Surfacing
Looking at the Paintings of Ben Reeves

M.E. Sparks

Look, harder. Look this way, now that way. Look softly. Blur your vision, the way you do when you open a Magic Eye book. Move the image away inch by inch, looking and not looking. Then you see it—hold it. Allow this glossed gaze to idle. Warm and hollow but weighted with a fuzzy density. Don't pin it down. Rest lightly in this dislocated space between liquid and solid.

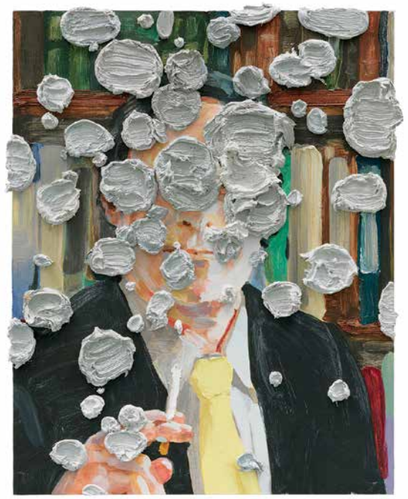
Raindrops slide across the window of the 99 bus. Some shudder and pause, long enough to look: into, at, within. Each drop is a microcosm, an upside-down world contained. A refraction, yes, but also embodiment. Cradled within its curved form is a sliver of sky grey, the red of a passing roof, hairlike strands of power lines. The drop is met by another, and two worlds slide into one. Eyes focus but do not harden, hoping to merge.

We represent water as blue. Our awareness of this fallacy does not stop us from naming it blue: "the blue lake." A mirror image, yes, but also manifestation. Like its counterpart raindrop, the lake carries its surrounding colour. Does its rippling surface reflect the moon's light, or hold it so deeply that it becomes the light—consists of it? Of course it is it, in unison and singular. Is there a difference between a surface that mirrors and a surface that contains—that is both a representation of and the representation itself?

Throughout history, painting has performed as a window, a surface that we obligingly look into rather than at. The paintings of Ben Reeves fall into step with this history, and yet possess a distinct gait of their own. Rooted in representation, painted from both memory and observation, and at times large enough to enter as we would a doorway, the alternative realities presented within Reeves's work are occupied by trees, bodies of water, tents and figures. What these paintings also represent is paint itself. Looking at this work, we are confronted with the palpable, earthly matter of pigment, oil and canvas. Comparable to looking through the bus window, it is the moment when our focus shifts from far to near, the distant view suddenly eclipsed by fingerprints, scratches, dust, our own reflection and the raindrop. We are now looking *at* the window rather than *through*, never quite able to hold *through* and *at* in unison. However, Reeves's paintings allow us to look both ways simultaneously: to see the window as entrance and as opaque, material surface. As the viewer, we find ourselves in an unfamiliar position between there and here, in and out, illusion and matter, picture and object. Face to face with these picture-objects,[1] we must look in a new way, in many ways, all at once.

Alpine Tents (2017, page 15) depicts three foregrounded tents framed by rising strata of pastel mountains. The longer we look, the more the painting fragments until it becomes, quite simply, itself: combinations of colour applied in a plethora of movements. Congregated masses of paint, seemingly smeared by fingers, are dusted with flakes of dried paint, while other marks have been squeezed directly from the tube onto stained and scraped colour. There are myriad gestures here that, as we move away inch by inch, coalesce once again, as if pieced back together to form a recognizable image. French philosopher Hubert Damisch writes that "a portrait, a landscape, a form only allows itself to be recognized in painting insofar as we cease to view the painting for what it is, materially speaking, and insofar as consciousness steps back in relation to reality to produce as an image the object represented."[2] Although *Alpine Tents* falls into a familiar category of landscape painting, the physical tactility and dimensionality of its surface complicates and obstructs a straightforward view through the "window" of the canvas. The painting stubbornly asserts its reality as object over image. Perhaps, then, the painting itself can be viewed as a landscape of its own. What could be considered a topographic survey of a painting's surface allows for a reflexive exploration of its own material terrain.

