

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Leidy Churchman

Press Packet

Yerebakan, Osman Can, and Leidy Churchman. "An Artist Whose Buddhist and Painting Practices Converge." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 5, 2020.

Mellin, Haley. "The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound." *Garage Magazine*, April 5, 2020.

Scott, Andrea K. "Leidy Churchman." *The New Yorker*, March 16, 2020, p. 14.

Fateman, Johanna. "Leidy Churchman." *4Columns*, March 6, 2020.

Marcus, Daniel. "I of the Storm." *Artforum* 58, no. 2, October 2019, pp. 170–79, 245.

Noor, Tausif, and Leidy Churchman. "Merging With: Leidy Churchman, Interviewed by Tausif Noor." *Bomb*, October 3, 2019.

Eisenman, Nicole. "Best of 2019." *Artforum* 58, no. 4, December 2019, pp. 158, 162–63.

Battaglia, Andy. "Crocodile Rock: Painter Leidy Churchman Cedes the Floor to No One in First Museum Survey." *ARTnews*, July 10, 2019.

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T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

ARTIST'S QUESTIONNAIRE

An Artist Whose Buddhist and Painting Practices Converge

Leidy Churchman's latest show encourages a focused, joyful kind of looking that feels deliberately at odds with our increasingly distracted world.



The artist Leidy Churchman in their Brooklyn studio with their work "Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)" (2020). Jacob Pritchard

By Osman Can Yerebakan

March 5, 2020

Tucked at the end of an unassuming alley in Red Hook, Brooklyn, amid 19th-century red brick houses originally built to accommodate fishermen, Leidy Churchman's studio feels like a refuge — a minimalist retreat that exudes the kind of tranquility found in the artist's meditative paintings. The 800-square-foot space, located on the first floor of a former industrial building, is unfurnished but for a trio of stainless-steel and wood work tables, which are entirely covered with palettes, brushes and oil paints

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— mostly Old Holland but Churchman, who uses “they” and “them” pronouns, favors Gamblin for white and sap green. On a breezy afternoon in February, they stood surrounded by five large-scale paintings — including “Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)” (2020), a vibrant landscape populated by monkeys and bears that’s based on an 18th-century Indian work by an unknown artist, and the abstract “Groundless Ground” (2020) — which they completed for “Earth Bound,” their current exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. Their dog, a black Saluki-and-Doberman mix named Sarah, sat alongside Churchman as they put the final touches on the works.

It’s been six months since the artist moved into this studio — previously, they rented a space on the Lower East Side not far from their Alphabet City apartment — and working in the former port neighborhood has grown on them. “I see trucks and forklifts coming and going, I hear people fixing motors and engines. I enjoy being the only artist in this building,” they say. But now that they’ve finished the 21 paintings for the Matthew Marks show, they admit they’re already eager to move on. “When I devour a space, I believe I am done and ready to go,” says Churchman, who spent just three years in their former studio. The sparse furnishings in the Red Hook space are, in part, a reflection of the fact that they are just passing through.

Churchman, 40, is known for their contemplative, detailed explorations of a broad array of themes relating to memory, pop culture and art history. If they have a signature, it is perhaps the diversity



The work “Karma Kagyu & Essex St. (Yellow Studio) (Devotion)” (2020), one of the new paintings on view at Churchman’s show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. Jacob Pritchard

Yerebakan, Osman Can, and Leidy Churchman. “An Artist Whose Buddhist and Painting Practices Converge.”
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of their subject matter, which has included exotic animals, Tibetan Buddhism, maps, online videos, paintings by other artists, from the French Post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau to the American Modernist Marsden Hartley, and book covers. In fact, they compare a painting to a good book, one that reveals new depths with each reading — though they often like to present multiple images within a single canvas without any clear hierarchy, as if inviting the viewer to sequence the narrative as they please. Last year, the more than 60 diverse paintings in the exhibition “Crocodile” at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College, which remains the largest survey of Churchman’s career to date, especially highlighted the artist’s wide-ranging interests. One work — “Don’t Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)” (2019), a 32-foot-long collagelike painting spread across the museum’s floor — included images of a scene from the 1982 movie “E.T.,” a notecard bearing a Buddhist Lojong slogan (“Abandon Any Hope of Fruition”) and a skunk captured mid-spray. Another painting, “Disappearing Acts” (2019), was inspired by the conceptualist pioneer Bruce Nauman’s “Contrapposto Studies, I through VII” (2015-16). “There is so much detail and nuance surrounding us,” they say about the abundance of seemingly ordinary images that we have the potential to overlook.

Buddhism, which Churchman has practiced for six years, is a primary theme in their new show. “Karma Kagyu & Essex St. (Yellow Studio) (Devotion)” (2020), a large yellow-drenched painting, shows a Buddhist ceremony taking place in a room that resembles both the Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in Woodstock, N.Y., which Churchman visited shortly before making it, and the artist Zoe Leonard’s former New York studio (some years after Leonard left that building, Churchman occupied the adjacent space and that connection lingered in their imagination). “Buddhadharma Fever” (2019), another vast painting in autumnal colors, is an ode to both a bedroom in Churchman’s father’s house in Maine, where they often spend time and sometimes paint in the garage, and to the same Woodstock monastery. “What I didn’t quite realize was that the monastery there is modeled after a traditional one in Tibet, and that we would actually be chanting in Tibetan,” they recall. “So much seeped in and manifested there — my yearslong Buddhadharma fever transitioned into something much roomier, an easy, breezy devotion that feels like letting go.”

Working in contrasting scales — “White Girl” (2019), which depicts a young woman on a kind of recumbent bicycle, measures just 9 by 11 inches — allows the artist to engage their viewer more actively in the practice of looking, inviting them to move closer to or farther from a canvas, an exercise they consider especially urgent in our era of iPhone snapshots that are forever an arm’s length away. “Looking at paintings is healthy for us,” Churchman says. The idea for “iPhone 11” (2019-20), a painting in which the device resembles a planet or spaceship floating within an infinite darkness, came to the artist while they were navigating the F.D.R. Drive en route to their studio: There, above the parkway, was a gigantic billboard promoting the phone’s three-lens technology, the positioning of which recalled a human face. Removed from their original context in Churchman’s work, those lenses seem to stare quizzically back at the viewer, all but demanding you stop and meet their concentrated gaze.

As we took shelter in the studio from the blustery day outside, Churchman made cups of espresso, opened a can of dolmades and answered T's Artist Questionnaire.

What is your day like? How much do you sleep? What's your work schedule?

My schedule depends a lot on my dog. If I don't bring her to the studio, I leave her with my Buddhist mentor, Gayle.

How many hours of creative work do you think you do?

Around eight hours every day, although it depends on whether I'm working from my studio, my apartment or Maine. It's a 10-hour drive from New York to my father's house, so when I go, I tend to spend a good amount of time there.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

I believe it was a sculpture that I made as an undergrad at Hampshire College in Massachusetts. I just took stuff — a coffee pot, for example — from all over the place and wired it together to create a human figure.



Churchman usually works alone in their studio, though their dog, Sarah, often keeps them company. Jacob Pritchard

Yerebakan, Osman Can, and Leidy Churchman. "An Artist Whose Buddhist and Painting Practices Converge." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 5, 2020.



While the artist makes large-scale paintings in their studio — pictured here is a selection of their tools and a jar of turpentine in their Red Hook space — they also make smaller works at their Alphabet City apartment.

Jacob Pritchard



To create “Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)” (2020), Churchman used a projector to trace details of the original 18th-century Indian painting on which the work is based onto their canvas. Jacob Pritchard

What’s the worst studio you ever had?

Probably my Columbia University studio during grad school. It was a small space right next to the boiler with no windows. A studio with no windows can be really depressing, but this one led me to create video work, which benefits from darkness, so it turned out O.K. in the end.

What’s the first work you ever sold, and for how much?

I had a painting in one of those coffee-shop exhibitions, and a man paid me \$100 for it in cash. This was in Amherst, Mass., in 1999, while I was in college. They kept the painting up until the exhibition was taken down, by which point I had lost his phone number. I guess he never received that painting.

How do you know when you’re finished with a work?

I believe I’m not done most of the time. But that’s why we artists always have to look. If we turn around, close our eyes and then look back, we see what the painting is doing by itself. We have to closely watch what we’re putting out there.

How many assistants do you have?

I use temporary assistants once in a while. For example, I had a few people help me paint “Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur).”

Have you assisted other artists before? If so, whom?

I helped my friend MPA do her hair for one of her Los Angeles shows, which was in the same vein as her show “Red in View” at the Whitney in 2017. We once lived in the California desert together, and we also did a performance together, in the Netherlands in 2012.

When did you first feel comfortable saying you’re a professional artist?

I don’t think I feel comfortable with it. I don’t like saying I’m an artist because people don’t have a reference point for being an artist as a profession.

Is there a meal you eat on repeat while you’re working?

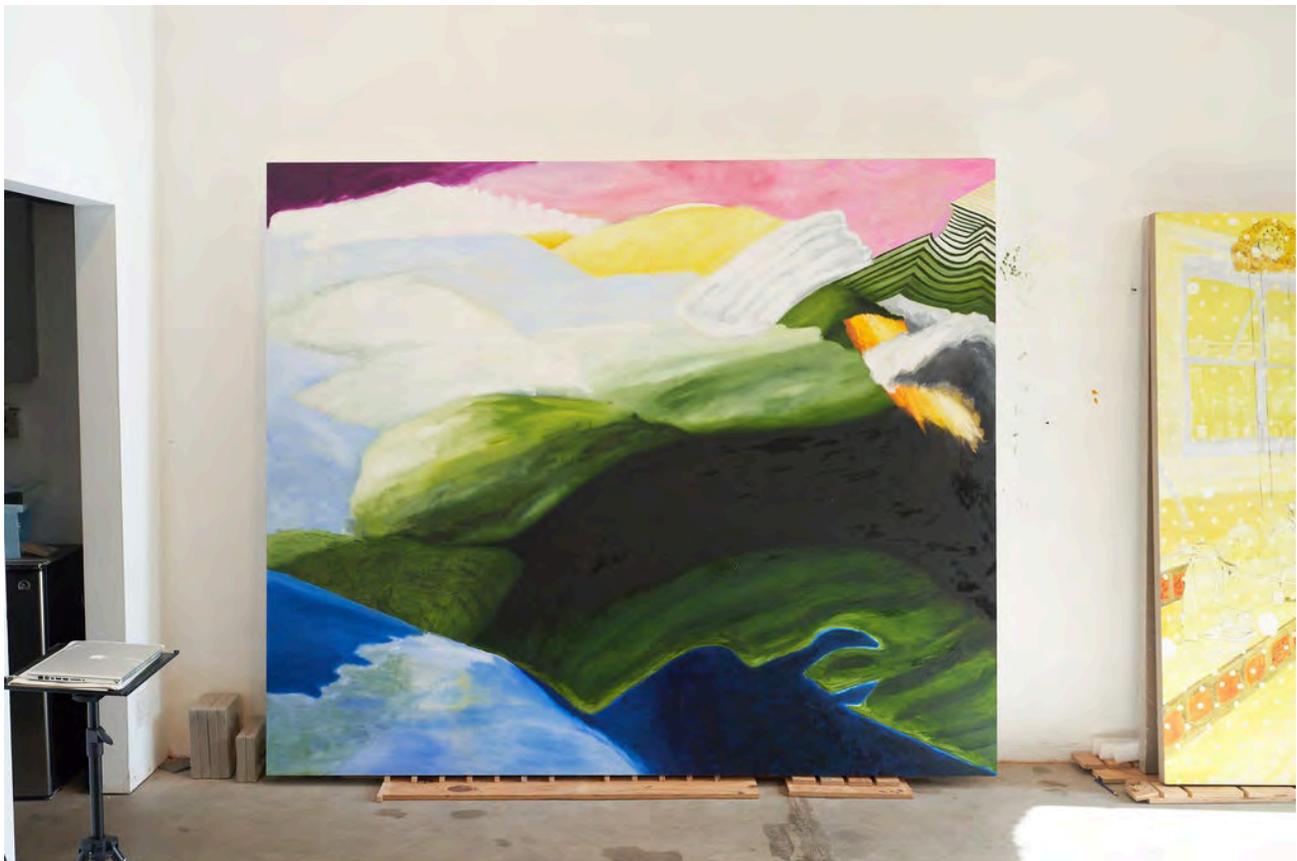
My mom bought me this water bottle that has motivational instructions on it to remind me to hydrate. I’ll usually eat something on repeat for a week, and then move onto something else. This week is dolmades, as you can tell.

What is the weirdest object in your studio?

Maybe my sun lamp. They also call them SAD lamps for people with seasonal affective disorder. I admit that I bought it on Amazon.

Are you binge-watching any shows right now?

I really like “Real Time With Bill Maher.” And I was sick a couple of weeks ago and binged “Cheer.” I think I identify with Morgan the most — I loved her hair!



“Groundless Ground” (2020) is one of two new paintings that Churchman named after a principle of the Mahamudra meditation tradition. The artist started the work in Maine and was inspired by the region’s rocky landscape. Jacob Pritchard

Yerebakan, Osman Can, and Leidy Churchman. “An Artist Whose Buddhist and Painting Practices Converge.” *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, March 5, 2020.



Churchman, seated in front of "Reclining Buddha" (2020).
Jacob Pritchard



Churchman mostly favors Old Holland brand oil paints but uses Gamblin for certain shades. Jacob Pritchard

How often do you talk to other artists?

I keep in touch with Nicole Eisenman; we send each other pictures of what we're working on. Also, my mom (who is not an artist) gives me really good advice on my work.

What is the last thing that made you cry?

Listening to the votes come in from the senators during the impeachment trial.

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I text people or look at Instagram. I sometimes delete the app and come back to it.

What do your windows look out on?

A cobblestone courtyard full of rusty junk and old vehicles.

What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?

Granola bars and espresso pots.

What's your worst habit?

Vaping.

What embarrasses you the most?

Spending too much time alone.

Do you exercise?

I jog with my dog in the East Village.

What are you reading right now?

A book about two prominent teachings of Tibetan Buddhism called “Wild Awakening: The Heart of Mahamudra and Dzogchen.”

What’s your favorite artwork by someone else?

“Monkeys and Bears in the Kishkindha Forest,” an 18th-century painting by an unknown artist from Jodhpur.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

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GARAGE



Phone 11, 2019–20, Oil on linen. Photo: Aaron Wax

ART By [HALEY MELLIN](#) | Apr 5 2020, 2:31am

The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound

The painter talks about their latest show at Matthew Marks, and the way the Internet warps the way we experience art.

I met Leidy Churchman to walk through the artist's new show *Earth Bound* at Matthew Marks in New York, while the galleries were still open in February, prior to the COVID-19 closing. Kind and intuitive, Churchman deftly handles major topics—Buddhism, now-ness, the environment, abstraction, digital life—with gratitude and observational humility. The scale varies in the twenty-one new paintings on view, from a one-foot abstraction to an interior bedroom scene eight feet wide. Likewise, subject

Mellin, Haley. "The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound." *Garage Magazine*, April 5, 2020.



"RECLINING BUDDHA," 2020, OIL ON LINEN IN NICHE DESIGNED BY THE ARTIST. PHOTO: AARON WAX

matter shifts between the personal, the shared and the monumental. One painting depicts a reclining Buddha carved into a granite cliff in Sri Lanka dating from the twelfth century, with modern-day stanchions rendered alongside. Others illustrate the camera lens of the latest iPhone arranged as three eyes, another a moon, while another pictures a cloud-covered Earth from space with a new Earth rising up behind it. We talked about looking at art online, and the current state of the world.

The timeline of this show, spanned pre-epidemic with the gallery open, and now the show is visible digitally. What do you think about looking at painting online?

I think you can learn a lot about art online but seeing work in person is special. Even for video, because an artist installs it stealthily, in their own way. Most everything is transmogrified to be online, from its previous form, and art is too. Should I start making iPad paintings like David Hockney? Maybe we can learn to be more aware of what we are seeing and what we are not. Especially with painting. It is like a picture of a person: you might get an idea of what they look like and be able to recognize them in a crowd, but you won't know who they really are, what they are capable of.

I enjoyed walking through the show with you. It is good to hear your thoughts on each painting. How are you reconciling technology with the mind-space of meditation and Buddhism?

You know the feeling you have in meditation sometimes, or if you're sitting quietly and you have that quiet library feeling in your stomach? To me, it feels like my belly starts to make honey, it's a warm inner-richness

feeling. Everything starts to fill up, it is an essential feeling and very ordinary, too. When we go so far outside our bodies when we are online, and for so much time, we need to have a real practice to cultivate open awareness. Our riches are in our body, which keeps us alive on earth. This makes me think about Martha Graham, Yvonne Rainer and others at the St. Mark's Church scene. They brought the embodiment of the everyday to performance art and dance. What can performance artists do to guide us now? My favorite artist over the past many years is Mariana Valencia. In her domain, everything in the world is hers, intimately. Could it be that we could craft our "online" to reflect every intimate way that the world sparkles for us, secretly?

Can you talk with me about the painting that the show is titled after: Earth Bound (Card 21 of the Secret Dakini Oracle)?

In the book by Penny Slinger and Nik Douglas, the meaning of the Earth Bound card is written: *Realization of the underlying meaning of earthly existence. The completion of a cycle. Responsibility, understood in its broader aspect as humanitarianism. Action as the result of choice and free will. Liberation from the bondage of habit. Change in viewpoint. Single-mindedness, particularly with regard to worldly things.* I wasn't



"EARTH BOUND (CARD 21 OF THE SECRET DAKINI ORACLE)," 2020. OIL ON LINEN. PHOTO: AARON WAX

Mellin, Haley. "The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound." *Garage Magazine*, April 5, 2020.



"BUDDHADHARMA FEVER," 2019, OIL ON LINEN. PHOTO: AARON WAX

reading these words while making the painting but reading them now is spooky considering this global crisis. Reverend angel Kyodo Williams came to walk through the show with me the day before it opened. Her riff on the picture was interesting: She saw the planet Earth floating in space as the way we view ourselves with our ego, the way we imagine and speculate and fret over our entire image as a separate being. The other view of earth in the painting, which is bigger and fluffier is more embodied and interdependent. It is like the view we see of ourselves looking down and seeing our chest and belly and legs. Earth bound, planted, connected.

How do you decide what to paint, since you work with a range of subjects?

At this particular moment it makes me think about how a dog chooses something to chew. Which toy, which stick. It just happens, in a self-secretive way. And then that thing goes into the mouth of a dog. When my dog Sarah chews something, she takes millions of little clicking bites with her front teeth. It happens throughout the day and I like to say she's at the type-writer, or she's texting.

While you paint a number of different subjects, you pretty much stick to painting as a medium. Why paint?

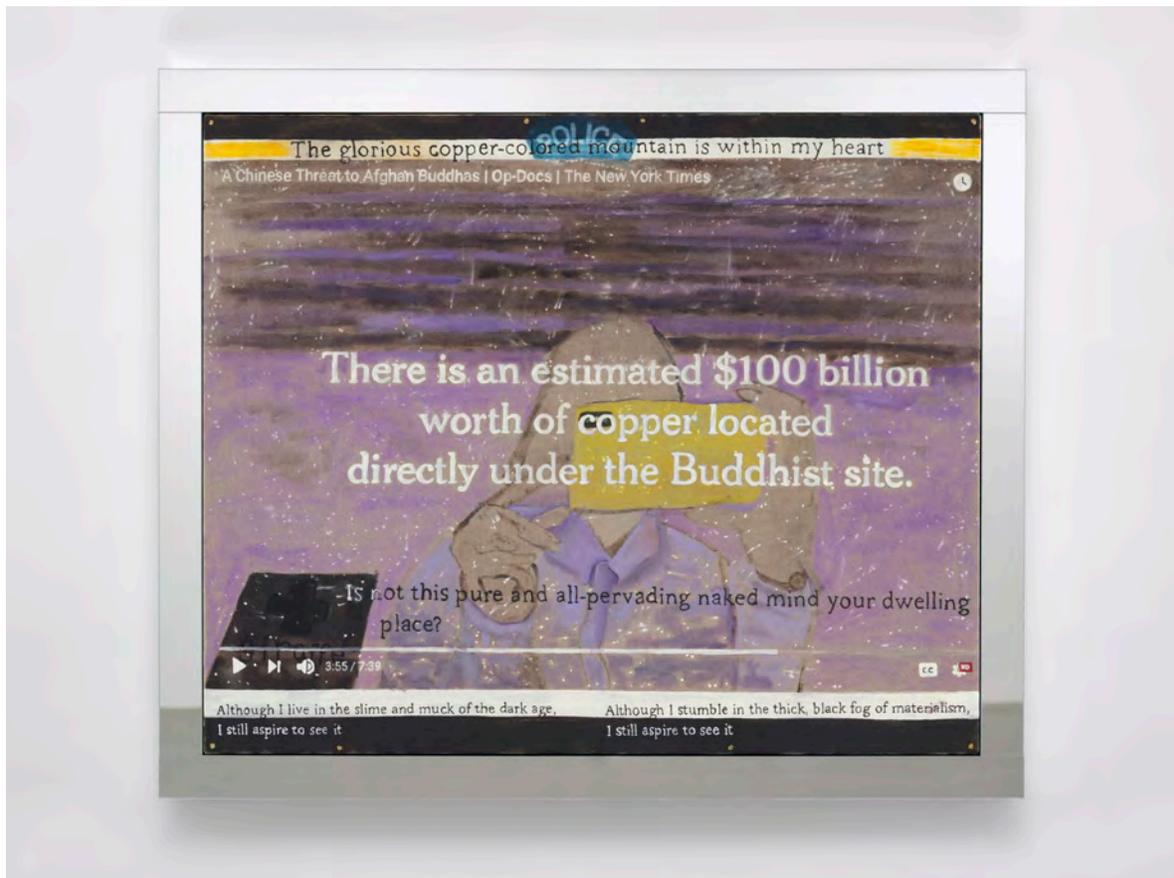
There are so many things to say about that question. My answer would look like an astrology chart. One small part of the chart would be my history of learning. Painting is a self-sufficient action. It is a direct action and

gives all the time in the world. I find so much in painting, for instance, making an answer to a question that reads like a chart.

A few weeks after the gallery walk-through Leidy reflected on the show while the exhibition is temporarily suspended, though viewable online, due to the pandemic.

