



Two Worlds Colliding

Paintings in which analog and digital meet

BY ED SCHAD

A YEAR AGO JOE REIHSEN would turn cagey when asked how his paintings were made, and perhaps justifiably so. His perfect surfaces, crisp flat finishes, and trompe l'oeil depictions of impasto and brushstrokes certainly seemed like clever, even proprietary, tricks. Visitors to “Clean Title, No Accidents,” Reihsen’s spring 2013 show at Anat Ebgi in Los Angeles, could be seen squinting their eyes and tilting their heads to the sides of the works, trying to detect any gradient or texture or bump. Many thought the paintings were digital printouts. Reihsen

would correct this misunderstanding with a cool and polite “No, they are painted,” but would offer nothing more.

Reihsen’s taciturn days are over. Now he will take a visitor around his studio, showing each stage of his process. For the first layer, he plops drops of paint randomly on the surface that his paint roller picks up and spreads them out into a pattern. Then come brushstrokes and more traditional applications of color, which are shaded and altered with spray paint while wet until the ground is totally even. To finish each

work, Reihsen is now doing something new: He takes pre-made shapes of paint, dried on sheets of hanging plastic in his studio, and applies them like skin to the top. More spray painting seals the outer layer.

The completed works come across almost like bubble-gum Richard Diebenkorns: Pastel colors like the palette of Hypercolor T-shirts trace out and come to resemble the very topographies of beachfront and desert that inspired the man from Ocean Park. Reihsen’s layers work like veils. They slide, float, and move around the rectangle, sometimes compressing into solids, other times evaporating into voids. The painter’s work is stronger on a smaller scale, but he is making ground on his larger sizes—repetition and sustained effort are paying off. The skin works make their debut at Brand New Gallery in Milan this month.

It is not nature but, rather, the computer that sparked the 34-year-old Reihsen’s interest in painting. Like many artists his age and younger, he made art with early versions of Photoshop before he ever bought a tube of Winsor & Newton. “Integrating the digital tools with my paintings started in 1996, when I was still in high school,” Reihsen says. “My parents were generous enough to spend what was probably a month’s salary on a very early digital point-and-shoot camera. I would shoot my paintings with it and play with them in Photoshop and repaint them.”

His first show in L.A., in 2010, featured photographs of people in front of his paintings wearing elements and colors taken right from the surface of those same canvases, a seemingly mad, mad world along the lines of Ryan Trecartin, Brian Bress, and other artists whose physical universe is permeated by new digital realities. Even now, when Reihsen takes his paint skins and puts them on the work’s surface, he imagines the action more like manipulating a specific shape on a screen with a mouse than like collaging onto a canvas. Even when speaking, he will use computer terms to describe his method: He will “copy and paste, distort, warp, and rotate,” only to “scale up or scale down.”

The artist does not find himself at odds with the digital world. He even believes that it can increase our ability to interact with our flesh-and-blood environment. He identifies with Christopher Wool and Albert Oehlen—painters who mix the human gesture with the machine and whose obsessions are as much those of printing geeks as of traditional painters. But it is Eva Hesse and Clyfford Still, both geniuses of texture and surface seemingly at odds with flat screens and

A lot of body-focused surface stuff, 2014. Natural and synthetic polymers on panel, with aluminum frame, 25 x 20 in.



pixels, who really earn his admiration. There is a part of Reihesen that seems to long for a lush buildup of paint, a connection between art and skin that acts almost as a corrective to art's becoming more and more digital, as Hesse once added warmth and humanity to Minimalism.

If one takes a closer look at Reihesen's process, it is the deep materiality of Still and Hesse that resonates. Outside his studio stand towers made of reclaimed Douglas fir, a well-used forklift, and assorted shop tools, all part of his furniture business, called Blake Avenue Studios. Nothing about the shop is precious. Neither is the neighborhood in which it is located, a sliver of land between the 5 Freeway and the concrete-clad Los Angeles River north of Silverlake that Angelenos call Frogtown. The terrain is all industry and hard edges, a land of rough hands and tough negotiators.

Reihesen, who sold cars to pay his way through art school, fits right in. He seems to work constantly and can tell you the price of plywood on any given day. He is a Minnesota native who naturalized quickly to California cool, complete with wispy surfer hair. While his laid-back, good-natured demeanor mirrors the appearance of his paintings, his stride has a kind of bent urgency that denotes a workaholic. There is a blue-collar directness to Reihesen, who does not suffer fools and would seem too busy for delicate things like painting or societal polish.

Up a staircase from the woodshop, however, one finds a white studio, floor to ceiling a gleaming surface, a land apart. The room is empty save for finished paintings leaning against the wall, a camera on a tripod, a small woodstove for heat, and a table with a large Apple monitor and computer.

This split in Reihesen's character—the twin elements of digital maven and manual laborer—is exactly what makes him interesting. The bright studio and computer without the furniture workshop would not make any sense, in the same way that his paintings' pristine surfaces would not make any sense without those bits of extruding paint skins.

Much as the interaction of inorganic systems with the body was Hesse's question in the 1960s, Reihesen is drawn to the "collision of the biomorphic with the digital" in the age of Facebook and Twitter. He is a house divided, an old-school physical being in a digital world. The most urgent question of his painting is whether these two worlds ultimately have to be at odds or whether he can find a vocabulary that dissolves the split entirely. **MP**

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Levitate, 2014. Acrylic on birch panel with aluminum frame, 60 x 47 in.

TOP: Joe Reihesen, 2014.