From Rembrandt van Rijn, to Vincent van Gogh, to Frank Auerbach and Lucien Freud (the so-called thick-pigment crew),[3] the three-dimensionality of a painted surface in relation to, or perhaps in competition with, representational imagery has evolved throughout art history and persists within contemporary practices. The work of Allison Schulnik portrays haunting subjects, often monstrous, fantastical and feminine. In addition to what is represented, it is Schulnik's method of application, the way in which her paint consumes its support, that becomes bodily, signifying a fluidity both seductive and repulsive. Described as "somatic and coagulant, … intent upon reaching the threshold where the oil paint signals its own truth as morphological matter,"[4] the paintings of Schulnik underscore, in the same manner as Reeves's, their own sculptural materiality and objecthood while remaining loyal to representational forms. Schulnik's *Centaurette Cup* (2016) is slathered with dirty creams and yellows, from which stiffened tendrils extend and curl over the edges of the frame. We are presented once again with the bygone window. Smudgy shadows, the hint of a table edge and perspectival depth guide our eye *into* the painting, and yet its material opacity prevents us from sinking in too deep, as if holding our heads above water. The audacious gooeyness of paint is even more prominent in Reeves's *Smokers* series (2007–09). In *Neurologist* (2009), suspended

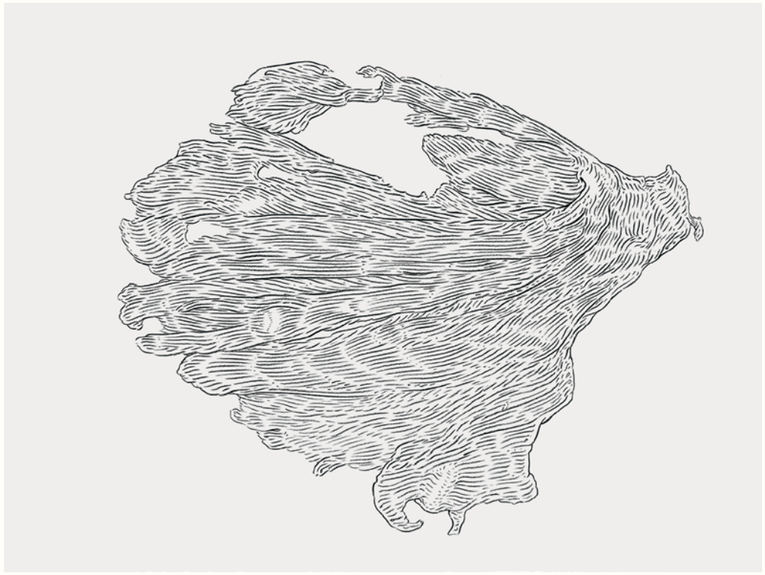


clouds of cigarette smoke appear weighted and sludge-like, occupying the canvas like barnacles or tumorous lumps. What sets these works apart from Schulnik's surfaces are the openings between the smoke clouds, through which we catch glimpses of tenderly painted lips, dry-brushed nostrils, a buttery lemon tie. Our gaze descends into this flat and deep space but cannot travel far before encountering the smoky globs' rising ridges. There is a digging out required, a scrambling upward, a resurfacing. Engaging the viewer in a push-pull between illusion and material, the work's pronounced and protruding surface delays passive absorption. In the spaces where illusion persists, we earnestly take the plunge. Just as quickly, we are dragged back to the surface, gulping for air—gulping viscous grey matter.