Thinking about my recent paintings, bound on earth with the COVID-19 virus. This show is called Earth Bound, which turns out is just what a pandemic is. It is not ethereal; the virus clings to bodies and things. Out of the blue, it is trespassing into our most intimate worlds. I read something today by the historian Frank M. Snowden who wrote, "Epidemics are a category of disease that seem to hold up a mirror to human beings as to who we really are." Mirroring is very much what my works aim to embody.

The through-line of this show, for me, is the *Reclining Buddha* painting in the pale blue alcove. It faces the *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra* painting, crossing two of the rooms of the gallery. The Reclining Buddha is a famous image. It was the first way in which the Buddha was depicted after he died, on his death bed, laying down at the end of his life. It is a meditation on his humanness, while at the same time, his enlightenment. I had this painting in the studio for six months, and it had an actual effect on me, which surprised me! I was really shocked by this body. It was so fluid, so peaceful and inviting. Enlightenment is



"100 BILLION SADHANA OF MAHAMUDRA," 2020, OIL ON LINEN, MIRROR. PHOTO: AARON WAX

Mellin, Haley. "The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound." *Garage Magazine*, April 5, 2020.

a real human quality. That quality is always there in us. We can see it—our basic nature—in flashes. Seeing the Buddha appearing and dying everyday was very nice. I most likely won't find my way to enlightenment in this life, but I aspire to it. I would like to be like the Buddha: fluid, peaceful, and inviting; extending those flashes of realization for the benefit of others.

The *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra* painting, across from *Reclining Buddha*, depicts where we are right now — in Zoom rooms and in online isolation. I was inspired to make this painting in recognition of being online and my position in relationship to the internet—physically as a reflection in my computer screen and mentally filled with dread and fear and a feeling like there was an emergency. The painting holds the experience of sitting in two places at once. Not quite in either location—where are we exactly? The painting is framed by mirrored glass, which turns the whole work into a video or moving image. Words appear on the painting from the Sadhana of Mahamudra, which has an incredible origin story—asking the question, “Is not this pure and all-pervading naked mind your dwelling place?”

THE
NEW YORKER

AT THE GALLERIES



Is there anything **Leidy Churchman** can't paint? Among the subjects of the twenty-one paintings in the New York phenom's new show at the Matthew Marks gallery (through April 18) are a fever-dream bedroom, a moonrise, a girl on a bike, a rose garden, a monkey-filled forest from the Ramayana, hypnotic abstractions, and a laundry-room sign. The palette runs from monochrome black to hot purple and pink; dimensions change from a scant dozen inches to more than ten feet wide. The only logic at work is intuitive, even oracular. The mood is less image-overload restless than optimistically omnivorous—Churchman seems hungry to paint the whole world in all its mystery and ordinariness, two categories that often collide here. In Churchman's deft hands, a cropped closeup of an iPhone 11 (pictured above) assumes a third-eye mysticism worthy of Hilma af Klint.—*Andrea K. Scott*

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|||| 4Columns

Leidy Churchman

Johanna Fateman

From iPhones to a mythic monkey kingdom: a show of paintings from the browser cache.



Leidy Churchman: Earth Bound, installation view. © Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Aaron Wax. Pictured, left to right: *Reclining Buddha* and *Kishkindha Forest (Jodhpur)*.

Leidy Churchman: *Earth Bound*, *Matthew Marks Gallery*, 522 West Twenty-Second Street, New York City, through April 18, 2020

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My Kindle Cloud Reader displays a two-page spread from the 2008 book *True Perception: The Path of Dharma Art* by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan scholar and meditation master who introduced Vajrayana Buddhism to the West. Another window shows a 2016 post on the Whitney Museum's Education

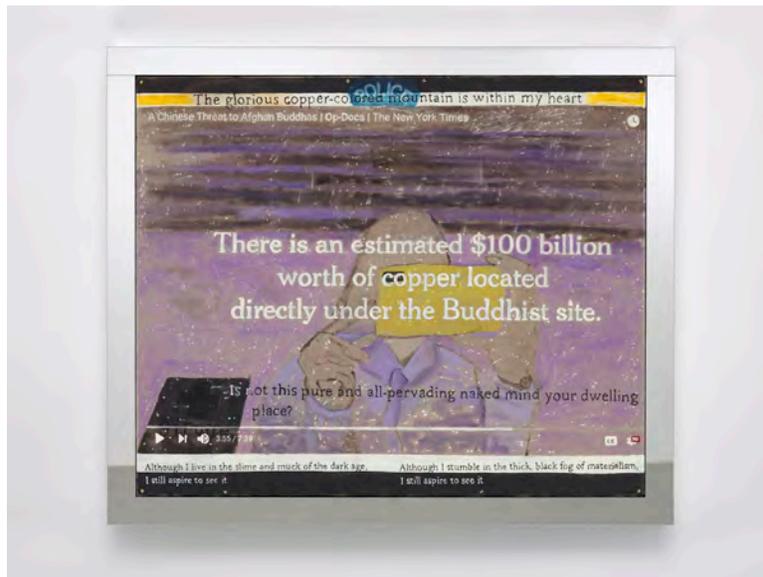
Blog titled “Teens Meet Leidy Churchman,” which tells of the artist reading passages of Trungpa’s book to a group of students, and meditating with them. I have, in other tabs, the press release for Churchman’s new exhibition, *Earth Bound*; a Twitter search for #coronavirus; a “quick shop” view of a jacket, which, now marked down, still costs too much; and various Wikipedia pages, including the one for “Reclining Buddha,” where I found the source image for Churchman’s 2020 painting of the same name.



Leidy Churchman, *Reclining Buddha*, 2020. Oil on linen in niche designed by the artist, 48 × 79 inches. © Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Aaron Wax.

Among the characteristically cryptic assortment of twenty-one canvases on view at Matthew Marks, *Reclining Buddha* is the only one that’s not installed on a white wall. Placed in a pale blue, shrine-shaped niche designed by the artist, it faithfully reproduces the Wikipedia photo’s generous vantage, showing the length of the monumental, stone-carved side-sleeping figure, which belongs to the twelfth-century Gal Vihara temple in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka. A crumbling, low brick wall partially cordons the statue off; a simple bench avails itself to tired or contemplative visitors; and the composition’s postcard-like white border subtly signals that it’s not a plein-air portrait—all somewhat humbling features, at odds, maybe, with its devotional framing.

“The term *dharma art* does not mean art depicting Buddhist symbols or ideas, such as the wheel of life or the story of Gautama Buddha,” writes Trungpa, not with regard to Churchman’s scene, of course, but for the occasion of the first-ever session of the Naropa Institute, in 1974. (His missive is included in the aforementioned posthumous collection, *True Perception*). “Rather, dharma art refers to art that springs from a certain state of mind on the part of the artist that could be called the meditative state,” he continues. “It is an attitude of directness and unself-consciousness in one’s creative work.” The use of the Buddha—in the piece cited above, and in related, scattered references elsewhere—orients us to the philosophical concerns of Churchman’s art. But the assiduous painter, who mostly forgoes oil’s capacity for seduction, doesn’t glorify or even particularly highlight such symbols’ metaphysical significance. Instead, Churchman emphasizes their impermanent, un-iconographic existence as things in the world and on the internet.



Leidy Churchman, *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra*, 2020. Oil on linen, mirror, 32 1/8 × 38 inches. © Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Aaron Wax.

The hazy, purple and gold *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra* (2020) shows what seems to be a screengrab of a paused video on YouTube. In fact, we are looking at an ominous, dreamy composite: a still from a *Times* “op-doc” titled “A Chinese Threat to Afghan Buddhas,” which reports on the threat to Buddhist antiquities (from a Chinese mining company as well as the Taliban), is overlaid with an iPhone-holding figure and lines of text. It’s Trungpa again: “Although I stumble in the thick, black fog of materialism / I still aspire to see it.” (“It,” in the original text, part of a shifting refrain, refers to “the all-pervading naked mind,” among other related, poetic possibilities.) The layered painting is a despairing comment on global-capitalist rapacity and war. It also captures the particular kind of synthesis—and confusion—born of the easy and endless juxtapositions that the web affords. And it might recall, if you’ve ever sought meditation instruction, one of anxious thinking’s rapid crossfades that becomes particularly vivid as you try to let thinking go.



Leidy Churchman, *Earth Bound (Card 21 of the Secret Dakini Oracle)*, 2020. Oil on linen, 58 1/8 × 42 3/4 inches. © Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Yet, however prominent they are in this show, allusions to dharmic themes form just one category of image in a career that, on the whole, dissolves categories. (Although, I guess, that is itself a dharmic theme.) Churchman's substantial body of paintings (a densely hung survey closed at the Hessel Museum in October) is known for its disarming variety of styles and subjects, and this new gallery show is no exception. Its title work, *Earth Bound (Card 21 of the Secret Dakini Oracle)* (2020), is based on a Tantric divination card. Resembling a new-age take on the 1968 photo *Earthrise*, which was snapped from the window of the Apollo 8, the cheesy yet poignant image shows our planet not from the moon's orbit, but, impossibly, from the atmosphere of another, identical earth. A familiar brown and teal globe, marbled with clouds, appears like a long-lost twin, just above the glowing, misty horizon line of our current galactic home. Other images include a realist rendering of an iPhone 11 Pro; a Hallmark-ish close-up of roses in a mirrored frame; a small, orange grid of dots; an enormous, verdant panorama of Kishkindha (the mythic monkey kingdom in the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*); and the big, flabbergasting, vaguely O'Keeffian abstract landscape *Groundless Ground* (2020).



Leidy Churchman, *Groundless Ground*, 2020. Oil on linen, 86 1/8 × 102 1/8 inches.
© Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Aaron Wax.

This is not to say that Churchman's approach is one of purposeful incoherence or opacity; the radical heterogeneity is not random. But maybe it's a little more mysterious than before. In the past, art-historical shout-outs to figures as diverse as Marsden Hartley and Barbara Kruger have mingled with careful facsimiles of book covers and inscrutable wildlife scenes to map a zigzagging, self-styled lineage. And intimate gestures of homage to contemporary queer and trans artists of Churchman's own community—such as in a lovingly copied painting of a moody 2010 photograph from Every Ocean Hughes's Christopher Street piers series, or a canvas depicting a realist sculpture of multimedia artist Juliana Huxtable—have offered a very specific, if fragmentary, view of a social and artistic cosmos. In *Earth Bound*, more often it's a dizzying, impersonal cosmos that is explored—though with the same eccentricity and personal passion as before. And Churchman's signature browser-cache quality still rules.



Leidy Churchman, *iPhone 11*, 2019–20. Oil on linen, 9 5/8 × 15 1/8 inches. © Leidy Churchman. Image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

On its face, such internettiness strikes as irreconcilable with a meditative state. To be mindful online—in a culture where the internet is synonymous with distraction and compulsion, on a day when I refresh my feeds between every clause and tumble headlong down a YouTube chute—feels impossible, paradoxical. But the riddle of Churchman’s weird attentive practice, with its calm handling of both information and paint, does seem to open up space. While the internet has changed our experience of the world, it has not changed the nature of experience itself. Being online, Churchman reminds us, with a guileless rigor that Trungpa might call “directness and unself-consciousness,” is actually just being.

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ARTFORUM



Above: Leidy Churchman, *Don't Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)*, 2019, oil on linen, 7 x 32".
Opposite page: Leidy Churchman, *Basically Good*, 2013, oil on linen, 12 x 13 1/2".

I OF THE STORM

DANIEL MARCUS ON THE ART OF LEIDY CHURCHMAN

TUCKED WITHIN THE DENSE ARRAY of canvases in “Leidy Churchman: Crocodile,” the artist’s survey exhibition currently on view at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, is a small painting of a rat perched on the edge of a body of water. Pressing its nose close to the water’s surface, the rodent appears vexed by the sight of its inchoate reflection. Created in 2013, the painting was first exhibited in 2015 under the title *Narcissistic Rat*; Churchman later retitled it *Basically Good* in 2017, as if to allay its protagonist’s dysmorphic concerns. Does it matter what species we see when we look in the mirror? Or what gender? Or what shape? Not really, *Basically Good* reassures us. Still, something is not quite right about this scene of pondside self-examination: Churchman handles their rat Narcissus with Bonnardian wit, picking out the whites of the rodent’s bulging eyes and the hairs of its penile tail; yet the reflection in the water looks more mouse- than ratlike, its beady eyes peering meekly from an inscrutable face. Rather than resolve these differences, the painting seems to articulate the terms of their mutuality, positing rat and reflection on either side of an unbridgeable, but paper-thin, divide.



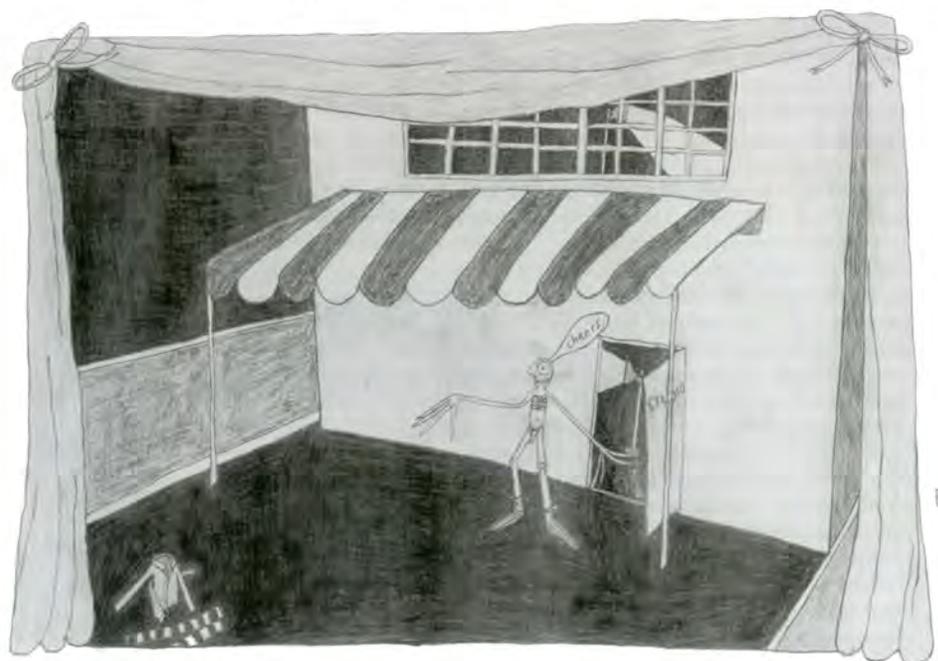
Basically Good is emblematic of Churchman's unlikely—and often disquieting—approach to representation, which, while never depicting the artist's own countenance per se, nonetheless toes the boundary between ego and imago. Of course, the coexistence of subjectivity with alterity furnishes one of modernism's core teachings, a legacy stretching from Arthur Rimbaud's dictum *Je est un autre* (I is someone else) through Adrian Piper's exaggerated self-portraits and beyond. For Churchman, who is both trans and a student of Buddhism, Rimbaud's mantra resonates in several directions, echoing queer-theoretical accounts of gender (and gender transition) while at the same time resonating with aspects of their own identity—including their racial positionality—that might well give the rat pause.

THE PREDICAMENT OF CHURCHMAN'S rodent owes much to the legacy of queer theory. It is, perhaps, especially indebted to Judith Butler's still-powerful critique of identity as a lived social category. Attacking the foundations of the gender binary, but with the entire philosophical edifice of identity in view, Butler emphasizes the inevitable failure attending each and every performance of self-coherence: It is just because identity *cannot* be adequately performed, she argues, that we are condemned to repeat its scripted gestures, enacting time and again “the vain and persistent conjuring and displacement of an idealized original, one which no one at any time has been able to approximate.”¹

These lines set the tone for Churchman's early experiments with performative self-representation. They publicly presented their work for the first time in 2002, while they were still an undergraduate, in the context of the New York-based queer feminist journal and art collective *LTTR*. Cofounded in the wake of 9/11 by K8

Hardy, Every Ocean Hughes (formerly known as Emily Roysdon), and Ginger Brooks Takahashi, who were later joined by Lanka Tattersall and Ulrike Müller, *LTTR* aimed to multiply rather than synthesize the diverse strains of new-millennium feminism (including transfeminism, then taking shape), while at the same time, and with increasing stridency, advocating street-level resistance to the forces of Bush-era neoconservatism. A friend of and collaborator with the group, Churchman contributed a drawing to the journal's first issue in which they confronted openly, albeit enigmatically, the theme of gender transition. Framed with a proscenium, with heavy curtains tied up in neat bows, it depicts a skeletal cyclopean figure who sports a strap-on cock and tightly bound chest. Posing beneath the awning of a film studio, and gesturing with Scissorhandsian fingers, the cyclops offers a simple greeting: “Cheers.”

It is hard to imagine a better alter ego for *LTTR* than this. From the beginning, the aims of the collective were frankly (and often uproariously) libidinal, defined in opposition to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identities and subcultures. Eschewing calls for gay and lesbian visibility, the journal's editors advocated a politics—and an aesthetics—of queer invisibility, proposing “a fluidity of names and gestures, outfits and pleasures, spaces and meanings,” in which each new role or pose is shed without hesitation. Churchman's drawing resonates with this project of transgressive self-performance, echoing Hughes's defense of the subversive potential of “dramatic arts.” (On *LTTR* 1's cover is a photo of Hughes wearing a David Wojnarowicz mask and a strap-on erection.) “Not an example of what has been termed ‘post-identity,’ implying progress beyond or transcendent of all categories,” as art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson argues, *LTTR* advanced “a vision of a more permeable, unbounded sense of possible identification.”²





Opposite page, left: Every Ocean Hughes (formerly Emily Roysdon), *Untitled* (David Wojnarowicz project), 2002. From *LTTR 1*, "Lesbians to the Rescue," 2002.

Opposite page, right: Leidy Churchman drawing from *LTTR 1*, "Lesbians to the Rescue," 2002.

Left: Flyer for the *LTTR #4*, "Do You Wish to Direct Me?," release party, 2005.

Right: Leidy Churchman and Luis Jacob, *Make Out Make Out Make Out Couch*, 2004, at the *LTTR 3* release party, Art in General, New York, August 5, 2004.

Far right: Leidy Churchman cutting Math Bass's hair at the *LTTR 4* release party, 22nd Street, New York, September 24, 2005.

Right, below: Leidy Churchman, *Purple Pals*, 2008, oil on wood, 31 x 23".



The impact of trans-ness in their art, and of their formative experience with *LTTR*, is best understood in terms of their release from the burdens of consistency and selfsameness.

Writing in the opening pages of *LTTR 1*, Hardy offered a slogan for this queer unboundedness: "Everyone in their own uniform!"

In everyday practice, social identities are harder to escape than Hardy's cheeky slogan admits, race and class in particular. Yet the journal's openness to transfeminism, and its centering of trans voices, was exceptional given the pervasiveness of transphobia even within feminist and lesbian circles at the time, and it remains exemplary. While there was little emphasis on passing in *LTTR's* milieu, the importance accorded gender fluidity (or, per Hughes, "invisibility") in queer circles often placed trans artists in an ambiguous position. Reflecting on the stakes of transfeminism in the journal's first issue, theorist and activist Dean Spade, who had recently founded the Sylvia Rivera Legal Project, a legal-advocacy organization serving poor and marginalized trans communities in New York, countered the charge that trans men and women had betrayed the gay and lesbian cause with a rousing assertion of the subversive power of gender transition: "All of our bodies are modified with regard to gender, whether we seek out surgery or take hormones or not," Spade argued. "I want to be disturbed by what you're wearing. I want to be shocked and undone and delighted by what you're doing and how you're living. And I don't want anyone to be afraid to put on their look, their body, their clothes anymore."³

As *LTTR* morphed from a curated publication into a roving program of exhibitions and public events, Churchman's contributions to the collective took an increasingly participatory form. For example, on the occasion of 2004's "Explosion *LTTR*: Practice More Failure," an anarchic series of workshops, film and video screenings, lectures, and installations held at Art in General, New York, Churchman teamed up with artist Luis Jacob to produce *Make Out Make*





Six stills from Leidy Churchman's *Painting Treatments*, 2010, two-channel video, color, sound, 25 minutes 1 second.

Like semi-inscrutable posts, Churchman's paintings since 2013 often cull their subjects from the internet's churn.

Out Make Out Couch, a plush sofa intended for amorous use. Answering *LTTR*'s call for practices of queer jouissance, Churchman and Jacob's contribution also responded to the group's assault on artistic norms, recasting the framework of success and failure in terms of collective libido. The following year, on the occasion of *LTTR*'s fourth-issue launch party, Churchman offered free haircuts to their collaborators; the gesture made use of their talents as a hairdresser (their day job), but also made space for social transitivity, affirming the participants' desire to change hairstyles at will. Mobilizing the prefix *trans* in a spirit of deviant self-fashioning, these undertakings drew strength from transfeminist accounts of performativity and self-modification, celebrating failure as destiny and inadequacy as basically good, or good enough.

This embrace of illegibility, misrecognition, and failure informed Churchman's nascent studio practice as well. In a statement posted to their personal website in 2008, they declared their commitment to "mak[ing] transgender pictures," linking the in-betweenness of trans experience with "the humor of uncertainty, and relationships of supposed opposites. I see people and their environments morphing into transsexual, not as a definitive destination but a space of complexity and amusement."⁴ Although a handful of Churchman's early paintings openly represent gender play, such as the dildo-wearing duo in *Purple Pals*, 2008, the impact of trans-ness in their art, and of their formative experience with *LTTR*, is best understood in terms of their release from the burdens of consistency and selfsameness.

This "practice more failure" ethos was equally pronounced in Churchman's forays into video, as with their *Painting Treatments*,

2010, in which they and associates apply various raw substances—paint, but also potatoes, wooden planks, and charcoal powder—to the bodies of assorted friends, who lie naked together on the studio floor covered in towels and slathered in detritus. As Amy Sillman noted in these pages, Churchman's videos treat *mise-en-scène* as a substitute for the painter's blank canvas, rehashing the gestures of Pollock's drip paintings and Yves Klein's "Anthropometries" "not by a parodic emasculation or a cynical recapitulation, but with a newly enthusiastic form of painting as nude activity."⁵ Not unlike other, equally unproductive group nude activities, 2010's *Painting Treatments*—and a related 2009 piece—give full rein to pleasurable excess; that they fail to coalesce into a fixed form (the videos loop before any "complete" pictorial state is achieved) is par for the course. Around the time they made these videos, Churchman began to experiment with sculpture, generating awkwardly painted facsimiles of commonplace objects—including a dildo in a sock, cigarettes, a wilted tulip, an oversize piece of Brie, and the then-ubiquitous *Art in Theory*, 1900–1990 sourcebook—in a queer repetition of Claes Oldenburg's flaccid commodities.

