surface with paint, only to scratch away at this surface – tearing and scraping at it to reveal multiple layers of marks – which produces a kind of ruin of the painting’s making. That said, the effect of this event produces the inverse of décollage, in that Moses builds the painting up only to tear it down from the absolute in order to return it to the materialist, corporal level of its own decay.

Should we further consider this suite of paintings as being formless – employing Georges Bataille’s notion of the term whereby all categories of thought are non-differentiated – what we then encounter is not the street versus the body, but rather an uncanny, psychological collapse of the two. The wall of the street redoubles the canvas of the painting, while the tearing down of the poster redoubles the scratching of the painting’s surface or skin. Meanwhile, if the décollagiste’s lacerations implied a kind of graffiti, then Moses's scratching similarly implies a kind of scarring of the body. In this way, the formless paintings present a body-as-painting, rather than an index of the body that made the painting.

In this case, the mark is simultaneously an anti-mark. In Moses's hands, it paradoxically makes itself present by fading away, as if the mark were a stitch or suture. Which brings us back to the wall. As Krauss explains in The Optical Unconscious: “The graffitist goes up to a wall. He makes a mark. We could say that he makes it to register his presence…with his declaration, ‘I am here.’ But we would be wrong to say this. Insofar as his declaration is a mark, it is inevitably structured the moment after its making…Thus even at the time the marker strikes, he strikes in a tense that is over…” And if the mark on the wall is like a scar on the body’s skin, then it’s evidence of a suture that creates a wound rather than heals it: the wound implied by a mark that at once designates its maker’s presence and effaces him.
With their brittle, monochromatic surfaces, Moses' craquelure paintings would appear to oppose the aesthetic mandate of the formless paintings. However, if we look at them operationally, the two bodies of work are conceptually isometric: the result of two different procedural means employed towards a similar end. Observing the craquelures more closely, we can see that the surface is once more a type of skin covered with a series of wounds or scars. As such, the top monochromatic layer breaks open to reveal the inner “body” of the painting. This effect is achieved through a combined process of chaos and control.

While the grid paintings were made with the most controlled means – employing a standardized convention – in the craquelures Moses aims for extreme formlessness by submitting the canvas to a chemical reaction. Science now takes over, although the pre-conceived constraint is not entirely gone, remaining in the form of controlled entropy. Beginning on the horizontal plane – as always – Moses lays down a ground of paint, usually black or white. On top of that – after the paint has done its chemistry due to what Moses calls his “secret sauce” – another layer of paint is added in a different color. As that dries, it cracks through to the bottom layer due to a chemical reaction. Sometimes Moses beats the canvas from behind to manipulate the patterns formed by the cracking process on the painting's surface. In this way, there is a “push pull” operation between the randomness of the chemical process and the physical manipulation by Moses's own hands, hence the sense of simultaneous chaos and control the paintings evoke.

The universal claim made by modernists – from Kazimir Malevich to Yves Klein to Frank Stella – was that the monochrome's zero degree game made it impervious to anything but itself. The monochrome was thus ontological, as Carl Andre said of Stella's Stripe Paintings: “Frank Stella has found it necessary to paint stripes. There is nothing else in his painting.” This claim, of course, was mythological. Malevich's paintings were bound up with the Soviet Avant-Garde, Klein's with Rosicrucianism and Stella's with Minimalism. At the end of this legacy, the craquelures literally crack this modernist myth, in that the painting is momentarily a pure monochrome before it begins to destroy itself. Hovering between painting and sculpture – in that zone Donald Judd called “specific objects” – the monochromatic craquelures have as their content the process of their own making, which exists simultaneously outside themselves – the punches made beyond their frames – and within themselves – the scars indexed within their frames. As such, the craquelures are not things in and of themselves. Rather they instance the inside out of monochrome painting.