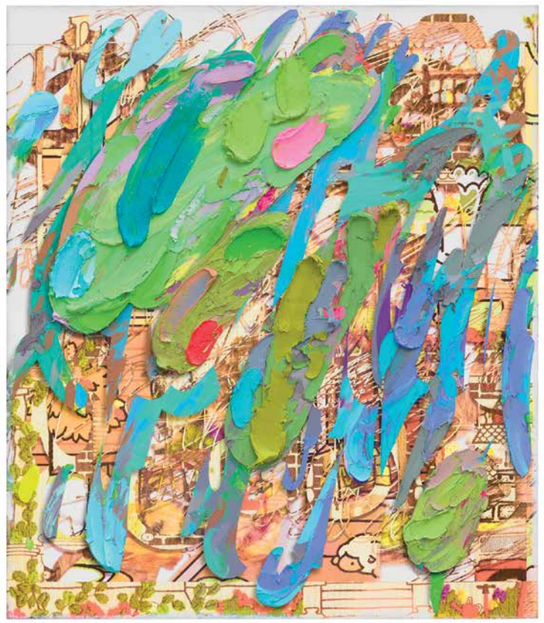
Prior to *Smokers*, Reeves developed the *Drawing Painting* series (2003–06), in which painted brushstrokes are isolated and re-presented with drawn charcoal line. The meticulous, delicate form of *Goose* (2006) imitates the swift liquid stroke of an absent brush. The form appears frozen mid-air: a goose in flight, exhumed from the impasto surface of a Tom Thomson landscape.[5] The *Drawing Painting* series functions somewhat like an instruction manual for Reeves's broader practice, prompting us to look at each painting with renewed awareness of surface and mark. As observed delineations of a brushstroke's grain, this depiction of painting, as both action and object, recalls Roy Lichtenstein's *Brushstrokes* series from the mid-1960s. A satirical response to the gestural mark-making of abstract expressionism, Lichtenstein's series of brushstrokes, rendered in his enlarged comic-strip style, present the painted mark as a caricature of itself.[6] In

LEFT Allison Schulnik
Centaurette Cup, 2016
oil on canvas
stretched over board
10" x 10"
Courtesy of ZieherSmith, New York

RIGHT *Neurologist*, 2009
oil on linen over panel
36" x 28"
Courtesy of Equinox Gallery
Photo: Rachel Topham Photography



Goose, 2006
charcoal on paper
30 ¼" x 44"
Private Collection



TOP Laura Owens
Untitled, 2016
oil, flashe and screen
printing ink on linen
69" x 60"
Courtesy of the Artist;
Gavin Brown's enterprise,
New York, Rome; Sadie Coles
HQ, London; and Galerie
Gisela Capitain, Cologne

BOTTOM *12th avenue lemon*
2011
oil on burlap over panel
36 ¼" x 28"
Private Collection

comparison, Reeves's brushstrokes are transposed through the medium of drawing, which functions more as a form of topographic mapping, tracing the contours of surface terrain and elevation. This work asserts paint as its subject matter—as an observed object autonomous from the objects depicted within its own surface. Rather than a parody of the painted gesture, Reeves's drawings convey an intimate portrait of paint, a process of slow looking and a devotion to every inch of the painted surface.

The idea that painting becomes its own portrait[7] retains conceptual significance in the work of contemporary artists who approach paint as a physical, self-referential and historical subject. The self-aware ontological state of painting about painting[8] is realized through ever-expanding approaches to medium specificity. From Bram Bogart's massive sculpted brushstrokes and Jonathan Lasker's ridged, impasto grids to the similarly dimensional work of Trudy Benson, Alex Olson and Laura Owens, these artists paint about painting in part through their shared approach to what could be called the "self-conscious brushstroke": a painted mark not necessarily created by the gesture that it immediately signifies, but rather consciously constructed to allude to or mimic that particular gesture. These marks are, in a sense, fabricated indices that often reference historical painterly gestures. Like Reeves's drawn brushstrokes, they are *representations of* painted marks, and yet they also exist *as* painted marks, thereby becoming hypostatic signs: aware of their own constructed nature while imparting this self-awareness to the viewer.[9]

The pronounced physicality of Laura Owens's work often contends with its convincing illusion of shadow and shallow depth. Similar to Reeves, Owens assembles her paintings through an array of methods, including the use of digital and printed imagery. The material and pictorial fragmentation of her surfaces stops us from falling in too quickly, too freely; we are instead buffeted by heavy buildups of paint. The greens and blues of *Untitled* (2016) are schmeared[10] across a silkscreened background. Trompe l'oeil shadows optically lift the painted strokes to hover above the flat ground—prompting momentary distrust of the actual shadows cast by the thick piling of paint. The looping shapes of the brushstrokes indicate expressionistic gestures, and yet their controlled edges and partial "deletions" suggest the digital sharpness of a Photoshop brush tool. Created by one kind of gesture (or in some cases, an amalgam of gestures and methods) to imply an alternative gesture, these forms become a self-conscious motif of the brushstroke.