AROUND 2010, Churchman dialed back their work in painting and sculpture to devote themselves to a new series of videos. At least partly necessitated by their residency at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende in Amsterdam, where they committed themselves to making large-scale floor paintings as "sets" for videos and performances, the hiatus also followed from the dissolution of *LTTR*, which published its fifth and final issue in 2006. Upon returning to easel painting around 2013, and now working exclusively in oil on

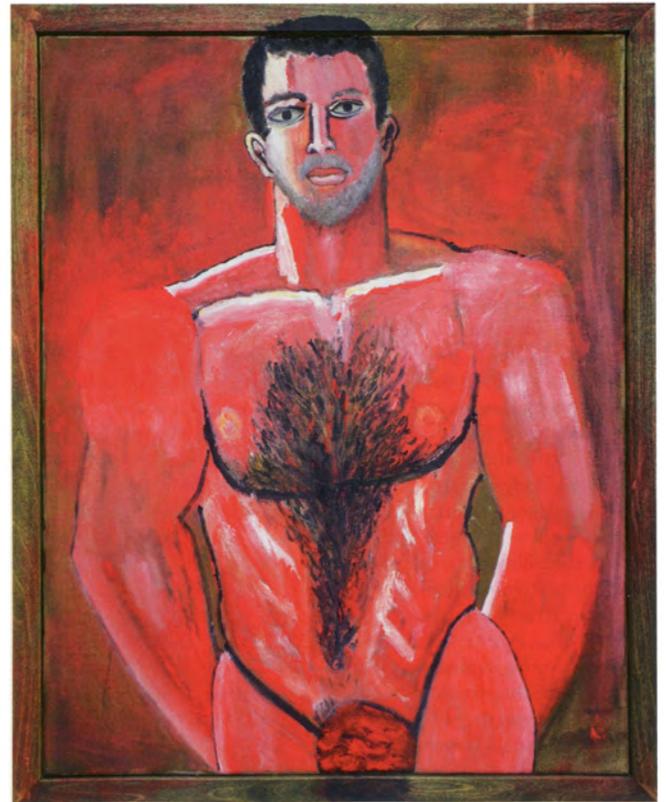


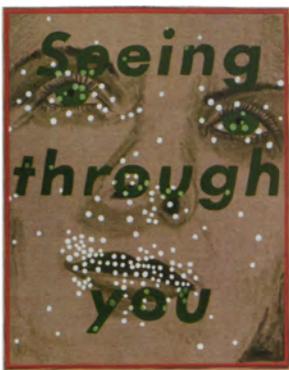
Left: Leidy Churchman, *Martha*, 2015, oil on linen, 39½ x 32".

Right: Leidy Churchman, *Bauhaus Boat Building Kit*, 2014, oil on linen, 44 x 33".

Below, left: Leidy Churchman, *Antique*, 2018, oil on linen, 76 x 66".

Below, right: Leidy Churchman, *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine*, 2014, oil on linen, 34¼ x 28".





Churchman has come to describe the task of self-unfolding (and self-othering) in their paintings as a practice of mindful self-emptying.

linen, Churchman devoted themselves to the medium more fully than ever before, in the process summoning a new constellation of art-historical forebears—trading Pollock and Oldenburg for Marsden Hartley, Henri Rousseau, and Chaim Soutine, among other modernist lodestars.

Churchman abandoned video when they returned to painting, yet they insist that this change of medium grew out of their work with digital technology, aligning the tabula rasa of the canvas with the performative space of the film studio—and also, importantly, with the networked spaces of social media. Like semi-inscrutable posts, their paintings since 2013 often cull their subjects from the internet’s churn, making the task of parsing their studio output in the aggregate akin to surveying an unfamiliar Instagram account. (“I can’t believe how many images I’ve seen,” Churchman admitted to a recent interviewer. “I’m in a scrolling world.”) In some cases, the subjects broached in Churchman’s paintings are unmistakably personal, as with *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine*, 2014, their copy after Hartley’s beefcake painting *Madawaska—Acadian Light-Heavy*, 1940: Like Hartley, Churchman has put down roots in coastal Maine, where *Madawaska* was painted. Both artists approach the question of masculinity from a queer perspective, Hartley as a semi-closeted gay man, Churchman as a trans person.

Yet even in Churchman’s homage to Hartley, the differences be-

tween prototype and copy signify in ways that verge on illegibility: As its title suggests, the painting ranges promiscuously in style, as if treating Hartley’s *Madawaska* to a process of Soutinification, rendering the beefy model’s torso more literally beef-like. (Churchman’s liberal application of red pigment, streaked with chalky white, recalls Soutine’s paintings of flayed beef carcasses.) There’s a shift from sculptural solidity in the Hartley toward flat artificiality in Churchman’s copy, but this flattening effect is countered at the painting’s upper edge, where the model’s coiffure spills over onto the frame, as if projecting (ejaculating?) beyond representation into reality. The opposite of parody, *New Dawn Marsden Hartley Soutine* expresses an unrestrained zeal for its source, as if the copyist were bent on unleashing the erotic charge pent up (repressed, albeit only barely) therein.

While Churchman’s appropriation tactics might recall the anti-authorial (and anti-patriarchal) gestures of Sturtevant and Sherrie Levine, the “I” remains an open question in Churchman’s art, a signifier neither empty nor full. How, if at all, might Churchman identify with the taxidermy passenger pigeon in *Martha*, 2015, the very last member of its now-extinct species? What led them to discover the Bauhaus toymaker Alma Siedhoff-Buscher, whose wood-block sailboat is the subject of Churchman’s *Bauhaus Boat Building Kit*, 2014? Did the image, a jpeg that has made the rounds

on Pinterest boards, find them instead? In *Antique*, 2018, is the zebra who returns our gaze in the ornate bureau mirror Churchman's mammalian avatar or a smoke screen: the personification of the self's inaccessibility and vacuity? And what is to be made of their copies after friends and peers—see, for instance, Churchman's *Kruger*, 2017, which translates verbatim a photograph of Barbara Kruger's, *Untitled (Seeing through you)*, 2004, into oil on linen? Likewise, in *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon*, 2016, Churchman copies a photograph by Hughes; elsewhere, they have appropriated an image of Frank Benson's *Juliana*, 2015, a 3-D-printed sculpture of artist Juliana Huxtable, and Cameron Rowland's *National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association Badges*, 2016, as seen on the Museum of Modern Art's online database. What does it mean, moreover, that Churchman's appropriations of these works (should we call them Regrams?), and of other imagery as well, circulate not through the palimpsestic spaces of online social media—at least, not primarily—but within the closed circuit of the art market, where the codes of authorial self-expression remain as guarded as ever?



Opposite page, top, from left: Leidy Churchman, *Kruger*, 2017, oil on linen, 33 1/2 x 26 1/2". Leidy Churchman, *Juliana in Art*, 2017, oil on linen, 8 1/2 x 10 1/2". Leidy Churchman, *National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty, and Pension Association Badges by Cameron Rowland*, 2016, oil on linen, 21 x 26". Leidy Churchman, *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon*, 2016, oil on linen, 40 1/2 x 45 1/2".

Opposite page, bottom: Leidy Churchman, *Is the Universe a Simulation, Moderated by Neil deGrasse Tyson*, 2017, oil on linen, 12 x 26 1/2".

Above: Leidy Churchman, *Crocodile*, 2016, oil on linen, 32 x 39 1/4".

Left: Leidy Churchman, *Giraffe Birth*, 2017, oil on linen, 51 1/2 x 75 1/2".

These questions can't really be answered; nor should they be. If Churchman's return to painting implies a departure from the queer-communitarian framework of *LTTR*, accepting studio solitude and the valorization of individual authorship, their work remains steeped in the collective's core values: illegibility, misrecognition, and failure. Devoted as ever to *LTTR*'s tactics of invisibility, Churchman's art thrives on the tension between contradictory models of selfhood and alterity. This tension becomes especially pronounced in their paintings of nonhuman life, such as *Giraffe Birth*, 2017, a work derived from a BuzzFeed listicle, "Tour Operator Captures Incredible Pictures of Baby Giraffe Being Born." Typical of its genre, the BuzzFeed post aggregates a group of images shot by photographer Andreas Knausenberger into run-of-the-mill clickbait, tracking the newborn giraffe's progress out of the womb and into the world (the listicle ends by showing the baby giraffe's confident first steps). Isolating the first photograph of the BuzzFeed series, Churchman's painting calls attention to the mother animal's unexpected stoicism; indeed, were it not for the amniotic sac and the stray pair of legs protruding from her hindquarters, we might not guess that anything out of the ordinary was transpiring.

At first blush, *Giraffe Birth* seems to celebrate the miracle of nonhuman nativity, perhaps aligning the infant animal's phal-



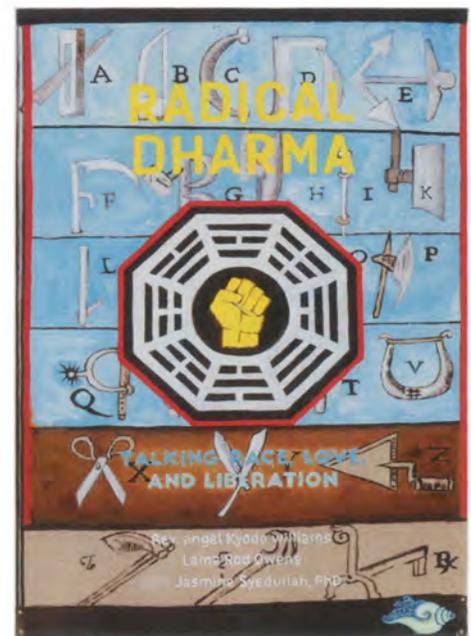
**Wealth is power, and power keeps the police in uniform.
The mind can be emptied, after all, but power, unlike evil,
is mindless; it keeps its hold where all else is swept away.**



Above: Leidy Churchman, *Relief of Weariness by Ultimate Mind*, 2017, oil on linen, 47 1/2 x 44 1/2".

Left: Leidy Churchman, *Infinitely Rich Qualities of Mind*, 2017, oil on linen, 35 x 45".

Right: Leidy Churchman, *The Teachers*, 2018, oil on linen, 30 x 22 1/2".





Above: Leidy Churchman, *Chief Police USA*, 2014, oil on linen, 35 x 31 1/2".

Right: Leidy Churchman, *Flotsam & Jetsam (Jail)* (detail), 2014, oil on twelve linen panels, overall 13' 9 1/4" x 1' 5 3/4".



lic protrusion with the self-birthing experience of gender transition. Yet the painting's subject—and its hero—is unmistakably the mother, not the child: Notice how Churchman leaves the body of the giraffe—at least, the pale parts of its reticulated coat, up to but excluding the animal's head—unpainted, letting raw linen show through, so that the central presence in the image turns, on close inspection, into an eerie vacancy. Likewise, the shadow cast by the giraffe, which barely registers in the original photograph, becomes a dark stain in Churchman's painting, its arboreal shape impressed on the grass like a burn mark or discarded skin. Then, too, the whole subject of the painting, a female giraffe in the throes of labor, points toward the political significance of pregnancy in trans communities. In any case, the enduring presence—or rather, the presence-as-absence—of the mother giraffe, the “I” of the painting, is unmistakable.

Other aspects of Churchman's paintings seem calculated to highlight their own awkward presence-as-absence as painter: For instance, in a diminutive painting titled *Is the Universe a Simulation, Moderated by Neil deGrasse Tyson*, 2017, Churchman renders a paused image of the American Museum of Natural History in New York's 2016 Isaac Asimov Memorial Debate, including their video player's volume bar at the top of the canvas—a marker of the artist's power to amplify or mute their sources at will. In other works, Churchman expresses their authorial role in quieter ways, by marking arbitrary borders around the edge of a painting or decorating its four corners with small circular marks, as if to emphasize the artist's paradoxical status within and outside the field of representation. While Churchman's paintings (including their paintings from photographs) rarely fail to make the artist's

hand felt, the feeling is most often equivocal, communicating imposture more than mastery.

THIS AWARENESS OF IRRESOLVABLE DUALITY, and especially of the artist's dual role as author and receiver, stems from Churchman's study of Zen Buddhism—an aspect of their recent work about which they are unusually voluble (unusually, insofar as artists and their critics rarely admit to the significance of spirituality as motivator). Placing themselves within a rich tradition of modernist and queer Zen, from John Cage's aleatory experiments to the writings of bell hooks, Churchman has come to describe the task of self-unfolding (and self-othering) in their paintings as a practice of mindful self-emptying. Consider Churchman's account of their painting *Crocodile*, 2016, a picture born after an unusually long gestation: “In 2013, when I was living out in the desert town of Twentynine Palms, a line came into my head: ‘A crocodile walks into the water.’ It was such a plain sentence, so I Googled it and found a couple of images that pictured my feeling. They gave off a stunning sense of immersion, of going into the world—farther.” Speaking with art historian Arnisa Zeqo, Churchman attributed this unbidden catchphrase to their yearning for a “feeling of meditation, a glimpse into a mind so large, reflecting, empty, endless, aware, and awake, with no time at all or all the time.” The crocodile thus becomes “a portal into the self,” Zeqo suggested. But it is also, simultaneously, a portal *out* of selfhood, casting the artist as an unfathomable reptile—a figure, like the rat Narcissus, poised at the limit between identity and difference.

Several recent paintings make Churchman's debt to Buddhism explicit: *In Infinitely Rich Qualities of Mind*, 2017, for example, a

pearlescent (and not subtly clitoral) chinoiserie pattern, painted against a Robert Ryman-type background, figures the mental void multiply, as arabesque, as cloud, as genderless bodily substrate. In *Own-Being Emptiness*, 2016, Churchman depicts a solitary console table, its wooden body left unpainted, highlighting its thingly impermanence; *Relief of Weariness by Ultimate Mind*, 2017, juxtaposes the artist's empty shadow with a menagerie of bugs and cats copied from a medieval manuscript. Each of these works is a meditation on subjective vacancy—less a glimpse of the artist's mental furniture than an attempt at opening the mind to what exceeds it.

Churchman's effort at mental exfoliation informs their largest, most ambitious work in "Crocodile": *Don't Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)*, 2019, a massive floor painting on linen, thirty-two feet in length, made with collaborative input from the painter's Buddhist mentor, Gayle Hanson, and friend Siobhan Liddell (who helped embroider its framing edge). Images of all kinds appear laid out in trompe l'oeil fashion across its throbbing red ground; as Churchman explains, the painting was meant to "have a runway effect." Rather than articulate a fixed web of relationships, however, the runway evokes a void as capacious as the mind; the images—which include NASA's ubiquitous black-hole photo, an April 2019 cover of *Vogue Paris* featuring model Adut Akech (an homage to the late Karl Lagerfeld), paintings by René Magritte and Giorgio de Chirico, a kente cloth, and a trans-rights poster emblazoned with the words safe space—scatter like paper in the wind. Interspersed throughout the composition are mind-training cards bearing slogans of the twelfth-century Tibetan Buddhist master Chekawa Yeshe Dorje: IN POSTMEDITATION, BE A CHILD OF ILLUSION; SELF-LIBERATE EVEN THE ANTI-DOTE; ABANDON ANY HOPE OF FRUITION.

Dorje's slogans chime with *LTTR*'s "Practice more failure," albeit in a more personal, self-hectoring vein. As Avram Alpert has recently argued, while Zen Buddhism is often misinterpreted as a call to blissful self-erasure (self and world becoming one), its theorists emphasize the necessity of "return[ing] to the world not with demands but with gifts of clarity and insight."⁶ Drawing inspiration from the Reverend angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah's 2016 book, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*, which aligns the path of self-awakening with the difficult work of racial consciousness, Churchman has come to locate race—implicitly, whiteness—at the root of their Buddhist practice: Insofar as the "sociopathic environment of white supremacy plays out through minute, fractured thoughts that race through the analytical mind and make everyone sick," they suggest, *Radical Dharma* attempts a "conversation from this abstract place of self. It is different from trying to be effective; it is trying to understand the truth."⁷

It is hard to say, though, where truth—and especially the truth of identity and difference—might find a viable outlet in Churchman's art. In a series of works from 2014, painted during a high-water mark of recent black liberation struggles, they come near to addressing their own position as a white artist—see, for example, *Chief Police USA* or *Flotsam & Jetsam (Jail)*. Distinguished by their foregrounding of logos and text, these works largely abandon Churchman's premise of ambiguity; easily read and comprehended, they offer little room for tactics of authorial invisibility. Legible as confessionals, they lay bare the artist's position within networks of economic power and state violence, figuring whiteness in place of the "I." As exercises in self-exploration, they re-

veal familiar truths, but ones art rarely lets be seen or said: Wealth is power, and power keeps the police in uniform. The mind can be emptied, after all, but power, unlike evil, is mindless; it keeps its hold where all else is swept away.

If self-emptying is self-othering, how are we to arrange ourselves before a binary that cannot be so easily circumvented, that resists performative imitation and self-transfiguration alike? In a recent interview with Sara Ahmed, Butler offers a tentative answer, reframing the question of identity and alterity in terms of mutuality and copresence: "What if we shift the question from 'who do I want to be?' to the question, 'what kind of life do I want to live with others?' . . . If the I who wants this name or seeks to live a certain kind of life is bound up with a 'you' and a 'they' then we are already involved in a social struggle when we ask how best any of us are to live."⁸ While the truth of white privilege, and of other forms of privilege as well, can't be performatively side-stepped, as Churchman's project makes clear, we can nonetheless imagine a framework in which such truths might be lived with—not singly, solipsistically, but reciprocally, in a space over which no one (neither identity nor difference; neither "I" nor "you") can exercise full sovereignty. Letting hope of fruition fade, we might learn to cultivate this fragile mutuality, a place of common life—and also, necessarily, of common failure. It wouldn't be everything, wouldn't solve anything; but it would be basically good.

"Leidy Churchman: Crocodile" is on view at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, through October 13.

DANIEL MARCUS IS THE ROY LICHTENSTEIN CURATORIAL FELLOW AT THE COLUMBUS MUSEUM OF ART, OHIO.

NOTES

1. Judith Butler, "Lana's 'Imitation': Melodramatic Repetition and the Gender Performative," *Genders*, no. 9 (Fall 1990): 1.
2. Julia Bryan-Wilson, "LTTR: Repetition and Difference," *Artforum*, Summer 2006, 110.
3. Dean Spade, "Dress to Kill, Fight to Win," *LTTR*, no. 1: "Lesbians to the Rescue," 2002, 18.
4. Personal statement posted to www.leidychurchman.com, accessed via the Internet Archive.
5. Amy Sillman, "Ab-Ex and Disco Balls," *Artforum*, Summer 2011, 325.
6. Avram Alpert, *Global Origins of the Modern Self, from Montaigne to Suzuki* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 275.
7. "Lauren Cornell and Leidy Churchman in Conversation," in *Leidy Churchman: Crocodile*, ed. Lauren Cornell, Karen Kelly, and Barbara Schroeder (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; New York: Dancing Foxes, 2019), 141.
8. Sara Ahmed, "Interview with Judith Butler," *Sexualities* 19, no. 4 (2016): 491.

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BOMB

Merging With: Leidy Churchman Interviewed by Tausif Noor

On mystifying moments big and small.



Leidy Churchman: Crocodile. Installation view. Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Photo by Chris Kendall.

Oct 3, 2019

Leidy Churchman has been painting the world as he sees it, accumulating a catalog of things, people, places, events, and ideas of astonishing range, from zoo animals and mythological creatures to book covers and branded credit cards. He is as likely to be inspired by the modernist canon as he is by a string of words or a stray ad on the internet, and he filters these inspirations through his canny gaze and commitment to Buddhist philosophy. What emerges from these two purviews is a style defined by clarity and grace, an even-handedness that extends to the way our conversation developed

Noor, Tausif, and Leidy Churchman. "Merging With: Leidy Churchman, Interviewed by Tausif Noor." *Bomb*, October 3, 2019.

over the course of several weeks during which we covered the surprises that come with paying attention, painting with and for your friends, and the importance of complete and total freedom. Like Churchman's paintings, our correspondence was grounded in the tangible, real things that surround us, but also extended into the singularly enchanting musings of an artist in tune with a larger, metaphysical universe.

—Tausif Noor

Tausif Noor

Let's start with *Don't Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)* (2019), a site-specific floor painting you created for your exhibition *Crocodile* at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College. Was the process of making this piece different from other floor paintings you've done? It pairs beautifully with your video work and a new painting, *Disappearing Acts* (2019), which is of Bruce Nauman's 2015/16 video *Contrapposto Studies*. There's a kinetic quality that unites these works, even if they are technically different mediums.

Leidy Churchman

This floor painting was different than others I've made. I think previous ones have been more related to video, gravity, and objects mixed into painting. This one is about the pictures' signage and positioning as they seem to drift and transform along the runway. The Nauman painting brings a kind of highly fractured momentum. I like how they work together: in both pieces, there is a sense of forward motion but also a kind of pause within a heightened and groundless atmosphere.

TN

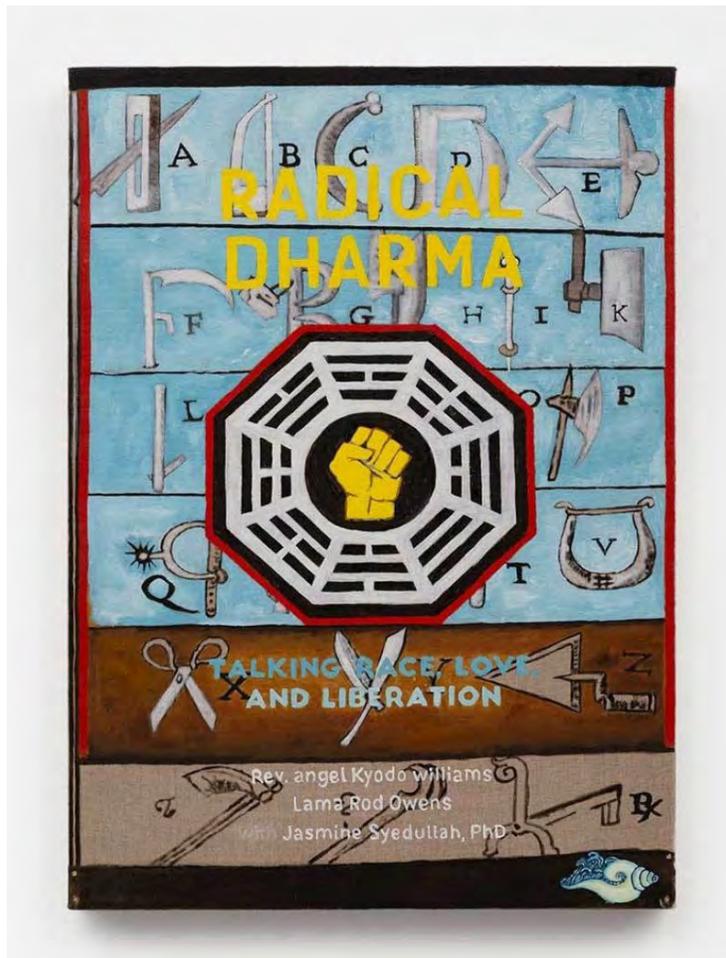
In the exhibition catalog, curator Lauren Cornell refers to you as a "sign-painter—someone who crafts literal messages, often copied directly from the world." You've suggested that paintings are similar to signs in that they can open up and be available to the viewer through multiple points of entry. I'm wondering if this "openness" of painting is something that you've come to as you've progressed in your career, or if this is how you've always approached painting.

LC

I think it is possible for my paintings and my artwork in general to go in any direction. The way I am able to get into my work and feel motivated to try painting again and again is by letting things go and moving into the larger notion of complete and total freedom. When I begin, all possibilities are on the table: there is nothing I *should* be doing. I think this "openness" is not just about variety; it is about working with things as I see and feel them, and I was going to say demystifying, but maybe also *mystifying*, that is, the way we look and think our way into things, into our moments, from the big spaces and thoughts of and in our collective mind to the small voice in our stomachs that once in a while we acknowledge.

TN

Part of what motivates that question is thinking through the boundaries between the world and the self in your work, and what being present in the world might look like. I'm thinking of *Is the Universe a*



Leidy Churchman, *Radical Dharma "The Teachers,"* 2018. Oil on linen. 20 x 16 inches. Collection of Scott Lorinsky. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo by Aaron Wax.

Simulation, Moderated by Neil deGrasse Tyson (2017), a painting of the 2016 Isaac Asimov Memorial Debate. More accurately, it's a painting of a video of that debate, as indicated by the little volume bar you've painted at the top. Someone is there, watching and being present—in one sense—for the event that's happening.

LC

Something funny I remembered recently was that in 2016 when I painted Barbara Kruger's piece that says "Seeing Through You" I was on some website and a small advertisement came up telling me that this work was available at auction that day. There are no particular requirements I have, but in this case the work was so stunning and fit nicely with the other paintings I was working on. Plus, it was having a live moment.

TN

Being present in a metaphysical sense is also something that runs through your practice. We see it in a title that's cited from the Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Knowledge Must Be Burned, Hammered and Beaten Like Pure Gold* (2018), or in the painting *The Teachers* (2018) for which you've reconfigured the cover of the book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (2016). Simone Weil thought of attention as a form of prayer. I'm wondering how your attentiveness to the quotidian bits of contemporary life might constitute something similar.

LC

I think that might be true. I love the surprise element that comes from giving attention. There is always more to be seen. In some moments, with some things, I feel that they could become a painting, but not for the purpose of transcribing those things. The surprise comes from the thing, or idea, merging with painting. The painting ultimately takes over. It is more powerful than the information.

TN

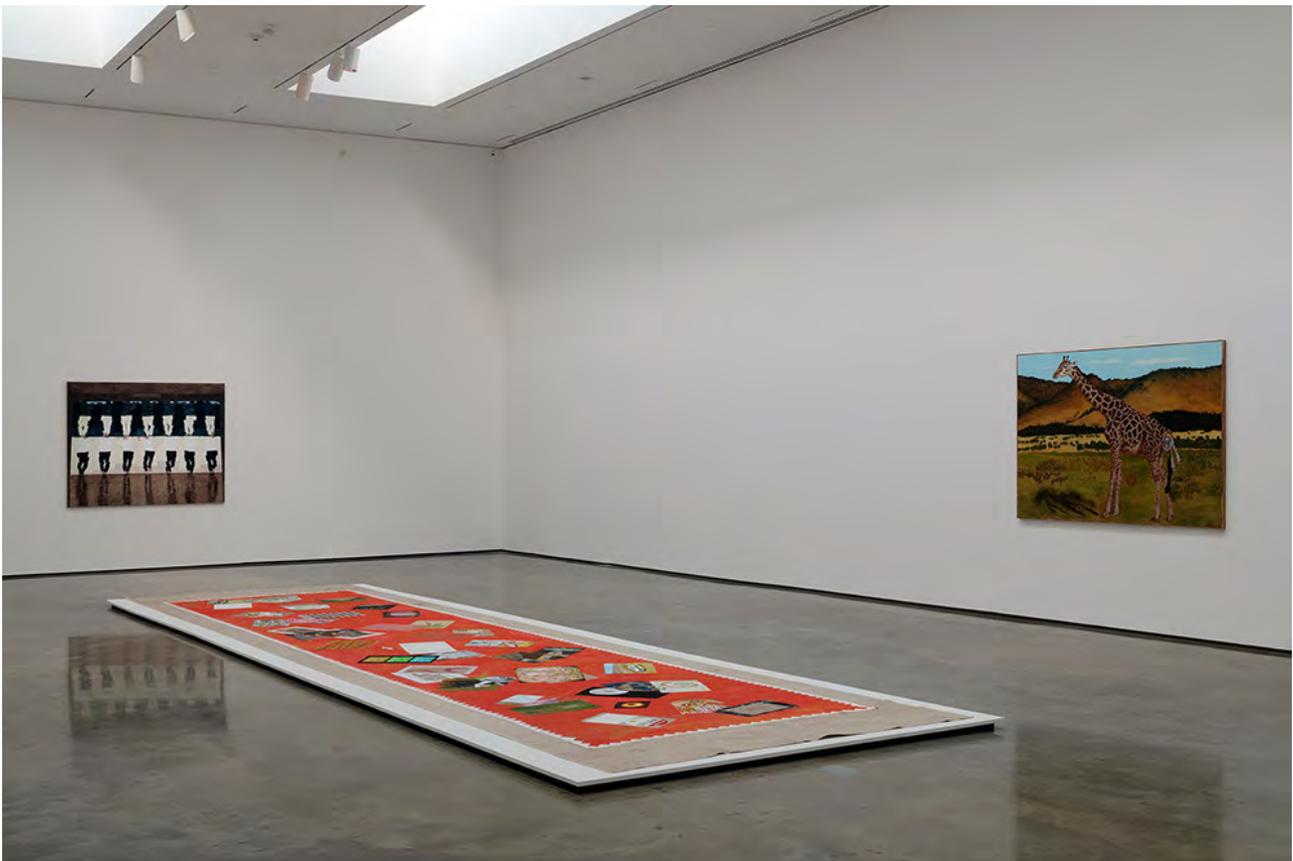
What if an observation or an idea that might become a painting *doesn't* become one? Do you ever become obsessed or attached to those ideas? I tend to think of Buddhist philosophy as one that rejects attachment to the material world, but I wonder about the world of ideas.

LC

It is definitely okay if something does not become a painting! There is always another painting. The painting is the thing that happens, not the idea. But ideas can leave and return again. Just as you look back, it's there.

TN

Your paintings take stock of the world's ephemera, but you also make references to a smaller network of artists and art history, like in your Marsden Hartley paintings or a painting after a photograph by Emily Roysdon, who is now known as Every Ocean Hughes. Making art can often seem like a solitary, lonely activity; but your paintings embrace artmaking as a social activity.



Leidy Churchman: Crocodile. Installation view. Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Photo by Chris Kendall.



Leidy Churchman, *Antique*, 2018. Oil on linen. 66 x 76 3/16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rodeo, London/Piraeus. Photo by Lewis Ronalds.

LC

When you are on your own—solitary—those are the times when you can get such a sense of how much the world is within you. The biggest things you can imagine coming in your mind and your open heart. I love concentrating on other artworks because of that intimacy. And the longing. I love the longing. *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon* (2016) came about as a painting from looking at a mix of photographs that Every Ocean Hughes took of the old Christopher Street Piers. This is a landmark in the queer community, a place to which in the past people could escape to be themselves, together. Maybe I would paint it sometime, but this particular painting is about Every. This painting is because Every went there in a boat to take pictures on what turned out to be a wildly rainy day. And I love that, and I feel that very much.

Leidy Churchman: *Crocodile* is on view at the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, until October 13.

Tausif Noor is a writer and contributing editor at Momus.

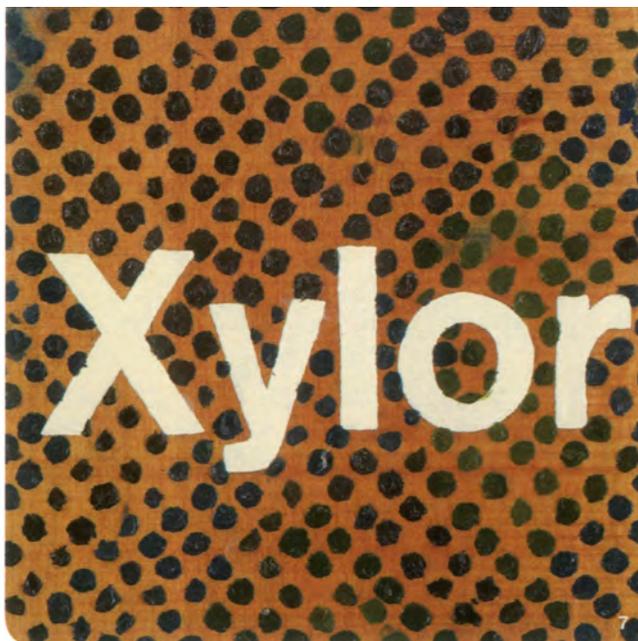
ARTFORUM

BEST OF 2019

EACH DECEMBER, *Artforum* invites a group of distinguished critics, curators, and artists from around the world to consider the year in art. Ten contributors count down their top ten highlights of 2019, while four others select the single exhibition or event that, for them, rose above the rest.

NICOLE EISENMAN

NICOLE EISENMAN IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN BROOKLYN. SHE IS A MEMBER OF RIDYKEULOUS.



1. Xylor Jane, *10th Order Magic Square for Planet Earth*, 2019, ink and oil on panel, 19¼ x 19¼".

7

LEIDY CHURCHMAN (HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART, ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NEW YORK; CURATED BY LAUREN CORNELL) *What* Churchman paints is a fascinating riddle. Their choice of subject is almost the subject itself. It amazes me that the same person who paints, say, a new ad for the iPhone 11 Pro or a cover of *Vogue Paris* could also paint their dreams or, plain air style, their backyard in Maine. Enigmatic—and yet Churchman paints without tricks. Their approach to the material is always open and honest.

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ARTNEWS

ARTISTS — NEWS

Crocodile Rock: Painter Leidy Churchman Cedes the Floor to No One in First Museum Survey

BY *Andy Battaglia* POSTED 07/10/19 5:02 PM



Installation image of "Leidy Churchman: Crocodile" at the Hessel Museum of Art.

CHRIS KENDALL

When Leidy Churchman was given the floor for his first museum survey since starting out as a painter, he did not squander the opportunity. Nor did he fail to take the proposition literally—with a 32-foot-long floor painting that serves as a sort of stream-of-consciousness survey of its own.

Battaglia, Andy. "Crocodile Rock: Painter Leidy Churchman Cedes the Floor to No One in First Museum Survey." *ARTnews*, July 10, 2019.

“It’s like another show in it,” the artist said of a new work taking special pride of place in “Crocodile,” an exhibition spanning Churchman’s career dating back to the mid-2000s at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. “I thought I should do something big and abstract, but I don’t really plan much in advance. I didn’t know I was going to do this.”

When we met up, Churchman was in his studio on New York’s Lower East Side, and he was not yet finished with the floor work that would soon travel up to the Hudson River Valley. Most of it was complete, but there were some final tweaks and tinkering to be considered. The painting, titled *Don’t Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)*, features some 40 smaller paintings within it, all of them connected—or disconnected—in ways that can be difficult to describe.

“I think of the whole thing as a sort of mind,” Churchman said. “I’m always painting about the mind in a way. There’s this idea of emptiness in Buddhism that is hard to comprehend—that emptiness is not something that doesn’t have anything in it [but] is about the in-between between everything. It made sense to put all these pictures together in space. I think of it as bumper boats or something like that.”

The subjects that double as bumper boats vary: playing cards, a skunk, a *Vogue* magazine cover, E.T. and Elliot hover-biking in front of the moon, a pink pony, a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, a sunset spied through the window of an airplane. All of it together covers the kind of ground that Churchman focuses on in his practice as a whole (two mini paintings inside the floor painting are



Installation image of “Leidy Churchman: Crocodile” at the Hessel Museum of Art.
CHRIS KENDALL

already-extant works of his own), and fittingly, perhaps, that practice can be intriguingly elusive.

Here's writer Alex Kitnick, in an essay about Churchman's work in the "Crocodile" catalogue (a handsome new tome published by Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies and Dancing Foxes Press):

"There are patterns here, just as there would be in an archive of web searches, but there is also a radical juxtaposition between things that are hard to make coherent. The shape of the constellation is big and diffuse." And then: "His interest, I think, is less in burrowing into things and reading them than in moving around their edges. Once, someone might have called that superficial, but today it might be one way of sensing (not making sense of) the glut of the world."

Lauren Cornell, who curated "Crocodile" from her post as director of the graduate program and chief curator at CCS Bard, said of Churchman,

"He's evolved into a painter who can do anything, from complicated abstractions to intricate landscapes or portraits. What he puts in his paintings has always felt very timely. He paints the people around him and things he cares about. His painting tracks his preoccupations in a way, whether he's looking at other artists' work or thinking about different philosophies or books he's reading or an awning on a restaurant across the street from his studio. I appreciate how over time he has created a kind of visual lexicon or archive of him and his life and interests."



Installation image of "Leidy Churchman: Crocodile" at the Hessel Museum of Art.

CHRIS KENDALL

Cornell said she sees the floor painting as "a kind of key for the show," and Churchman spoke of the special significance of its placement in front of another work, *Disappearing Acts* (2019). That one is a wall-hung painting of a scene from one of Bruce Nauman's recent *Contrapposto Studies* videos, in which he walks in a pose privileged in classical European sculpture (hands clasped behind head, hip thrust out) and exaggerates it in a manner that is pointed, playful, and preposterous all at once. "He

looks like he's walking a runway," Churchman said of Nauman, "and it gives it a movement that is nice." (Hence the *Runway Bardo* part of the title, the artist explained: "Bardo" is a Tibetan-Buddhist word for "the in-between." And then "Disappearing Acts," the name of the big recent Nauman retrospective in New York and Basel, Switzerland, intimates Buddhist notions of erasure.)

Churchman's mind seemed to wander, by design, as he walked around the floor painting in his studio, trying to size it up. The idea to make it sprang from the mode of reflection that attends the process of organizing a survey show with some 60 works—"showing all your cards," as he said with a nervous grin akin to the look of the gritted-teeth emoji.

He was in good hands, he said, with Cornell, a friend of nearly two decades with whom he worked closely on the show, which runs into mid-October. "She was one of the first people to buy a painting from me," Churchman said. "It's a flying carpet with an ocean and these cats and bears in telephone wires. I'm in it and I'm throwing up on the rug. It's on stained wood and looks like Maine folk art. But that was major."

As he spoke, one couldn't help but be curious about a tattoo of a watch on Churchman's wrist. "I wanted to get the time of the tattoo, but it turned out I was getting it at 4:20," he said. "So I got my birthday time, which was 9:08. In ads it's always 10:10, because it looks like a smile. At 9:08, it looks like a smirk." (Another clock was stitched onto his button-down shirt: "At Muji you can pay \$3 and get a lot of different things embroidered. I have a sweater with a praying mantis.")



Installation image of "Leidy Churchman: Crocodile" at the Hessel Museum of Art.

CHRIS KENDALL

In mind of the fleeting nature of thoughts surrounding the subject matter he paints—especially in the disparate *Don't Try to Be the Fastest (Runway Bardo)*—Churchman turned contemplative and open-ended. “I’m trying to think of all the ways that things get torn apart and then move along and come back and reemerge—things that don’t make sense and do make sense, and all the emotions that come with them. I guess it’s a place where all these things and all their different elements can just *be there.*”



Leidy Churchman (middle, black shirt) at the opening of “Crocodile.”
LISA QUINONES

Looking down at the painting at his feet, he asked, “Does it feel like they’re all hitting each other, or like they’re transferring codes? As long as it brings you to thinking about how your mind works...”

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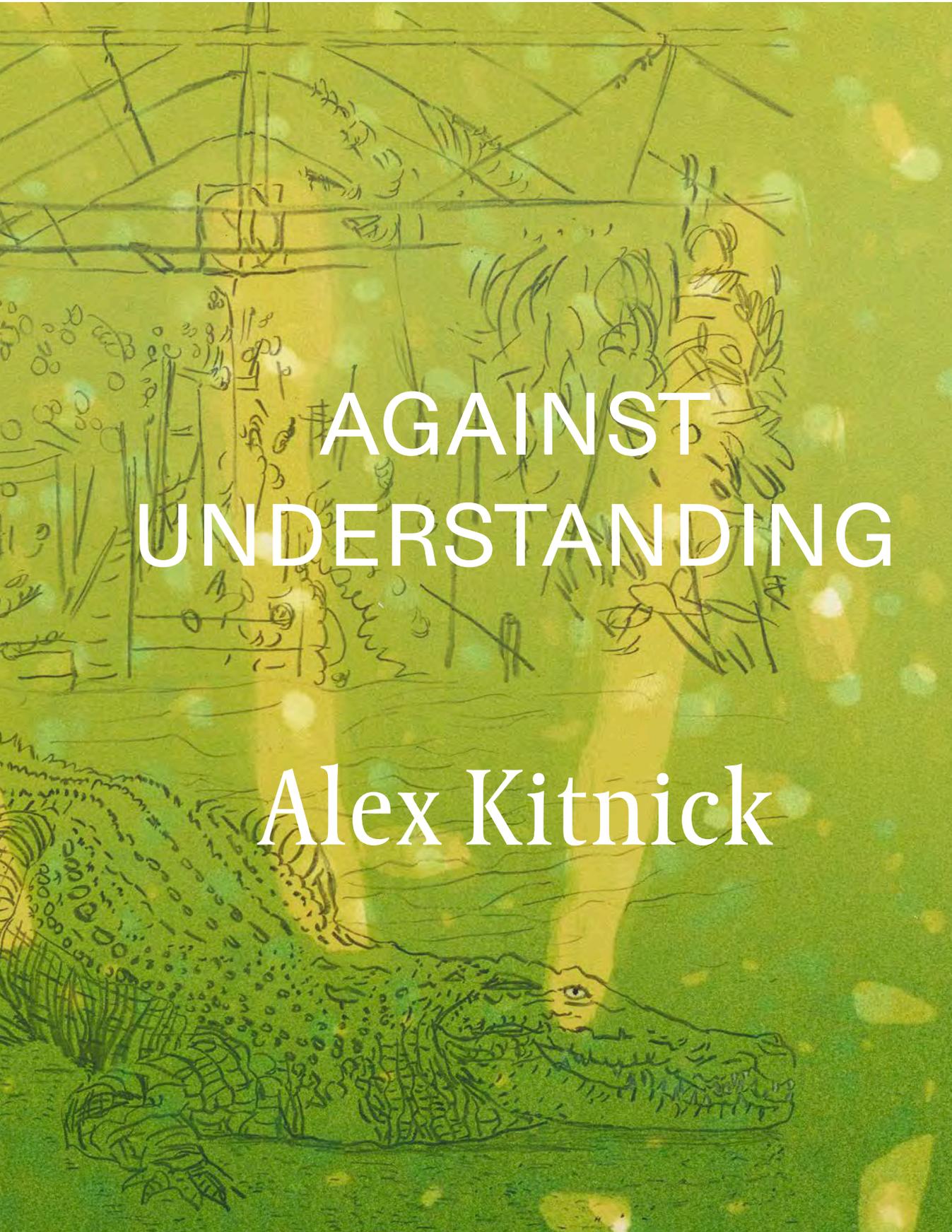
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LEIDY
CHURCHMAN

Crocodile

Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Dancing Foxes Press, Brooklyn, New York

The background of the cover is a green-toned illustration. In the foreground, a crocodile is depicted in a swampy or watery environment, facing right. The crocodile's body is covered in detailed scales, and its head is partially submerged. In the background, there is a structure with a thatched roof, possibly a hut or a boat, with various lines and patterns suggesting a complex interior or exterior. The overall style is that of a hand-drawn sketch or a textured print.

AGAINST UNDERSTANDING

Alex Kitnick

Since beginning as an artist sometime around 2007, Leidy Churchman has painted, among other things, a painting by Marsden Hartley, a sculpture by Cameron Rowland, and the cover of the book *Of Human Bondage* by W. Somerset Maugham. He has taken paint to canvas and linen and wood and made versions of a pizza box, the Mastercard logo, and a Bauhaus boatbuilding kit. Other subjects include an awning from Rivington Street in New York and rugs from Tibet, ocean maps, medieval sketchbooks, feminist art catalogues, and a Reena Spaulings painting. A few of these things are three-dimensional, but most are flat, such as a photograph grabbed from the Internet of the tower that the *New York Times* hailed as the “tallest residential building in the Western Hemisphere.”¹

The first thing one notices about this list is its bewildering diversity. Then, to use a word that has shadowed art making for the past forty years or so, one sees the striking use of *appropriation*, even if Churchman’s work departs from the ideas and motives typically associated with this word. Appropriation has a historical relationship to photography: the first artists to adopt the practice went about their work with camera in hand. The language of photography suggests appropriation: one *takes* a picture.² (There is also photography’s indexical quality and its ability to frame.) Richard Prince leaned over photographs and rephotographed them. Early on, he worked at Time Life publishing, and the material he captured, a commercial kind of dross, deserved to be taken, *détourned*, made strange. Appropriation was critical, maybe even subversive. Sherrie Levine took pictures—really, she made duplicates—of works by the founding figures (or fathers . . . or figures) of modern photography, including Walker Evans and Edward Weston and thus drew our attention to how those artists had taken from others in turn: how they lifted images out of their subjects and pulled from conventions of art history (the portrait, the torso) to make their startling photographs. She also wanted to break into a genealogy in which men passed things down to other men, and women could only be the object of a gaze. After her photographs, Levine painted watercolors based on plate reproductions from books of early modern works of art, “pieces” by artists ranging from Piet Mondrian to Joan Miró to Alexander Rodchenko. All of them were men. As a woman, Levine was both taking something back and taking something away.