This type of hypostatic construction of the painted mark brings to mind Reeves's enlarged raindrop series. The sculpted slicks of paint in *12th avenue lemon* (2011) depict a triad of refracted colour within a single raindrop. Both object and gesture are magnified—the raindrop, the scale of the mark and its corresponding brush size, as well as the artist's hand implicit in their formation. These marks are applied as if with quick, singular, impressionistic motions. They signify a particular kind of gesture rather than having come directly from it. Unlike Owens's works, which merge disparate found imagery, Reeves's paintings depict observed spaces, thereby adding another layer to what is represented within the painted surface. There is a bumping of heads between observed exterior space and the recursive interior space of painting. *12th avenue lemon* contains within it the self-referential depiction of the painted brushstroke and, of course—as we step back to see beyond the paint as paint—the representation of a raindrop: a carrier form, bending its surrounding colour and simultaneously existing as the colour itself. A reflection, yes, but also reification.

Many paintings in the *Floating among Phantoms* exhibition employ cut and collaged canvas in the form of foliage, tree branches and full moons. Freed from its role as support, the canvas becomes its own subject matter within the painting, both tangible object and self-referential, painterly mark. In *Night View* (2018, page 26), stained canvas shapes are adhered to stretched burlap. This layered field of monochromatic blues confuses the distinction between foreground and background. A warm ultramarine shape—what we assume to be a slice of receding lake and sky—optically pushes forward to momentarily sit in front of the cooler indigos of cut canvas, slipping between a positive and a negative form. The dividing foreground line of a silhouetted tree trunk defines this otherwise ambiguous image as landscape, and yet the tree feels provisional, as if about to dislocate and droopily float away. Reeves upends the assumption of canvas as neutral, passive ground and instead calls attention to its corporeality, shadows, raw edges and protruding threads, a nod to modernism's recognition of a painting's material and structural properties. The collaged surface pushes outward, as if expanding with a breath, ever so slightly reducing the gap between painting and viewer.

In her whimsical, symbol-rich paintings, Sojourner Truth Parsons uses cut canvas to delineate bold, figurative forms. Parsons works with a repertoire of recurring characters often tied to complexities of sociopolitical identity and stereotypically feminine objects (such as butterflies, flowers and bows—a resistance, shared by Schulnik, to painting's male-dominated history). *Everybody anyone* (2017) depicts a jagged, collaged sunflower set against an inky ground. Like Reeves, Parsons embraces the rough, raised and misaligned edges of cut canvas. The painting is as much a representation of a sunflower as it is a representation of painting's elemental materiality,

physical limitations and weighted histories. In these collaged works, both artists approach the notion of "the painting within the painting,"[11] as each shaped canvas cutout becomes a nested painting of its own. About Parsons's work, the critic Andrew Berardini writes: "Perhaps not an abstraction, but rather these layered shreds are purely what they are, a painter finding in the destruction of other canvases a rebirth in their combination."[12] The cut canvas may bear the form of a figure, flower or tree, and yet resolutely remains as itself.

The construction of a painting through the reformation of its basic components—paint and canvas—is a recursive action, a folding in on itself or, perhaps, a kind of self-cannibalism, a swallowing of its own tail. Reeves's *Suspended Leaf* (2014, page 27) slides into this self-referential realm through the use of collaged paint skins, peeled from the bottoms of dried-out paint cans and buckets. These indexical forms, which point to the paint's previous container, line the top edge of *Suspended Leaf* and appear strangely, refreshingly, out of place. They do not hesitate in their declaration of the painting as a painting, of paint as paint. It is interesting to compare this work to *Neurologist* (2009), in which the clinging piles of paint still try to be something else. Here, in the shape of its own skin, the paint is boldly, unapologetically itself.