This is the standard history of appropriation, its terms and techniques. But something different happens when an artist begins to paint back through everyday life and art history, to make images not thinner and

more ghostly, like apparitions (as the Pictures Generation artists did), but thicker and richer, turning them into sensuous presences. (Can we call Churchman a Things artist?)³ Jasper Johns did something like this with his flashlights and light bulbs and flags and numbers, which seem to have congealed with collective memory. His painting-objects give us a first idea of how things might stick in the mind, and how they can accrue meaning as they do so. (As Leo Steinberg pointed out in an important early essay on Johns, the artist made his subjects and his artworks coterminous with one another. Steinberg listed eight qualities of Johns's work up until 1958, but number five seems most relevant here: the subjects "tend to prescribe the picture's shape and dimensions.")⁴ Where Johns's objects belong to a common object world (Steinberg again: "All are commonplaces of our environment"),⁵ other post-Duchampian artists, such as Robert Gober, mined similar territory only to stitch it together in Surrealist fashion, causing like things to meet in unlikely ways—a stick of butter might appear jammed into a shoe, for example. But something different happens when an artist puts so many different objects next to one another, items from different times and places and cultures, from both inside and outside of the domain of art. Things that we don't typically think of as sharing a world now suddenly, vertiginously do:

an Indian tankah and a painting by Philip Guston, for example
or a Donald Judd catalogue and an LTTR zine
a painting by Jacob Lawrence
the cover of a Kara Walker catalogue
native elongating transcript
synchronized mitochondrial and cytosolic translation programs
the menu from the Jungle Café in Greenpoint, Brooklyn

Some of these things are more from Churchman's immediate world than others. The artist lived close to the Jungle Café when it was open. And Kara Walker taught at Columbia University when he was a graduate student there. Some of the things he buys, others he sees on the Internet, some he might simply take photos of in passing. He knows about all of it in some way. Some of his work is appropriation, while some of it, to use a loaded term (and not my favorite), is *cultural appropriation*, which has come to mean grabbing something from outside of one's own culture, often for financial gain (in other words, performing a kind of plundering). But such ideas need to be addressed historically. Taking—and the nature of what is

taken—means different things at different times. Today, in no small part owing to digital multiplication, we are often in gray water when trying to determine where the borders of one’s own culture begin and end.

Borderlessness and boundaries have long been central to Churchman’s work, and the way he thinks about them has changed over time. (If Levine’s work is feminist in scope, Churchman’s is trans, or transitive. Transitive verbs possess objects.⁶ The transitive contains, or is capable of containing, multitudes.⁷ *Trans* as a prefix suggests the ability to cut across, or go beyond.) Churchman’s early work—from roughly 2007 to 2009—is queer in content: its subject matter ranges from pussycats on carpets to a couple of bearded guys ass-fucking a third with colorful (strap-on?) cocks. The imagery is fantastic, mythical, and comic, sourced from Tom of Finland-type porn and the willingness of the odd boyfriend. Identity was applied and reimagined through prosthetics and pigment. Another painting from around the same time (when Churchman was painting primarily on shellacked wood, giving the work a shiny thickness) shows a couple at the beach, polychrome dicks dangling from jaunty belts. Identity is not so much fluid as accretional, and it seems to have required a considerable amount of invention, labor, and work to pull off. It is not a world without boundaries as much as a boundaried world that one transgresses through play and wit.

But at a certain point the nature of Churchman’s subject matter began to change. Suddenly it had much less to do with sexuality and subcultures—at least on the surface. I have a painting that Churchman made in 2007, which might point to another trajectory. Like other works from this period, it is on wood (two panels bolted together), and the paint was put down in a thick, straightforward manner (the early works have a Horace Pippin-like impasto). It is in portrait format and shows someone from the shoulders up. The person wears a beret, which is doubled in red and green, with the initials *PGC* lettered on the front. (It’s an open anagram, but I guessed once that it stood for “Philip Guston Club” and the painter smiled.) A little brown hair falls on the shoulders, and some turpentine seems to have spilled onto the right shoulder, swirling the colors in a marbly mix. A book hovers open in front of the figure’s face, denying any guess at identity. Logically the covers would face outward toward the viewer, but they’re blank—nothing is written on them. Perhaps the book is inside out, but there are no columns of type, either. The pages are ivory at the bottom, fleshy and rosy pink up above. They seem to blush for the face we can’t see.

The body has always been the key point of reference in Churchman's work, even if it has been stretched and differently rendered. While he started off depicting it in paint (Churchman is a painter, after all, working through a long history of figuration), at some point things swung around, and he started to use paint on the body itself. In his *Painting Treatments* (2010), which take the form of single-channel videos, different combinations of the artist's friends and collaborators get laid out, toweled, and rolled over with paint and stuff (Cheerios, plants, etc.) of various chroma.⁸ They are poked and prodded, maybe massaged. (Indeed, the title of the work has something of the smack of the spa.) Flesh takes the place of wood, canvas. Something is cooked up. The performance and processes of painting win out over any finished work; to borrow a phrase from the painter-performance artist Carolee Schneemann, the work is a kind of "meat joy."⁹ The works were done in the privacy of the artist's studio, unlike Yves Klein's *Anthropométries* (1958–60), which were staged to chamber music before audiences, women thrown around in blue, with the aftermath shipped to galleries. Here, the video is all we are left with. (Very few faces here, too. The bodies tend to lie on their stomachs or are covered in towels. The gendered relationship of Klein's work is not simply reversed but split apart, unfurled.) A more relevant precursor might be Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting*, performed during the Perpetual Fluxfest in New York in 1965. The lesson: There are all different ways to take hold of the brush. Feminist critics have spoken for some time now of "writing on the body," but with "painting on the body" Churchman imagines a new trans mode of address (*to paint somebody* takes on a different meaning and connotation) that shifts the mode of emphasis from signs to sensations.

With these lessons in store (and for the time being the video work has been put on hold), Churchman turned things back around again to a more traditional type of painting. And then—well, not just then, but around then—the dam seemed to give way and all different sorts of things rushed into Churchman's painting. He got rid of the wood support (for the time being) and began to stretch linen, scumbling oil across it. He continued to refine his skills as a painter (yet at the same time he approached each subject with a kind of desperation, as if he were trying to fix it in place). And he practiced on all sorts of things that appeared in front of him:

Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts
the laundry room
Barbara Kruger

the *New Yorker*
a New Year's card
The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon
Rousseau
Permaculture Official by Carolyn Watson-Paul

There are patterns here, just as there would be in an archive of web searches, but there is also a radical juxtaposition between things that are hard to make coherent. The shape of the constellation is big and diffuse. The whole idea of identity begins to manifest in new ways, and it can no longer be depicted all at once as a thing in itself, in one specific work. Identity is constituted through the various things you put in front of yourself and the connections between them. The connections are not stable. They come and go, link up in new ways. Some stay longer than others.

One could argue that Churchman's practice constitutes some kind of cosmopolitan view of the world, that his capacious image hunger manifests a desire to understand varied things, to meditate on them, and to grasp them more fully. While this may be true to an extent, I think the best way to understand a book is still to read it, not to repaint a chunk of wood in its image, making the thing look even denser and more impenetrable than before. (In the sculpture *Cart in Theory*, from 2008, he loads a version of the trusty *Art in Theory* textbook onto a pushcart alongside a replica of a block of cheese.) Many of Churchman's paintings have this quality of thickness and opacity to them, even as his painting technique has smoothed out over the years. (His early works were done in a heavy-handed impasto, with a spread or smear—a *pâté*—of paint.) Everything becomes more thinglike, more like an object, and taken together his paintings do not so much suggest "real" or motivated connections between things—between Al Qaeda and Juliana Huxtable or Peter Doig and dharma—as much as they make clear that here is a collection of things that don't go together, that are thinglike beside one another, burnished and blushing in their uniqueness even if they all inhabit the same world and even though some subjects have more of a personal connection to the artist than others. (In other words, even if some subjects connect back to his biography, they don't necessarily connect laterally to one another, not even *through* him.) Part of what appears as the naiveté (and at times I have worried about the possibility of its faux naiveté or its traces of nostalgia) of Churchman's art is that he goes after these things so directly, so bloody-mindedly, as if there were nothing else around them, as if each were alone in the world for the time being. (As with Johns, the edges of the

objects Churchman depicts often go right up to the borders of his paintings, so that the paintings and the things depicted appear coterminous with one another.) Yes, they are precious objects (and I struggle with preciousness), but they are also *dumb* (as in “destitute of the faculty of speech”) objects. Is there a connection between the precious and the dumb?¹⁰

Churchman’s project seems to be less about weaving meaningful relationships between things than about rendering them both autonomous and inadequate at once. His interest, I think, is less in burrowing into things and reading them than in moving around their edges. Once, someone might have called that superficial, but today it might be one way of sensing (not making sense of) the glut of the world.

In 1966, Susan Sontag famously rallied “against interpretation.” She claimed that what was needed was not a “hermeneutics” but an “erotics of art.”¹¹ Some fifty years later, I hear something similar coming from Churchman’s objects (even his paintings I call objects): he is against understanding. Instead he wants to take in the sensuous entirety of the world one thing at a time. One thing after the other. To feel what makes us here.

¹ Charles V. Bagli, “Sky High and Going Up Fast: Luxury Towers Take New York,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2013. This is one strand of Churchman’s work. He has also been involved with traditions of abstraction and still life, among others.

² Of course, it wasn’t always this way. Recent sculptures by Zoe Leonard (2016–18), made up exclusively of Kodak photography manuals, trace the evolution of a photographic language, from “how to *make* good pictures” to “how to *take* good pictures.”

³ At a certain moment in her career, Sherrie Levine moved from making watercolors to creating oil paintings, often on mahogany. “I wanted to make it more clear that I was making things I wanted to make,” the artist said. See Gerald Marzorati, “Art in the (Re)Making,” *Artnews* 85, no. 5 (May 1986): 93.

⁴ Leo Steinberg, “Jasper Johns: The First Seven Years of His Art,” in Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 26. Originally published in *Metro*, nos. 4–5 (1962).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ In his influential essay “Painting beside Itself,” David Joselit offers up a definition of “transitive painting.” Writing about the work of Jutta Koether, he claims that “instead of attempting to visualize the overall contours of a network, she actualizes the *behavior of objects within networks* by demonstrating what I would like to call their transitivity.” He continues, “What defines transitive painting . . . is its capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas, and those external to it.” See David Joselit, “Painting beside Itself,” *October*, no. 130 (Fall 2009): 128–29. (Italics in the original.)

⁷ As my friend the art historian Robert Slifkin has noted, the transitive is “also inherently contingent. Modernist aesthetics of self-reflexivity posit ‘to paint’ as an intransitive verb.” Slifkin, e-mail to the author, fall 2018.

⁸ For more on this body of work, see Amy Sillman, “Ab-Ex and Disco Balls: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism II,” *Artforum* 49, no. 10 (Summer 2011): 321–25.

⁹ Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy*, 1964, 10:33 min., color, sound, 16 mm film transferred to video.

¹⁰ Mark Leckey recently plumbed the idea of the “dumb” in his exhibition project *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (2013), which the artist tells us “is a phrase from a concept in computing that refers to a network of everyday objects, an Internet of Things, all communicating, talking to one another.” See Mark Leckey, introduction to *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 5.

¹¹ Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 1–10.

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LEIDY
CHURCHMAN

Crocodile

Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

Dancing Foxes Press, Brooklyn, New York

“Lauren Cornell and Leidy Churchman in Conversation.” In *Leidy Churchman: Crocodile*. Edited by Lauren Cornell. Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College; Brooklyn: Dancing Foxes Press, 2019, pp. 131–41.

Lauren Cornell and Leidy Churchman in Conversation

Lauren Your painting *Crocodile* (2016) stuck with me after I first Plate 26 saw it in London. The way the reptile is rendered—alone, except for its reflection—seemed to distill some key aspects of your approach, such as the way you encourage us to look at quotidian things anew. Here, the viewer is asked to stay with the crocodile, to consider what we know of this beast and how we know it. Meanwhile, its reflection, vivid in the water, implies a consciousness that is actually unknowable to us. I suggested the title *Crocodile* for your exhibition at the Hessel Museum because I felt this ask of the viewer to stay with a subject, even a familiar one, in order to relearn it, happens throughout your work. On another level, a playful one, the crocodile’s attitude—its ferocity—seemed relevant to your voracious practice. Can you talk a bit about this painting, which you made for your solo show, *Lost Horizons*, that same year?

Leidy In 2013, when I was living out in the desert town of Twentynine Palms, a line came into my head: “A crocodile walks into the water.” It was such a plain sentence, so I Googled it and found a couple images that pictured my feeling. They gave off a stunning sense of immersion, of going *into* the world—farther. When I was asked a couple of years later, in 2015, to be in the show *Queer Fantasy* at OHWOW Gallery in Los Angeles, I thought of how that crocodile related to a kind of radical transformation and queer liberation. I didn’t have enough time to finish the painting for that show, but it did return me to this particular imagining. So the crocodile painting came forward later on in the context of *Lost Horizons* at Rodeo in London.

In the press release for *Lost Horizons*, we quoted Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche—a visionary meditation master, holder of both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages in Tibetan Buddhism, founder of Naropa University, and the radical originator of a re-presentation of Shambhala vision in the West: “One day passes and another day comes along, and everything happens the same. But basically we are so afraid of the brilliance coming at us and the sharp experience of our life that we can’t even focus our



eyes.” So *Lost Horizons* centered on the experience of direct perception—on that “brilliance coming at us.” An immersion and transformation at a different scale; a richer, rounder view of the moment from within the mind. Dropping the horizons of hopes and fears and the projection reels of past and future from a moment, direct perception remains. (I was

Plate 92 also getting at this idea in the painting *Sea Floor* [2016].)

Lauren There does seem to be an intentional indiscernibility in the *Lost Horizons* paintings: with each of them, one has to step back and ask, “What exactly am I looking at?” In *Sea Floor*, for instance, is it the sandy ground, the water above, or the lone fish flitting by? However, when I thought of the voracity of your work, I meant in terms of subject matter: the way you devour disparate topics and styles, from the medieval to the Renaissance to modernism, to contemporary art, politics, spirituality, current affairs, and personal matters. Also in relation to speed: you produce so much work. I’ve always had this impression that your time in your studio must be prolific—only forward momentum.

Leidy Oh, sure. There’s a lot of painting but also a lot of just looking, just trying to figure out what I’m seeing and what it seems to say. What it feels like. And sometimes I just can’t paint, because there seems to be no reason



to do so. Why do it? It’s not like Jackson Pollock: painting is not just what I imagine to be some continuous flow. When painting happens for me, it’s more like collecting caterpillars on a summer night, being both delighted and grossed out, or it’s driven by a desire to take care of something that is completely unknown. I get upset, though—I’m a whiner, kind of melancholy happy. I think my paintings are so hard, and they’ll never show me anything. But wait!—then something shows up.

Lauren You spend a lot of time just staring at the canvas?

Leidy Yes! I let the visual subject swarm in my mind. It’s a free-for-all. At a certain point, a kind of space emerges, and I think, “Ooh! What is that—it’s so strange?” And things continue.

Lauren That surprises me, because I think of you, at least partly, as a sign painter—someone who crafts literal messages, often copied directly from the world around you.

Leidy Well, I love to be straightforward. But what a painting needs most is to have a sense of presence and multiplicity emerging from the “house” of a concept. So the concept or sign opens up to a point where it becomes available in many ways, like a carcass to be eaten. That feels so good, I love that.

Lauren You say “presence and multiplicity” are what paintings need most. Where does this idea come from? Are there artists that have particularly inspired or influenced you? Or painters—or artists in general—with whom you absolutely disagree and who you want to paint against?

Leidy It’s funny you say “paint against,” because I was thinking that in painting to be against something is to be *with* something. Sometimes I like to paint against “antipainting,” like Donna Nelson or Blake Rayne. Things as paintings bother me. You know that perfectness of draping a little rope memento that carries an idea across your canvas and over its shoulder. I love it too. I’m also weirded out by Surrealism. I always think of Dalí, dead in his casket at his museum in Spain. Right there. So hoaxy and rotten! It occurs to me now, is this really true? I loooove De Chirico and Magritte—the most legible painter in the world. But I don’t want to be like him! In general with art, I feel like the person who doesn’t like to swim. The one who says, “Aw, no, I’m all dry. I don’t want to get all wet and sandy and then have to walk back from the beach.” When I see art, I get overwhelmed quickly. I either want to go take a nap or go work. I’m less like this now maybe. Contemporary art has such sharp newness, it can be hard to handle.



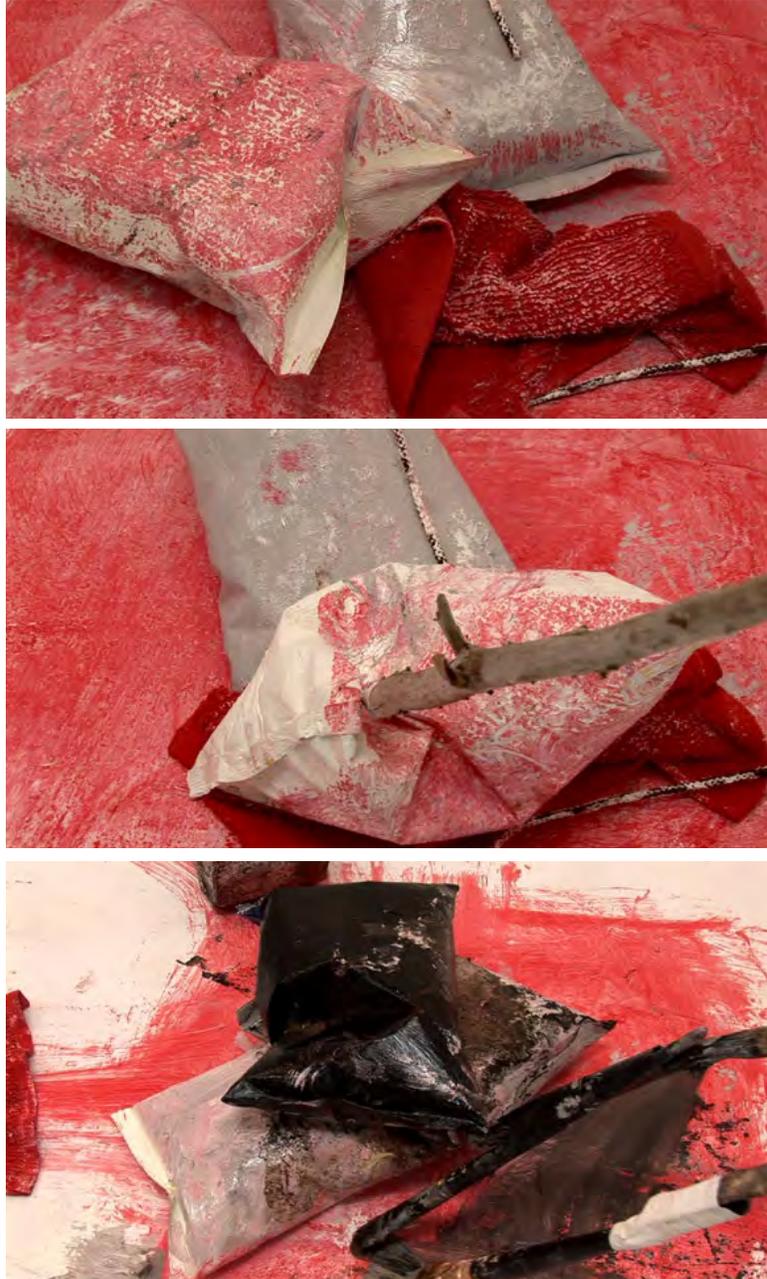
Lauren Something that differentiates your practice in painting is your versatility in terms of medium. The fact that you are a painter who also makes performance, sculpture, and video seems to argue against the tight

2-D boundaries of the medium. Do you think of this other work as part of your practice of painting?

Leidy By switching mediums, I can observe what I am drawn to do, whatever action, whatever I find, that brings new intel to 2-D painting. This is because 2-D painting is constantly screening the world for its parts. My video showed me how abstract painting works. Everything that came through the lens was more real but also more abstract than a painting—and flatter, with gravity and sound pushing around inside. Making painty videos brought the computer state of mind into my paintings. Now I think of painting as more like Alexa or Siri. I do think of paintings as robots, or something similar. They are programmed. I think you can feel this with an artist like Forrest Bess. His pictures are so emotionally searing that I feel like I've made them myself and I have very little memory of not having known them.

Lauren As we finish up our work on the book, you are about to begin a floor painting, a new work for the museum. This is the sixth or so floor painting that you've made, and they are all site-specific, i.e., made for particular environments and shows. When did you first make a floor painting, and how has this practice evolved over time? Is this the first time you'll make one on linen?

Leidy I used to shoot video on the floor, on top of big laid-out sheets of vinyl. They're like whales—heavy and rubbery. But the art historian and curator Arnisa Zeqo just reminded me that I used to call them crocodiles. She mused that the big colorful shapes and lines thrown around the compositions looked like dismembered parts of people who had gotten too close. That is also around the time in 2012 when I got more interested in 2-D painting again after doing mostly video for three years. I began to paint the enormous floors without the “camera-on” splish-splash that live recording brings. The new floor painting will be on linen, which will make it quite different. My plan now is to paint shapes like fallen leaves on the ground, playing cards, clouds passing, or stepping-stones, but like the Sistine Chapel ceiling in that many small scenes might be on a ground that could be sky or ceiling. It might have a runway effect. The painting will be “doing” the runway. Hung with the floor painting will be a new painting, of Bruce Nauman's 2015/2016 *Contrapposto Studies* video **Plate 64** installation, which I think will give it some movement. We'll see—



Red, 2009 (stills)
Video, time tba
collection tbd

that's my jumping-off point. Attention will be held to the border of this painting, too, because it is a textile. I'm gathering a group to help decorate and embroider: my mother, Lee; my partner, Marley; my Buddhist mentor, Gayle; previous gallerist and colleague Janice; close friend Siobhan; and my godson, J'Vaughnii. I might be painting while they make the edges. It will be familial.

Lauren The composition of the 2018 work **Plate 63** *Mother* is so densely layered that it appears almost encrypted, with seemingly random words and signs, such as *taxi*, *mother*, *Egypt*. One of the words, *jazz*, is jammed into the upper-right corner and seems like a key to the composition, which appears to sway in different directions at once—its vertical central columns shimmying to the left and right; its diagonal lines sliding across the canvas; its many spaces filled with bursts of color; and its small, sublimated scenes, such as a desert cactus at sunset.



Leidy That painting took a long time, over a year. I start to call paintings like that monsters—that is, the ones where the “swarm” just keeps landing on bright, brash decisions. These types of paintings typically start very free-form and gestural or loose and impulsive. That painting took me a while because I just kept doing outrageous and unexpected things to it that felt instrumental, but all the while I was wondering *what* I was trying to do, because every step seemed to threaten the whole picture. It went on for a long time, and I would take it out of the studio for periods of time. Edvard Munch called that “the horse cure.” It comes from the technique of taming a raucous horse by letting it go run off instead of whipping it, and then it will calm down in its own time and be ready for training. He would take his paintings and put them outside in the harsh Oslo snow, sun, and wind, and check on them periodically to see if they were ready to continue. I have done this a lot. The word *jazz* itself represents, to me, black excellence. Artistic genius, overflowing mastery, and improvisation, and piano. Jazz represents overcoming enduring cultural oppression through what gets created collectively, and it's so rich and stunning and masterful, its seed of endowment so deep, it overflows into everything. Everybody receives

its riches. I think each part of this painting played a key role—maybe this painting is like a superintendent’s ring of keys, one of those thick, jingly key chains.

Lauren How do you know, with a painting like *Mother*, when you’re done? How do you finish a “monster”?

Leidy I look at it alongside other paintings and think about whether it has a relationship to and can stand with the others. The other paintings in the room will indicate, over time, what each painting needs, actually. There are so many ways to go, and I look for a painting that can surprise me while remaining ordinary. Yes, *Mother* says, “Egypt,” “Taxi,” “Tokyo,” “Taxi,” “Taxi,” “Mother,” “Jazz.” I think it says “Mars,” too. As you say, the colors slide and jump. There is a lot of talking. There are so many layers. Its monster qualities are still seen, but it has transitioned into something much more integrated.

Lauren There is an acute timeliness to your paintings. In fact, they actually often reference time—be it sunset or sunrise or some sort of historical narrative (artistic, religious, economic, scientific, climatological). They also come right up to the moment, sometimes pointing to current events and news.

Leidy I like the beat of the drum of contemporary facts and figures occurring orchestrally. Awards ceremonies, scandals, scientific breakthroughs, war reports—so much public information. And we eat it all up together, slicing and dicing. Dogs, depression, Alice Coltrane, Galápagos Islands, Amazon

and Whole Foods . . . As we were joking before, I’m not trying to write Billy Joel’s “We Didn’t Start the Fire” (“Pope Paul, Malcolm X, British politician sex, JFK, blown away, what else do I have to say”)! Not quite! This stream of behaviors, ideas, famous moments, symbols of this and that. No, these ribbons are like snakes of RNA, breaking off from DNA like short receipts of requested information in the cell. My sister, Stirling, has a biophysics lab, and they work in this arena. Her work



is basically invisible. It has changed my perception. In her lab, they take pictures inside a cell by biochemically slicing through the cell, into the mitochondria. In the slice, they can see proteins in different stages of that particular moment of action. So they try to find the storyline. Who's working with whom? They try as hard as they can to develop ways to feel around in the dark, in the dark of a cell, where the human eye can't see. I've gotten better acclimated to that scale: in my mind, it seems very big, because there is so much going on in a microscopic cell and there are such vast regions that are significantly unstudied at this point.

Lauren When you were preparing in mid-2018 for your exhibition *For the Moon There Is the Cloud*, at Reena Spaulings in Los Angeles, you told me that the paintings would reflect our “mental state of emergency” here in the United States. It was hard for me to imagine how this would be evoked in landscape portraits of Maine. And yet, in the final works, I see a creep of grief and dread, as if you had conjured a latent darkness in the land and in our perception of it. You make each portrait, whether of a craggy beach or rose hips, strange or thrown off. For instance, *Double Bubble* [2018] features frothy waves lapping up against rocks, but the canvas is shot through with a blood-red line.

Leidy I'm interested in what's happening in the mind. We create duality, and it's palpable—like the line in the middle of the painting. You can see the scene, but that line just sits there right in the way. That middle line has a kind of gravity. The area of the painting that is close to it gets pulled into a mirroring effect with the other side, and the farther the picture gets from the middle line, the more that it becomes its own and does not mirror the other side. I had been wanting to set aside time to make landscapes in Maine and approach them in a slightly different frame of mind. I felt like a big landscape painting could be a place where I could be with my handwriting. I thought of the landscape itself as a body, like the bloody carcass that occupied Chaïm Soutine. Could I see parts of myself in all

the wild flashes that I come across in the natural world? Feel those
Plate 39 weighty, sludgy pieces but also be brushy, haphazard, and sunny?
Who is that big thick rose-hip bush growing by the sea? The material world is so different, like the teddy bears and hot chocolate, the colorful graphs, and the police sirens. But the natural world is unfathomable, stranger every second; it looks like the mind.

Lauren I recently spoke about the exhibition *Crocodile* with the artist, writer, and gallerist John Kelsey, with whom you've worked many times and who has written about your work. He described very aptly, I thought, how groupings of your paintings follow an "antilogic," in that they resist themes or categories and that they manifest more in what he called "energy force fields." In the press release for your show at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in Los Angeles last year, he wrote:

Painting in the midst of an emergency, the artist wonders how the experience of livestreaming the implosion of democracy becomes present in an improvised composition of clouds turning into rocks becoming scribbles and more clouds. Does a landscape or any painting whatsoever contain the sociopathy of white privilege? The painting is like a bowl of water: an emptiness reflecting everything. There is tension and calm, the feeling that everything is about to become something, also a kind of stuckness. Other Maine moments were painted plein-air looking out toward a cove in shifting light, or else using an iPhone pic taken nearby, or came just out of his head. Leidy Churchman works like a painter of signs, flattening and framing wide and close views that often seem to want to lean into direct, sign-like communication of the present, presenting this communication as painting.



He also mentioned a kind of stoner effect in your work. I can see how your paintings relate to the act of staring at a familiar object to create distance for a naive or renewed wondering and inquiry.

Leidy Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche describes this kind of seeing as the process of recognizing the "is-ness" of a thing. That is, that you make an effort to approach an object not with an idea; instead you just *look* at it to see it with fresh sight. You see what's happening. And as a viewer, you look forward at a painting; there is a transcription—a binding awareness—and that is its message.

Lauren Would you apply this question of "is-ness" to the systems you depict and allude to, say in *Billions of Never Ending Universes* [2015], **Plate 37**

in which the world is rendered a yellow field with no borders, only with names of countries hanging out in undifferentiated space.

Leidy Seeing the world laid out through naming began as a simple activity and then became interesting. Spooky. You never see the world that way, without the landforms and borderlines. Without all the info, it felt like a reintroduction. It scared me, too, how all the names on the map looked so far away and small, like stars.

Lauren Reintroduction is an apt way to describe the effect of your paintings on viewers. I often feel reintroduced to subjects or species or topics through your rendition of them. I think it surprises viewers that your work lacks any irony or sarcasm. You aren't bracketing or joking about these objects but are deeply exploring them. Your work strikes me as part of a practice of dedicated life learning; it roves from spiritual questions to art historical themes, to the poetics of everyday life, to current affairs, focusing hard on things—sometimes in isolation.

Leidy I love learning, it's my favorite thing, but it's really hard for me! I lose my place a lot, I'm a daydreamer. To really get something I have to take things further and create a personal interaction. I've come to enjoy this, it's a lot of my work. It shapes my life.

Lauren In the past few years, your commitment to a Buddhist practice has deepened, most recently through Reverend angel Kyodo williams's teaching. You repainted the cover of her most recent coauthored book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*. As I understand, partly through listening and reading on your recommendation, radical dharma involves peeling back layers of personal identification and association, such as ways you see yourself through things you inherit socially and culturally. How does that process of peeling back, of disidentifying with aspects of yourself that might have previously been firm, affect your practice in terms of what you paint and how you approach painting?



Leidy Studying the dharma little by little over the course of some years and cultivating a Buddhist practice came about through my motivations in

painting. I think my study and meditation practice have helped me to learn about the place from which I paint—and from which I decorate myself. Reverend angel Kyodo williams and Lama Rod Owens are key teachers and interpreters of the dharma right now in the United States. As queer people of color, they particularly focus on creating an environment within the dharma for dismantling the latent and persistent culture of white supremacy. The Buddhist dharma gained its foothold in the United States during the late 1960s and early 1970s, during a time of massive cultural upheaval. Its audience was largely made up of young white people with the time and resources to invest in individual spiritual development. It was a moment when great meditation teachers came from the East to engage Western students. Spiritual communities flourished among the white middle-class students who suddenly became the gatekeepers for how Buddhism would be taught. Radical dharma asks us to upend our thinking and recognize that the most profound teachings of the Buddha are based in the Mahayana. It is here where we recognize that we all suffer and that our relief from that suffering is connected to one another, that our true liberation is indefinitely tied to one another. Because meditation is a practice for the mind, it is an endlessly curious posture. Hilarity, certain boredom, insanity, dread, and awakenment are all there in meditation. The sociopathic environment of white supremacy play out through minute, fractured thoughts that race through the analytical mind and make everyone sick. Radical dharma positions a conversation from this abstract place of self. It is different from trying to be effective; it is trying to understand the truth.

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ARTFORUM

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON

“LEIDY CHURCHMAN: CROCODILE”

CCS BARD HESSEL MUSEUM
Bard College Campus

Curated by Lauren Cornell

When I think of a “surveyor,” I think of that guy (yeah, humph, usually a guy) in a utility suit with a mysterious tripod, taking the measurements of the terrain and marking it with chalk and sticks. That’s not unlike my conception of Leidy Churchman, whose early videos feature exactly such tools, and whose entire project could be described as a kind of survey of the world, and as a culling, sampling, rearranging, and remaking of its signs and systems. This summer, American viewers will have their first opportunity to survey Churchman’s enchanted and estranged artifactual universe in a show titled “Crocodile” at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College. The exhibition will include more than sixty oil paintings from 2010 to the present, the 2011 video *Snakes*, and a newly commissioned floor painting, and will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue copublished by CCS Bard and Dancing Foxes Press.

— Amy Sillman

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FLASH ART

•FEATURE

9 November 2015, 6:55 am CET

Painting It, Touching It by Michele D'Aurizio



Van Hanos, "The Fall" (2014). Courtesy of the Artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

The paintings of Leidy Churchman (b. 1979, US; lives in New York), Van Hanos (b. 1979, US; lives in New York) and Alan Michael (b. 1967, UK; lives in London) trigger a whirling dialectics between the reality they depict and the concrete world they inhabit. By filtering a realist imaginary through sly representational and framing gestures, the paintings convey a subject matter that interrogates strategies of image-making on the canvas. They render content in which a potential iconicity is compromised by hints of the creative process. Here, Churchman, Hanos and Michael talk with Michele D'Aurizio about appropriationist strategies in their painting practice, labor production and the possibility of making new images in our visually saturated world.

Michele D'Aurizio: *Your painting practice is grounded in appropriationist tactics. The sources of your subjects are multiple and diverse, and yet they denote affection for specific visual repertoires. The eclecticism that differentiates your respective subjects echoes the kaleidoscopic visual culture of our time; simultaneously, however, I feel that your individual approach, almost in opposition to the dynamics of image dispersion, lies in the exercise of framing an "imaginary." This imaginary, it seems, does not stem from your own imagination; rather, it exists as a factual system of references that fosters your belonging to distinct cultural landscapes and collective styles. In other words, it ties your paintings to the concrete world. Do you agree with this reading? How would you describe the visual repertoire that precedes your paintings?*

D'Aurizio, Michele, Alan Michael, and Leidy Churchman. "Painting It, Touching It." *Flash Art*, July/August/September 2015, pp. 72–79.

Alan Michael: I don't think art is a mirror: realism is symbolic — it represents a realist subjectivity. Using a retarded format of representation, photorealism is, in my case, the opposite of affection: I don't like the format per se but it's useful. The originators of the style had nothing of interest to say about the world they were displaying, but endless projections can be directed at this void. I used the style to display brand-products like BMW Minis, Accessorize stores, exhibition signage. With the plan being that the car paint surfaces and the shop windows would reflect surrounding real estate, restaurant interiors, etc.

Leidy Churchman: I just put down an interview by Lisa Ruyter, and she says, "appropriation as a mode of representation has completely changed in meaning over the last twenty years. Jeff Koons looks practically Mannerist now — it's not at all what it meant twenty years ago. There's nothing punk about it anymore." Some remarks on Mannerism: common characteristics of many Mannerist works include distortion of the human figure, a flattening of pictorial space, and a cultivated intellectual sophistication. And so I think that I don't like Koons's work very much, and maybe because in a weird way I have never been able to see beyond and endure all the projections of excellence. His work is seductive and exhausting. I have



Leidy Churchman, "Pelagic Ocean Sunfish" (2015). Courtesy of the Artist.

liked to pick oddly seductive and popular pictures to paint, but so that I can get very close to the representation of that thing. It becomes like the walls that would surround you if you sat in a closet for a long time... You would get to know them. And it would be weirder than the veneer of capitalism.

Van Hanos: Appropriation on some level is everywhere. Think back four hundred or more years ago, when seeing an image happened so rarely, maybe even once in a lifetime. The severity of that is something I want to consider more when making work. We are all beyond saturated; images function differently, have less potency. Many say image production is just a closed loop, that it's not possible to make new images. There's a lot at stake, but I'm optimistic.

I think in regard to appropriation, it's more felt than actual, as is acknowledgment of the internet. It's not an overt subject, but it influences how images are worked through, dispersed, and how the meaning of the images can change depending on which platform they're viewed on. That isn't to say that I haven't used found images. However, it is very rare. For me, all the paintings that come "from images" are from photographs I've made myself. In the past, I have tried to pull from images I love that I've found elsewhere — but I find my relationship to them just isn't intimate enough to push through to paint. Possibly this is something that will be incorporated more as it relates to the larger project of indexing painting. I'm just starting at it all, so it'll be something that evolves in time.

MDA: *It seems that your subject matter is a pretext for a kind of inquiry into image-making on the canvas. In the end, the artwork plays both with the "iconicity" of its subject and with the inner structural configurations that make it an "index" of the painting process. I think about the interplay of transparencies and mirrorings in Alan's paintings (see Untitled (High Street), 2007, or Regent Street, 2009, for example); or about the exposure of the photographic equipment and the studio devices in Van's (Painting Talia in the Studio, 2010; or A, 2014); or, in a less direct way, about the tension between the bi-dimensional artifact and the "bodiless" graphic artwork in Leidy's (Pizza Box, 2013, or 19th Century Flayed Elephant, 2015)... Can you elaborate on these visual and conceptual "gimmicks" at play in your paintings?*

AM: The subject matter is a checklist that includes formal stuff, like reflective surfaces, transparencies, etc. — paradigms from reactionary photorealism and all the associations leading out of that. I wanted to represent reality, the capitalist rapture, in a particular manner; so I looked at painting formats historically suited to this. The idea was to represent consumer archetypes in a credible way — I mean, in a way that looks believable. I found that the style of painting was something I could replicate while also producing texts and other types of work. It's interesting to look at it afterwards; adopting a style is like having someone else working for you. The painting process, such as it is, is simple and all about setting goals and time-scales.

The world has dissolved, but I think it's interesting to represent things as if nothing has happened, as if continuity exists. The information presented is, on the face of it, useless, and so could be said to be invisible to the class of information experts the work seeks to criticize.

VH: Those photographic cues are meta-references. My hope was they function as the fourth or fifth wall does in theater or film. There are two related paintings from 2010 that feature the photographer Talia Chetrit — her camera was used to get the picture. The first, *Portrait of Talia Chetrit with Lilly*, has the photo equipment — as does A. Both show a moment that would be very difficult to capture by the eye or in observational painting. I didn't want to front that it was made in any other way than it was; I wanted to show all the tricks I used. The second, *Painting Talia in the Studio*, also came from a photograph. This time the light source was a projector. It's the source image for the first painting projected over the studio while the painting was half completed. I wanted the paintings, when shown together, to collapse that time — in one you're looking at the other unfinished. They hopefully become fractals of the process and themselves. The photo and still projection speak to the slowness at which I want painting perform. To take a stance for stillness, to slow down to a rate where content unfolds through time.

LC: I think *Pizza Box* is a good piece that you brought up for this question. When it occurred to me that the pizza box would fit completely inside the entire painting and present itself as an exact-ish object, I got very excited. "Your Freshly Baked Pizza" it says, with creamy white and forest green — so bold and secure. The painting is in fact a delivery — right to you. I love that simple arrangement. "Here." Finding the way

for something to fit inside — framing — is my biggest concern. To me it's like making the bed. How can the picture get tucked in?

With *19th Century Flayed Elephant* I decided to make it slightly off kilter, and add a bright yellow frame to highlight that this object is moving. The picture comes from a Tibetan rug and is a very sacred object. It didn't seem to want to be framed too tightly. The piece has so much wisdom and wild awareness; it actually took a lot for me not to get frightened of it while painting it — touching it.

MDA: *In line with the methodological issues raised above, I'd like to learn more about productive strategies associated with "copy" and "repetition." In the case of Alan's practice, the reiteration of the same image on several canvases produces differentiations in the color tone of the image, such that full spec-*



Van Hanos, "Candle for Mark" Courtesy of the Artist.

trum often fades into grayscale (see Streetwear in Drapers, 2011); or it highlights minimal but undeniable incongruities in the reproduction of the image's details (Natwest, Anon-nets, Bornagain, 2013); or it "reframes," or "rescales" the original image (Alan Michael Publicity Agent, 2014). Leidy has instead repainted historical paintings (Rousseau, 2015). While Van systematically produces "versions" of his own painting (Candle Maker's Lamp, 2008 and 2012; or Portrait of Talia Chetrit, 2008, echoed in Painting Talia in the Studio, and Lilly's Gaze, 2012). These gestures can't but refer to a certain fatigue implied in copying, and thereby raise issues of labor production in creative work. What's your position here?

AM: These characteristics are definitely suggestive of work. Hating work is definitely not cool in society

today, but it ought to be, as a social image, since people are defined as being productive or not. I hate work. Those paintings you mention came about because I'm interested in reproducing methods for generating content and images that would be outside of the spectrum of coded research presentations. Creative identities and an affinity with easy flows and circuits of data were the main topic. It's hard to discuss because it's about wanting something to happen that's negative. The material is supposed to have the general appearance of specialized information but selected in a kind of panic.

Given my background of making works referencing photorealism, I started to synthesize this with modes of authoritarian Pop art — Richard Hamilton and others — to think about a parallel consumer-object-quoting movement. It never really integrates, which I find interesting. The paintings *Streetwear in Drapers*, in fact, are silkscreens with oil over-painting, and the variations in the different versions are there to point to their seriality.

LC: I am always trying to get close to the visual languages of our world. Art is a big part of that. I want to be with the paintings that have frightened me in some way (I might someday want to play with a Peter Paul Rubens body). You can get a very intimate look at a work in the museum or gallery but you must leave it there. I want to go home and get in bed with them. But it's funny, you go home and all you have is maybe a book of reproductions or the iPad. So I go to paint it. A painting is perverse — because it's made of muck and brains. It's such a mess. You are there in the muck with the intention to learn the painting you're painting — and stay with it until it haunts you like you wanted.

VH: It's something that came naturally: I taught myself to draw by copying. It left me with a range of ability but not much of a style or interest in choosing one. Working this way helps me understand an image, or try to get some meaning from it. The copies started after grad school, making gifts for those who helped me get through. I started by making small paintings of the details of paintings I had previously made, parts that were favorites of these people. It was a way to warm back up in the studio — nothing that serious — but ended up becoming something that plays a larger role now. I like to think of how many paintings were born out of that half-a-second moment the camera caught. How one can relive the same moment for a lifetime. It ended up amounting to my first solo show, which felt appropriate and hopefully unique, and a little funny to have a retrospective of details as a first show.

Candle Maker's Lamp is something I plan to paint every four years — maybe it'll culminate to be the last show I make? As of now it's an experiment; so far I can see I'm growing as a painter through it, but I imagine at some point that won't be an interest. It's hard to say. Being so slow, it'll take a lifetime to see. The image was taken with a 4x5 camera, so there's almost infinite potential for detail if that seems interesting. Initially, I thought the object was best presented as a ready-made sculpture, then I thought it should be a photograph, then a painting — I like that evolution. It shows how much consideration goes into any work. Overall I thought it spoke well to the medium, about light production, or its history: it's a lamp that pays homage to candle making.

MDA: *What is your concern in regard to the fact that painting is the most commodifiable of artistic media? I mean: in commenting on the world of commodities you end up delivering a "thing" that because of its economic and cultural value cannot but trigger a vicious cycle. In a similar fashion, your own images fuel the collective imaginary. How do you envision specific display and distributive strategies for your paintings? And how do you foresee the life of the painting at the end of its journey?*

LC: I guess what I think about a lot is how much I love to see art that was not made yesterday — I love going to museums to see older work. All I want to do is look at Hilma af Klint and learn from her. And maybe that is why I am drawn to painting in some ways. It is exactly what it is. So if you can find the opportunity to see it in person, there you are with a Peter Paul Rubens, just as it was, and still is.