Like the raindrop, a painting holds within its frame a multidimensional, microcosmic reflection of its surroundings, its histories and the present moment. And just as the raindrop's image is never fixed, a painting is always changing, depending on your vantage point. In a 2015 interview, the German painter Charline von Heyl describes how, when looking at painting, "thoughts shift, attention shifts, focus shifts. One can never quite take the image of the painting away in

Sojourner Truth Parsons
Everybody anyone, 2017
canvas, archival adhesive and acrylic on canvas
60" x 60"
Courtesy of the Artist and Downs & Ross, New York

one's mind, since there will be no one image. If it has clicked, one needs to go back to it, to stay in relation to it. The love of painting is also the love of one's potential of making any one painting one's own."[13] As our eyes travel across the painted surfaces included in *Floating among Phantoms*, it is as if we are looking from above, following the topography of oil and pigment, of opacities and transparencies, of mounds, slurries, dabs, scraps, cuts and pours: "Here the image content is wholly absorbed into the depths of a bottomless blue void. The image becomes the primordial soup where the eye no longer finds its anchor point, thus elucidating once again this painting's productive instability."[14] We traverse this goopy, soupy terrain as much with our bodies as we do our eyes, searching for our bearings in the liminal space between here and there, liquid and solid. As image and object bind together, merging through the turbulence of their common surface, we begin to see in a new way: *through* and *at*, in unison. Look, as many worlds slide into one.

---

[1] The picture-object is fundamental to the emergence of modernism in Western art. Édouard Manet's integration of the substrate's physical qualities with his subject matter represented a radical shift toward a painterly self-consciousness (which, almost a century later, was typified through Clement Greenberg's theory of modernist painting's self-investigation and emphasis on surface). Michel Foucault explains: "Manet reinvents … the picture-object, the picture as materiality, the picture as something coloured which clarifies an external light and in front of which, or about which, the viewer revolves." Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting* (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 30–31.

[2] Hubert Damisch, quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 247. Here, Damisch is summarizing Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), 67.

[3] Art critic Robert Enright provides this epithet in Allison Schulnik, "Brilliant Rejects," interview by Robert Enright, *Border Crossings*, August 2009.

[4] James Campbell, "Allison Schulnik," *Border Crossings*, September 2011.

[5] Reeves's *Drawing Painting* series references historical paintings, including the work of Tom Thomson and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. This is often indicated through titles, such as *Wild Geese (After Tom Thomson)* (2004).

[6] Ara H. Merjian, "Roy Lichtenstein (Review)," *Frieze*, March 2013, https://frieze.com/article/roy-lichtenstein.

[7] James Elkins, *What Painting Is* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 114. Elkins proposes that Rembrandt's self-portraits, with their brushy impasto surfaces, are not only "a self-portrait of the painter, but … also a self-portrait of the paint."

[8] One could argue that there is no painting that is not about painting, as every painted gesture is situated within and bound to its own history.

[9] Elkins, *What Painting Is*, 44. Elkins refers to hypostasis from a religious perspective, in which inert matter is infused with a spirit or inner meaning. Alternatively, hypostasis in literature refers to when a character becomes aware of their place within the story or their own fictitious existence. It is this self-awareness and self-referentiality that defines the "self-conscious brushstroke."

[10] "A schmear, as in the act of spreading cream cheese on a bagel, connotes excess: it may come from an impulse to ingratiate, or to indulge." Andrianna Campbell, "Dash, Fragment, Bracket," *Even*, Fall 2016, http://evenmagazine.com/dash-fragment-bracket-andrianna-campbell.

[11] Laura Owens, "Still Lifing: Conversation with Laura Owens," in conversation with Stephen Berens and Jan Tumlir, *X-Tra*, Winter 2014, http://x-traonline.org/article/still-li%EF%AC%81ng-conversation-with-laura-owens.

[12] Andrew Berardini, "Stardust Tears: Sojourner Truth Parsons's 'Crying in California,'" *Momus*, October 2016, http://momus.ca/stardust-tears-sojourner-truth-parsonss-crying-in-california.

[13] Charline von Heyl, "Our Love for Painting," interview by Isabelle Graw, *Dusseldorf: Paintings from the Early 90s*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Petzel Gallery, 2015), 44.

[14] Stephan Berg, *Laura Owens* (Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2011), 14–15.