But yes, now art is hemorrhaging from biennials and fairs. I sure do think about that. I agree a lot with Van's remarks. I feel similarly. I like to concentrate on our secret lives and recording those abstract traces through our work and our viral relationships. The practice is ancient and worthy, and all may be lost — or not.

VH: That's something I have thought about way too much, and I have been crippled many times by it. I was in Ross Bleckner's studio when he said something to the effect: "We're just dragging more useless garbage into the world — in mass if you keep doing it." I was a young man, maybe twenty-five. It had not occurred to me that this problem would persist. I was relieved he shared this, but thought Ross surely had an answer, as any mature artist must. My naivety didn't allow myself to consider it gets harder over



Alan Michael, "Cruise" (2012). Courtesy of the Artist.

time. The more work you amass the easier it is to keep going and simultaneously the harder it is to justify. I maintain that my hands are smarter than my head — they don't have this problem.

Another way I've evaded this is to consider that what I'm making now is an exhibition. The paintings then become elements for a larger goal. In that, showing work in white cubes, however necessary, can be crushing. I don't think it's a healthy or sustainable way to work. I actively look for other points of origin to produce the work. In the case of galleries, it's easier for me to think of who I'm working with to make an exhibition, all the work they've put in, all the artists who have shown there before, the work they have contributed. Overall, the necessity of the issue has made showing more personal but maybe more difficult, too.

AM: In my experience, the economic reality of the artist-dealer-market relationship doesn't have much in common with real-world trade transactions. It seems more like something out of the pre-industrial age. Or maybe somewhere between a black market and luxury goods artisan manufacture. Plus there's the position of the artist and the persona factor to add to the equation, plus or minus. There are obviously a lot of parallel markets going on simultaneously which don't sync up, worlds that are not necessarily communicating. And without a broker of some sort — a gallerist, a curator, a critic, the network — paintings are non-commodities. I heard someone talking about how they are going to get into self-representation the other day. I'm sure that's the way forward.

Michele D'Aurizio is Flash Art managing editor.

Leidy Churchman — Solo shows: Murray Guy, New York; Silberkuppe, Berlin; Boston University Art Gallery. Group shows: Kunsthalle Bern; National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; ICA, Philadelphia; Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Stroom Den Haag, The Hague; Museum of Art, RISD, Providence, RI; MoMA PS1, New York.

Van Hanos — Solo shows: Tanya Leighton, Berlin; Retrospective Gallery, Hudson, NY; West Street Gallery, New York. Group shows: The Artist's Institute, New York; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York; Rachel Uffner Gallery, New York; Zach Feuer Gallery, New York; OHWOW, Los Angeles; Mitchell Innes & Nash, New York; New Jersey Museum of Contemporary Art, Asbury Park, NJ. Upcoming shows: Row House Projects, Baltimore, MD.

Alan Michael — Solo shows: Vilma Gold, London; HIGH ART, Paris; David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; HOTEL, London; Galerie Micky Schubert, Berlin; Tate Britain, London; Stuart Shave / Modern Art, London. Group shows: Gregor Staiger Gallery, Zurich; Nottingham Contemporary; Cubitt, London; Mary Mary, Glasgow; CCA Andratx, Mallorca; CAPC, Bordeaux; The Drawing Room, London; Dundee Contemporary Arts; Gaudel de Stampa, Paris; MO-CAD, Detroit; The Showroom, London. Upcoming shows: Zero..., Milan (solo).

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

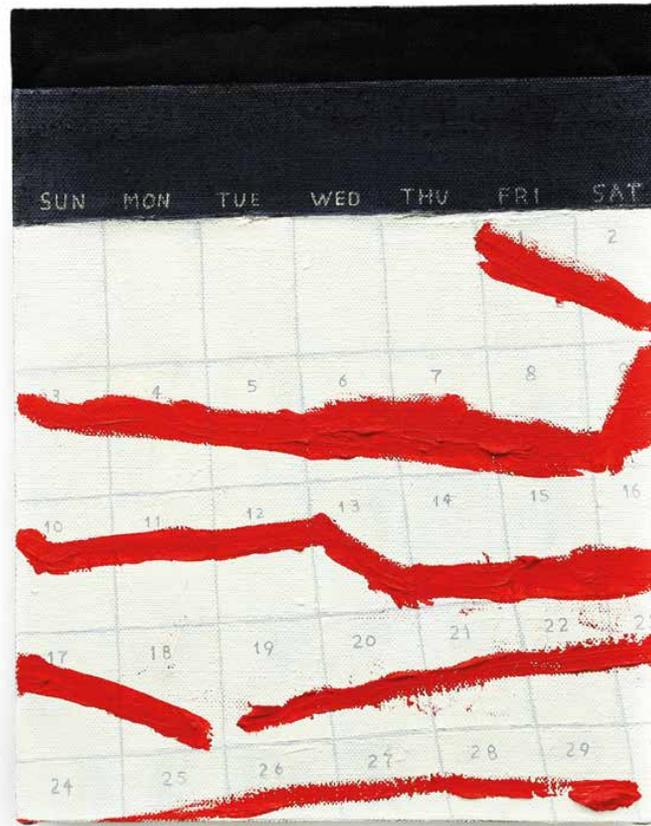
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Mousse Magazine

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DEAR DIARY, BY ANDREW BERARDINI A HUNGRY LOOK



AND A LION'S MEAL

Calendar, 2014.
Courtesy: the artist and Silberkuppe, Berlin

Berardini, Andrew. "Dear Diary: A Hungry Look and a Lion's Meal." *Mousse Magazine*, no. 49, Summer 2015, pp. 158–67.

A DIARY IS NOT JUST A SET OF PAGES ON WHICH TO STASH SECRETS AND EVERYDAY NARRATIVES. IT IS ALSO AN ESSAY, AN ATTEMPT TO GIVE MEANING AND ORDER TO LIFE. ANDREW BERARDINI HAS LEAFED THROUGH THE PAINTINGS OF LEIDY CHURCHMAN AS IF THEY WERE A DIARY OF IMAGES—PORTRAITS OF FRIENDS, ANIMALS, FRUIT, ORIENTAL DIVINITIES AND ART HEROES, FROM ROUSSEAU TO SOUTINE—THROUGH WHICH TO REVEAL THE IMAGINING GAZE OF THE ARTIST INTENT ON SIFTING THROUGH THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF IMAGES “RELUCTANT” TO SHOW THEMSELVES. CHURCHMAN CONVEYS VIEWS OF HIS EXPERIENCE, THAT ENGAGE HIM OR PROMPT REFLECTION. FOR EXAMPLE: AN IDEAL PORTRAIT, NOT A FACE BUT A CURIOUS SEQUENCE OF REPEATED FORMS THAT FLOAT IN A SIDEREAL FLUID, PERHAPS A CELL, LOVING SYNECDOCHES OF HIS RESEARCHER SISTER.

“Oh, please don’t go—we’ll eat you up—we love you so!”
Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*

Even though it’s everyday, this does not make a common thing less precious.

Your diary records whatever you feel like. Note the weather, sketch a seagull, copy an artwork, quote a passage. You can picture your friends and lovers or list books read and the moods of cats. You can doodle things you wished existed, record the meandering research found online, the menus of places eaten, the work of family. Current events can come, injustices witnessed and marked. It all depends on what you’d like to record to your dear diary. Or not even want but need to document, to observe a life in its passing.

A diary is a thing wrought simply and without pretension. In a diary, you’re not going to engage a discourse or try to impress anybody, prove your rigor or seduce. In a diary, you are just going to write, freely and without fear. If we consume the world, a diary witnesses it.

These tender self-revealings capture the real complexity of a person, subtle humor, open playfulness. Each page reveals a real person with a body you can feel. The lack of put-on sophistication is bracing, it makes you relax, drop pretensions and masks put on out of fear, and just be yourself.

The diaristic, the everyday, still has a frivolous domestic odor, not as serious as the grand war novel or the intellectual treatise. Though both of those things are fine, most of us live in the everyday, struggling to make meaning of our existence, living examined lives. When shared, the collection of a life’s observations in a diary can be meaningful to others, humanity revealed.

Like tiresome descriptions of dreams, it’s hard to make such things interesting to others, to make another person feel, think, act, evolve, laugh, revolt, anything. This is maybe always the challenge of art.

These are words, but diaries can be pictures too.

I’m not sure what Leidy Churchman sees when he looks at his paintings, but this is what I see. They aren’t sketches or scrawled notes, found in a spiral-bound book, though occasionally the frayed edge of a notebook paper appears. They are paintings. Given the force and thought of painting, the slow consideration that is canvas-time. But they are also occasional, wrought with an immediacy and simplicity that honor the flickering inspiration of the subjects.

Themes that emerge from paintings of Leidy Churchman: animals, fruit, topiary, copies of paintings, various goofy art jokes, signs. In the early works there are many pictures of friends, in the later ones more images drawn from Eastern religion, a cartoonish Kali and a Tantric rug design.

The signs can be logos from Pepsi or MasterCard, the state seal of the Islamic State or a police badge. The goofy art jokes are a kit for a Bauhaus boat, all beautiful shapes and bright colors. Or a jumbo jet as if painted by Alexander Calder. The animals are everywhere.

Presiding over Leidy Churchman's latest exhibition at Murray Guy is Henri Rousseau. Or at least his painting, *The Meal of a Lion* (1907), lovingly copied by Churchman and titled simply *Rousseau* (2015).

His last show at Silberkuppe in 2014 got its title "Fruit Stare" from an excerpted book; a scanned page revealed a paragraph boxed out with a yellow marker:

Orangutan observers instead report such exciting phenomena as the "fruit stare" which some people say is a function of the difficulty orangutans have foraging for food in the wild. Orangutans need to develop the fruit stare because trees can be coy about when, where, and how

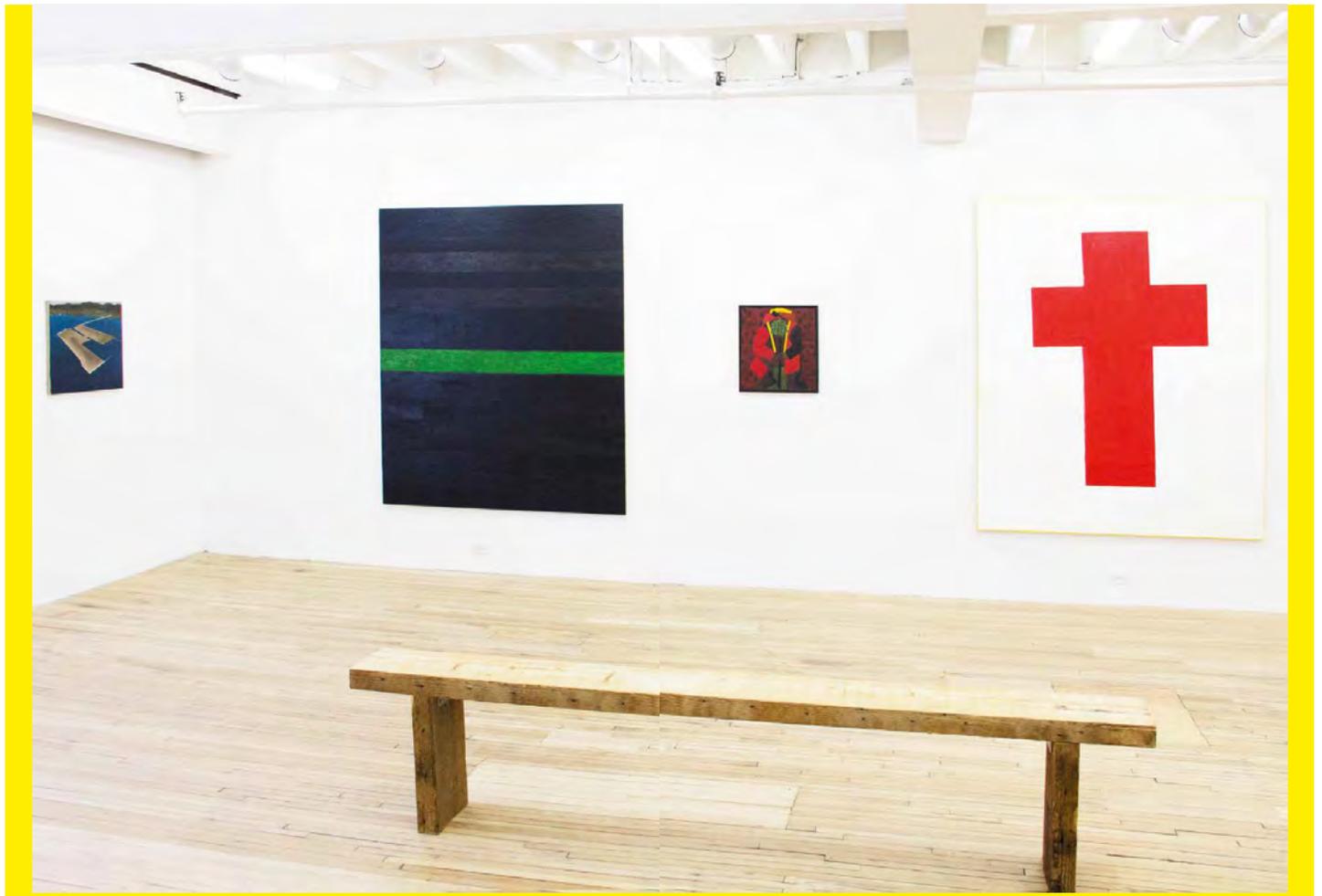
Leidy Churchman (b. 1979) lives and works in New York. His work will be in upcoming group exhibitions at Kunsthalle, Bern; Museum Brandhorst, Munich; and mumok, Vienna. He has recently been shown at the National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen; ICA, Philadelphia; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Murray Guy, New York; Silberkuppe, Berlin; Human Resources, Los Angeles; Stroom Den Haag, The Hague; the Museum of Art at Rhode Island School of Design; and MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY. In 2013, Boston University Gallery staged his first solo museum exhibition and Dancing Foxes Press published the book *Emergency* for the occasion. Churchman received his MFA from Columbia University in 2010, and his BA from Hampshire College in 2002. From 2011 to 2012, he was a resident artist at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Rousseau, 2015 Above and next spread - "The Meal of the Lion" installation view at Murray Guy, New York, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Murray Guy, New York

Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere, 2015

Something Very Special, 2015



KIX, Japan, 2015

Giraffe, 2012-15

Jacob Lawrence "Victory" from the War Series, 2015

Red Cross, 2012-2015

much they fruit, and the fruit is often hidden in the canopy of the leaves. The fruit stare is an expression of reverie, but it is a reverie directed outward rather than inward—"like thinking with your eyes," naturalist Sy Montgomery has said: "That's why they are so spaced-out."

This passage is a potent poem, for Churchman, who stares with reverie at the world to coax out a coy picture. Rousseau found form in his fantasies in a world not of the jungle, which he never visited,

What unites these art references with *Native Elongating Transcript Reveals Human Transcriptional Activity at Nucleotide Resolution*, 2015, which graphically depicts what I presume is exactly that referenced science? Stirling Churchman, Leidy's sister, noted on social media that she was giving a talk to provide context for the picture drawn from her own research. One of the most compelling paintings of the last show is *Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere*, 2015, a perfect modern tub backdropped by a distant city skyline, all in a soft pink glow. I can only guess at the origin of this image, other than its reference to concentrated wealth in our time, but I can know the source of all the paintings if not their ex-

Insecure Rat, 2013.
Courtesy: the artist and Murray Guy, New York



but a world hewn from possibilities and dreams. One can accuse colonial romanticism, but that would miss the imaginative simplicity, the sweetness of his dreaming. He stared out at a gray Paris and saw an elusive, imagined elsewhere. Never formally educated as a painter, Rousseau felt the pull and inspiration of painting and did not let the academy dictate the terms.

Other copies are scattered throughout Churchman's work. *Flayed Rabbit (Chaim Soutine)* (2014) depicts in abattoir colors the dissection of the creature's tender frame, the violence against it never stealing its beauty even if it took the creature's life. *Matisse* and *Bridget Riley* (both 2010) copy both these artists' work; the second has an optical field interrupted by a sans-serif sign advertising the quoted artist's name (a book cover perhaps). These quotations are a part of the essay, the thinking through of what inspires that is found in life, that marks all of Churchman's work, but each offers a different clue. Rousseau had the exuberant simplicity of his dreams, Calder a delightful play of form and color, a circus clown's sad joy. Matisse had his own escape from accepted form in the freedom of color, Bridget Riley a physically disorienting materiality. *Jacob Lawrence's "Victory" from the War Series*, 2015, and *Jacob Lawrence* (2010), in their dynamic simplicity, both respond with human energy to political conditions, most clearly that of Lawrence's African-American subjects. The unknown artists quoted in the depictions of *Big Kali (Goddess of Time and Death)* (2014) and *19th Century Flayed Elephant*, 2015, drawn from a Tantric rug, hint at a spirit that refuses the ethereal, that still must manifest as living, physical form. In a body of work from 2010 the references abound, from Baudelaire and Surrealism to the contemporary painter Xylor Jane, each hinting at a different register of Churchman's altogether subtle and personal oeuvre. Normally such appropriations might feel sly or overly self-conscious, but here they feel like love letters, a heartfelt way of thinking through what makes this painter want to understand them through reproduction.

act inspiration. It's Leidy Churchman. All these simply painted pictures are united by the fact that they are drawn from the visions of their maker, things witnessed and invented, artwork and literature and life that needed to be thought through. Rather than painting a straightforward portrait of Stirling Churchman, a literal depiction, he paints what drives his sister, her research, a deeper insight into her than a portrait of her face could perhaps contain. And one whose graphic language gives shape to that which is mostly the abstraction of an idea, that which gives form to thought. Like a painting.

A diary is not just a confidante, but also what Montaigne termed an essay, an attempt to make sense or give order to life. Joan Didion stabs it cleanly when she writes: "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. [...] We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." Leidy Churchman, a painter and not a writer, isn't stuck with the tyranny of narrative.

He can draw from his experiences those images that beguile, compel, haunt. The order of a hedged garden, the flat simplicity of a gravestone, the bathtub of a luxury tower, his sister's research, a menu from a vegetarian restaurant, a shelf of books and a museum full of art, a lifetime organized not by narrative but by pictures, each lovingly wrought with a gentility and verve that reveals a distinct hand of the thoughtful human behind it.



Bridget Riley, 2010.

Courtesy: the artist and Murray Guy, New York. Photo: Mark Woods

Un diario non è solo un insieme di fogli su cui depositare confidenze e cronache, un diario è anche un saggio, un tentativo di dare senso e ordine alla vita. Andrew Berardini ha sfogliato i dipinti di Leidy Churchman come un diario, un diario di immagini – ritratti di amici, animali, frutti, divinità orientali e omaggi a eroi artistici, da Rousseau a Soutine – attraverso cui rivelare lo sguardo fantasticante dell'artista intento a setacciare il mondo per scovare immagini "restie" a manifestarsi. Churchman restituisce le immagini della sua esperienza, immagini che lo coinvolgono e che si offrono alla sua riflessione. Una per tutte, un ritratto ideale, non già un volto, ma una curiosa sequenza di forme reiterate, che galleggiano in un liquido siderale, forse di una cellula, amorevole sineddoche della sorella ricercatrice.

"Oh, non andartene – noi ti vogliamo mangiare – così tanto ti amiamo!" Maurice Sendak, *Nel paese dei mostri selvaggi* (traduzione di Antonio Porta)

Anche se è quotidiana, ciò non significa che una cosa comune sia meno preziosa.

Il diario registra quel che ti va di raccontare: una nota sul tempo, lo schizzo di un gabbiano, la copia di un'opera d'arte, la citazione di un brano. Puoi ritrarre i tuoi amici e amanti, elencare i libri letti e l'umore dei gatti. Puoi tracciare oziosi disegni delle cose che vorresti esistessero, registrare la tortuosa ricerca trovata online, i menù dei posti dove hai mangiato, gli impegni familiari. Gli eventi attuali possono fare capolino come cammei, le ingiustizie a cui si assiste possono essere annotate. Dipende tutto da quel che vuoi riportare al tuo caro diario. O neanche quel che vuoi, ma quel che devi documentare, per osservare una vita mentre scorre.

Un diario è di fattura semplice e senza pretese. In un diario non si affronta una trattazione né si tenta di far colpo su nessuno, di ostentare zelo o di sedurre. In un diario tutto quel che si fa è scrivere, liberamente e senza timore. Se consumiamo il mondo, un diario lo testimonia.

Queste tenere rivelazioni del proprio io catturano l'autentica complessità, l'umorismo sottile e la gioscosità di una persona. Ogni pagina svela una vera persona con un vero corpo, palpabile. La mancanza di raffinatezza affettata è incoraggiante, fa venir voglia di rilassarsi, abbandonare tutte le simulazioni e le maschere, essere solo se stessi.

Il diaristico, il quotidiano, puzzano ancora di casalingo, privo della serietà del prestigioso romanzo di guerra o del trattato intellettuale. Per quanto entrambi siano ottimi generi letterari, è nel quotidiano che la maggior parte di noi vive, lotta per dare un senso alla propria esistenza, si muove sotto sguardi indagatori. Quando è condivisa con altri, la raccolta delle osservazioni di una vita può essere significativa: un'umanità rivelata.

Come per le noiose descrizioni dei sogni, è difficile rendere interessante al prossimo tutto ciò, far provare a un'altra persona sensazioni, pensieri, azioni, sviluppi, risate, ribellioni, qualsiasi cosa. E questa è forse la continua sfida dell'arte.

Queste sono parole, ma i diari possono essere costituiti anche da immagini.

Non so bene cosa veda Leidy Churchman quando osserva uno dei suoi quadri, ma questo è quel che vedo io. Non si tratta di schizzi o note scarabocchiate che emergono da un notes, anche se di tanto in tanto compare un foglio di quaderno dai bordi strappati. Si tratta di dipinti. Hanno la forza e la ponderatezza del dipinto, la lenta riflessione

del tempo richiesto dalla tela, ma incarnano l'occasionale, forgiato con un'immediatezza e una semplicità che esalta la scintillante ispirazione dei soggetti.

I temi che emergono nei quadri di Leidy Churchman sono animali, frutti, esemplari di arte topiaria, copie di dipinti, banali scherzi artistici, simboli. Nella sua prima produzione vi sono molti ritratti di amici, nella più recente, invece, immagini derivate dalla religione orientale, una dea Kali fumettistica e un motivo tratto da un tappeto tantrico.

I simboli possono essere i loghi della Pepsi o della MasterCard, lo stemma dello Stato Islamico o un distintivo della polizia. Gli scherzi artistici sono un kit per una barca Bauhaus, colori squillanti e splendide forme, o un Jumbo alla maniera di Alexander Calder. Gli animali sono ovunque.

L'ultima mostra di Leidy Churchman presso Murray Guy è dominata da Rousseau, o perlomeno dal suo quadro *Il pasto del leone* (1907), amorevolmente copiato da Leidy con il semplice titolo *Rousseau* (2015).

Il titolo della sua ultima mostra da Silberkuppe nel 2014, "Fruit Stare" [Sguardo da frutta N.d.T.], è ispirato all'estratto di un libro, una pagina scannerizzata che rivela un paragrafo evidenziato con un pennarello giallo:

Gli osservatori degli oranghi, invece, descrivono lo straordinario fenomeno dello "sguardo da frutta" che alcuni dicono essere una funzione sviluppata a causa della difficoltà nel cercare il cibo nel loro ambiente naturale. Gli orangotanghi devono sviluppare questo sguardo da frutta perché gli alberi possono essere sfuggenti su quando, dove e quanto fruttificano, e la frutta è spesso nascosta nell'intreccio delle foglie. Lo sguardo da frutta è un'espressione fantasticante, ma è un fantasticare rivolto verso l'esterno piuttosto che verso l'interno. Secondo le parole della naturalista Sy Montgomery: "È come se pensassero con gli occhi. Per questo sembrano in trance".

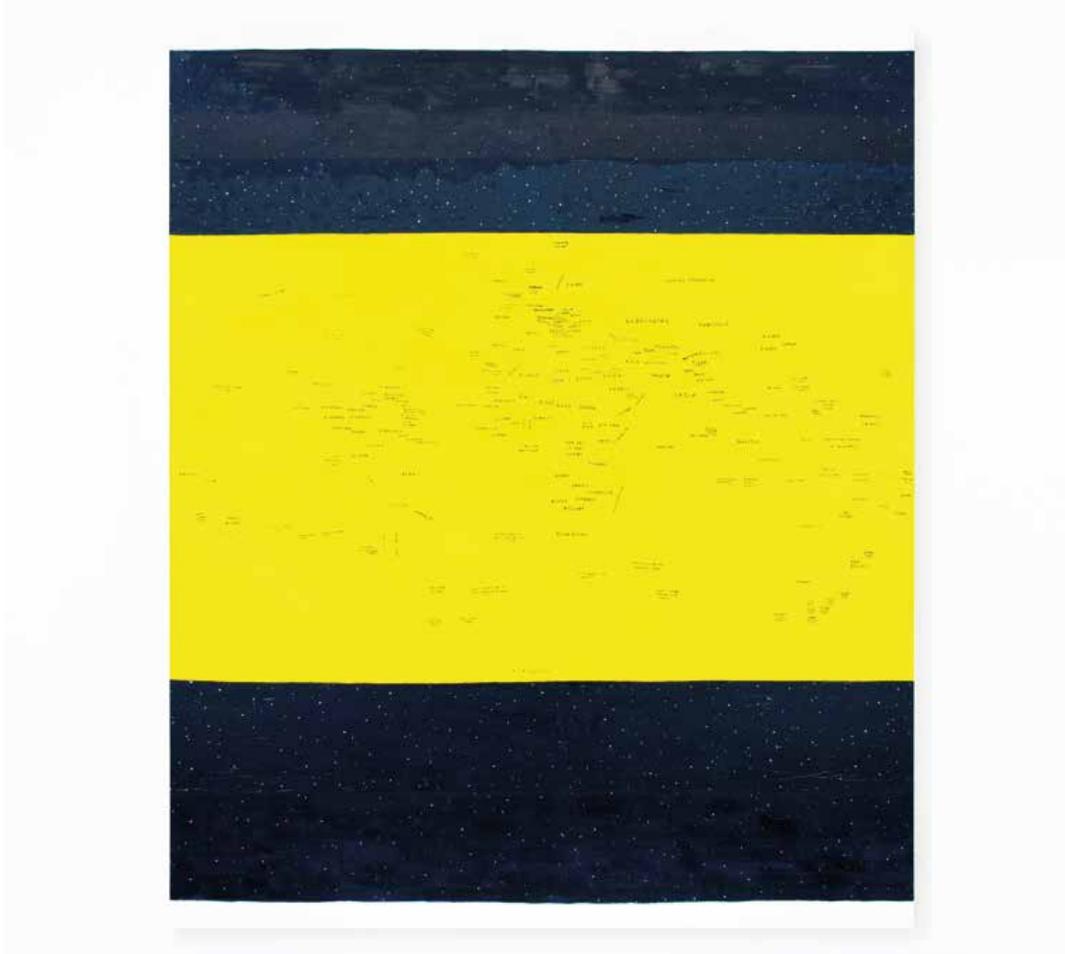
Questo brano ha la forza di una poesia per Churchman che ha uno sguardo fantastico sul mondo per scovare un'immagine restia a rivelarsi. Rousseau dette forma al suo immaginario non tramite il mondo della giungla, che non visitò mai, ma tramite un mondo ricavato dal possibile e dai sogni. Si può accusare il romanticismo coloniale, ma significherebbe non cogliere la semplicità della fantasia, la dolcezza del suo sognare. Rousseau rivolse lo sguardo oltre una Parigi grigia e vide un altrove elusivo e immaginario. Privo di qualsiasi educazione formale alla pittura, Rousseau avvertì l'attrazione e l'ispirazione alla pittura e non permise all'accademia di dettare le regole.

Vi sono altre copie sparpagliate tra le opere di Churchman: *Flayed Rabbit* (Chaim Soutine) (2014) [Coniglio scuoiato N.d.T.] riproduce in tinte da mattatoio la dissezione del delicato corpo, senza che la violenza privi la bestia della sua bellezza, per quanto le abbia tolto la vita. *Matisse e Bridget Riley* (entrambi del 2010) replicano il lavoro dei due artisti, e nel secondo il campo ottico è interrotto da una scritta in caratteri senza grazie che annuncia il nome dell'artista citato (forse la copertina di un libro). Queste citazioni fanno parte dello studio, della riflessione sui motivi d'ispirazione che si trovano nella vita, un tratto che segna tutta l'opera di Churchman, ma ciascuna citazione offre un'allusione diversa. Rousseau possedeva l'esuberante semplicità del suo sogno, Calder un incantevole gioco di forma e colore, la triste allegria di un clown da circo. Matisse la fuga dalla forma accettata in nome della libertà del colore, Bridget Riley una materialità fisicamente disorientante. *Jacob Lawrence "Victory" from the War*

Series (2015), e *Jacob Lawrence* (2010), nella loro dinamica semplicità, rispondono entrambi con vigore umano alle condizioni politiche, nella fattispecie quella dei soggetti afroamericani di Lawrence. Gli artisti sconosciuti citati nella raffigurazione di *Big Kali* (*Goddess of Time and Death*) (2014) [La grande Kali (Dea del tempo e della morte)] e *19th Century Flayed Elephant* (2015), [Elefante scuoiato del Diciannovesimo secolo N.d.T.], ispirati a un tappeto tantrico, alludono a uno spirito che rifiuta l'immaterialità, e che deve ancora manifestarsi come forma vivente, fisica. Una raccolta di opere del 2010 è ricca di ulteriori riferimenti che vanno da Baudelaire al Surrealismo, alla pittrice contemporanea Xylor Jane, e ciascuno fornisce un richiamo a uno dei diversi registri dell'ingegnosa e personale opera di Churchman. In genere, tali appropriazioni potrebbero sembrare scaltre o troppo intenzionali, ma qui valgono come lettere d'amore, un modo partecipe di riflettere sui motivi che stimolano l'artista a comprenderli per mezzo della riproduzione.

Cosa unisce questi riferimenti artistici a *Native Elongating Transcript Reveals Human Transcriptional Activity at Nucleotide Resolution* (2015) che rappresenta graficamente quel che immagino sia il concetto scientifico a cui si fa riferimento? Stirling Churchman, sorella scienziata di Leidy, ha annunciato sui social media che avrebbe fatto un intervento per fornire il contesto scientifico al quadro del fratello, ispirato alla sua ricerca. Uno dei dipinti più affascinanti della sua ultima mostra, *Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere*, (2015) [Il grattacielo più alto dell'emisfero occidentale N.d.T.], una perfetta vasca da bagno sullo sfondo di un lontano skyline urbano, il tutto immerso in un bagliore rosa, non mi permette altro che congetture per quanto riguarda l'origine dell'immagine, a parte l'evidente predominio della concentrazione di ricchezza ai giorni nostri. Sono in grado, però, di stabilire la fonte di tutte le opere se non dell'esatta ispirazione: Leidy Churchman. Tutte queste immagini dipinte con semplicità sono unite dal fatto di essere tratte dalla visione del loro creatore, cose testimoniate e inventate, opere d'arte e letteratura e vita che necessitano di essere ripensate. Invece di dipingere un esplicito ritratto di Stirling Churchman, una raffigurazione in senso letterale, dipinge ciò che anima sua sorella, ovvero la sua ricerca, una visione più profonda di quanto avrebbe potuto contenere un ritratto del suo volto. È una visione il cui linguaggio grafico plasma ciò che è per lo più l'astrazione di un'idea, ciò che plasma il pensiero. Come un dipinto.

Un diario non è solo un confidente, ma anche quel che Montaigne ha definito un saggio, un tentativo di dare un senso e un ordine alla vita. Joan Didion è efficace quando scrive: "Raccontiamo storie a noi stessi per riuscire a vivere. [...] Viviamo interamente, specialmente se siamo scrittori, in base alle 'idee' per mezzo delle quali abbiamo imparato ad arrestare quella mutevole fantasmagoria che è la nostra reale esperienza". Leidy Churchman, pittore e non scrittore, è esente dalla tirannia della narrazione, può trarre dalla propria esperienza le immagini che seducono, coinvolgono, perseguitano. L'ordine di un giardino ornato di siepi, la piatta semplicità di una pietra tombale, una vasca da bagno su un grattacielo di lusso, la ricerca scientifica di sua sorella, il menu di un ristorante vegetariano, uno scaffale di libri e un museo pieno d'arte, una vita non organizzata dalla narrazione ma dalle immagini, ciascuna di esse amorevolmente forgiata con una grazia e una vivacità che rivelano un'unica mano, e l'attento essere umano che c'è dietro.



Billions of Never Ending Universes, 2015.
Courtesy: the artist and Murray Guy, New York

Art in America

LEIDY CHURCHMAN

Murray Guy

A scavenger whose painted appropriations strike an earnest chord, the New York-based artist Leidy Churchman (b. 1979) culls from the miraculous detritus of our visual world. His curiosity for materials high and low, along with a consistently light hand that alternates thinly applied descriptive stretches and somewhat heavier impasto in layered, patient strokes, made for a cohesive tone in what at first appeared to be a disparate display of 19 oils on linen. Only minor changes in palette flag as copies otherwise faithful renditions of Henri Rousseau's *Repast of the Lion* (1907), in which the titular beast gorges on a leopard, and Jacob Lawrence's *Victory* (1947), depicting a weary black soldier. Neither Churchman copy contains a trace of Pictures Generation irony, or any of the "vampirism" (as the critic John Kelsey put it) of Michael Kreber's chilly readymade Polkes and Baselitzes. Churchman's Rousseau and Lawrence, along with other images captured or invented, are produced with a uniform loving care that erases distinctions between different ways of devising content.

At 66 by 84 inches, and with some of the original yellow flowers changed to pink, *Rousseau* was the largest canvas in the show, Churchman's first solo at Murray Guy. The smallest (and earliest, at 2013; the rest are 2014 or '15) was *Insecure Rat*, a 12-by-13½-inch portrayal of a rat caught in a bramble beside a murky pool—an unlikely Narcissus. Falling in between: a rendering of an informational pamphlet on vegetarianism from a Brooklyn restaurant (*Jungle Café*); a crustacean floating in what looks like a starry sky (*Crab and Plankton*); an homage to a subcontinental tapestry with a monstrous red-striped beast at the center (*19th Century Flayed Elephant*); and *Billions of Never Ending Universes*, in which a big yellow stripe presents a borderless world map between bands of cosmic sky. Alighiero Boetti's maps come to mind—but here the sites are all place names in small lettering, a number of them misspelled.

One painting, *Native Elongating Transcript Sequencing Reveals Human Transcriptional Activity at Nucleotide Resolution*, was produced in honor of Churchman's sister, a DNA researcher; the work might be mistaken for a Terry Winters-like abstraction but for its reproduction on the cover of an issue of *Cell Magazine* (April 23, 2015—a commission, apparently), present on a bench in the gallery. Churchman clearly has a reverence for all kinds of science, though the emphasis in this show was on ecology.



Leidy Churchman:
*19th Century Flayed
Elephant*, 2015, oil
on linen, 72 by 51
inches; at Murray
Guy.

He imagines the last of the passenger pigeons sitting patiently on a branch (*Martha*), offers a view of a fish hovering over the watchful eye of a whale (*Pelagic Ocean Sunfish*) and charts ocean currents in red and blue (*The Great Global Ocean Conveyor Belt*). However, just as you think you've understood his themes as nature-based, you find *Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere*, a view of Manhattan from a luxury bathroom tinted sunset pink (the image taken from a high-end realtor's ad), or *So-Called "Islamic State"*, in which the flag of ISIS appears in black and gold against what looks like a graph-paper background.

But there is also a large, handsome canvas presenting obscurely related objects, de Chirico-style: a half-open door, a duck sitting on eggs, and an empty highway, among other vignettes. The painting is titled *Freud!*; one guesses its symbols to be the contents of a dream. It reminds us of an era in which the unconscious provided the kind of incongruous imagery that Churchman mainly discovers in what he has called "the extraordinary junkyard" of contemporary culture—the preoccupation of much of his generation. Apparently, we now need seek no deeper.

—Faye Hirsch

SPIKE

Q/A LEIDY CHURCHMAN

How do digital images change painting?



Leidy Churchman for Spike magazine

I can't believe how many images I've seen. We're so engulfed in screens that I can't remember what it was like when you had to go to the library to find secret things. I'm not alone picking imagery; I'm in a scrolling world. Scrolling gives me an idea of what's out there and what people are doing right now. We have this stuff all around us and everything is so close. If I choose an image and use it to make a painting, people already know that image or something like it and have a relationship with it. We can then study the image together. You've seen it but you might not have really been able to get closer, because the devices we use separate our bodies from all these pictures.

Often I like to start work from signs, pictures, and paintings as if they're templates to build on. I pick an image that I feel is ready to be opened up (or I am ready to open it up). For me, to paint a thing is really to consume it, to eat it.

I'm chasing real things. For example, I made a copy of a Henri Rousseau painting from 1905, *The Meal of the Lion*. I had a picture in a book that had certain colors and a certain look to it. Then I saw a picture on the Internet that had really different, bumped-up color. Then I went to the Met and

saw the painting, and the real one was the best. I thought: Holy shit, this guy is so badass. The painting looked loose and crappy in such a beautiful way. I couldn't believe how imperfect it actually was. But I chose to paint the one from the Internet. It was really warm toned, and it reminded me of how I had remembered Rousseau's work. I think it's interesting what Michael Sanchez said in the essay "2011: On Art and Transmission," [Artforum Summer 2013] about how a warm, brown, earthy toned painting provides a point of relief during an endless scroll. It's a real thing to have that relief.

WHEN I SEE SHOWS, I DEFINITELY DO THAT SORT OF SCANNING TOO: "WHERE SHOULD I FOCUS?" I'M SCANNING AND DON'T KNOW WHERE TO START.

You do the weird thing a dog does when they keep circling and circling to figure out how or where to lie down. But that also makes an argument for stronger work that brings you to a halt (I have hungry eyes, give me something good.).

I think oil paint is still a very advanced system with which to make things. It doesn't fall short at all. Compared to the screen, painting is not flat; you go in and every part of that picture is going to be magnified in a way, like under a microscope. A painting is like an aquarium of traces – looping but rogue at the same time. Maybe it has a lot to do with empathy. Empathy determines our degree of happiness, and the feeling comes easily when our mind joins with our body. It is such a soft sadness, it is beauty. I definitely think about that a lot with painting. A painting holds all these feelings you have but don't really talk about much. It's about embodying that flat image: the imagined real space that's inside without ever being there.

*With the lack of inhibition characteristic of naive painting, Leidy Churchman's Dada-influenced works transform the stock of existing images from the realms of art and mass culture. Churchman (*1979) lives in New York.*

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The New York Times

Review: Leidy Churchman, 'The Meal of the Lion'

By Roberta Smith

May 21, 2015

Leidy Churchman's art comprises a range of mediums: painting, video, sculpture and installation. But painting and its infinite mutability are his main interest in this expansive solo show, his second at a New York gallery. Here, 19 canvases explore some of the subjects, styles, moods and meanings encompassed by representation, abstraction included. Materials and process receive acute attention. Most images evolved in some way from existing art, advertising or cartography, but personal imagination registers everywhere.

Especially prominent is "Rousseau," a reprise of Henri Rousseau's "The Repast of the Lion," which shows a lion savaging its prey in an otherwise peaceable jungle kingdom. Mr. Churchman changes Rousseau's big blue flowers to impassioned hot pink, emphasizing the rambunctious nature of youthful ambition in the china shop of civilization.

This appetite prevails throughout the show, restrained but restless and relentless. "Tallest Residential Tower in the Western Hemisphere" shows an elegant bathtub, tinged pink by the sunset, overlooking a darker, folksier rendering of Manhattan, contrasting real estate (and painterly) class with relative mass. In the mostly red-and-white "19th Century Flayed Elephant," a Tibetan weaving of an elephant with the claws and stripes of a tiger masquerades as a painting that is flat and ferocious. In "Pelagic Ocean Sunfish," two very different, mutually suspicious sea creatures evoke a famous photograph of Earth taken from the moon, equating the ocean's mysteries with those of outer space.

Other paintings take us up in the air with Alexander Calder, and down to sea level with a raw-looking linen canvas disguised as tarmac with smears of thin black paint. There's also a giraffe camouflaged by moody modernist stripes, a tribute to Jacob Lawrence's tribute to black infantrymen, and a portrait of Martha, the last known passenger pigeon. Finally, in "Freud!," Mr. Churchman exposes something of his dream life, depicting an open door, an open book and a bed with two pillows. Perhaps some painters contain multitudes.



Ferocity: Leidy Churchman's "19th Century Flayed Elephant," at Murray Guy. Murray Guy, New York

The Boston Globe

arts **wednesday**

Beckoning the eye, and the whole body

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

You might have the urge to jump into the first painting in “Leidy Churchman: Lazy River” at the Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery. “Pool” lies on the floor just inside the entrance, a giant, shimmering abstraction in blues, greens, and blacks, nearly filling the gallery floor. It’s the clarion opening note in a gorgeously orchestrated exhibition.

Churchman uses color, language, a variety of styles, and video to remind us how painting corresponds to our bodies, and how it twines our bodies to our imaginations. Paint is like the messy stuff of an inner life, organized and expressed into something meaningful by the bodily action of painting.

“Pool” invites immersion. In one corner, a quarter moon gleams softly, suggesting a reflection. Depth and surface, viscerally evoked. The painting beckons the eye, and the whole body.



Above: Leidy Churchman’s “Pool.” Below: John Cederquist’s “Architectural Elements.”

Paintings of graves appear throughout, in a faux-naive style in dusky, late-summer greens, flaring reds, and sooty grays. The artist places us at the foot of each grave, looking down. The rectangle of the grave becomes a screen for our projections, darker and more mortal than the watery delights we cast onto “Pool.” Pool, grave, painting — all screens for our own dreams, fears, and longing.

The graves, painted with juicy hues in a manner that simplifies shapes,



move toward abstraction. Form and color carry their own implicit emotional meanings. Several smaller paintings throughout the show flit like moths from picture’s concrete message to abstraction’s subtler codes. A

deep, marshy green recurs, like a touchstone, in seemingly straightforward paintings such as “Ambulance” and “Pizza Box.” The color feels tidal, tugging us under.

“Lazy River,” a suite of several paintings propped cheek by jowl on a low bench, looks up at the viewer like expectant parishioners in a church pew. They chat intimately among themselves. Many are abstract, vaguely geometric, echoes of color field painting. One depicts a seagull. Another is a smudgy, smoky black aura. That slow, deep

LEIDY CHURCHMAN:
Lazy River
At: Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery, 855 Commonwealth Ave., through Oct. 20. 617-353-3329, www.bu.edu/art

JOHN CEDERQUIST:
Indecision of Upholstery
GARRY KNOX BENNETT:
Just Some Lamps
MARY KOCOL: Ice Gardens:
The Poetics of Nature
At: Gallery NAGA, 67 Newbury St., through Sept. 28. 617-267-9060, www.gallerynaga.com

green seethes throughout, a bass note to the rhythms of black, white, and the brown, naked linen of the paintings.

Churchman digitally records details of paintings as he moves paint over them — a callback to action painting. His video “The Field” intersperses such images (including one where he pushes soil up the painting, chillingly bringing us right back to the grave’s edge) with scenes from nature. It’s a montage, like “Lazy River,” every image building on the next. A seascape fades into the fog. A robin sits in the grass, listening. Between these cuts, the monitor goes black.

Lovely and lulling, “The Field” is another screen, across which plays art history, surface and depth, color and gesture, personal associations. It’s an incubator for looking — which, as Churchman compellingly reminds us, is not a passive act, but a dynamically receptive one.

Three solo shows

John Cederquist’s remarkable wooden chairs and trays at Gallery NAGA come at looking and making from a different angle. Cederquist, a wizard of technique, riddles with perception. Making pictures with marquetry — that is, wood inlays — he creates 3-D illusions on objects that are already three-dimensional. “Architectural Elements” is a functional chair, but it just as much resembles a scrap heap of architectural throwaways. Anyone might be afraid to sit on it.

Three two-by-fours zigzag improbably up the back and don’t appear to fasten together. One leg looks like a plaster cornice. An arm appears to have dropped onto the seat. A striped length of fabric drapes over the whole thing — only it’s not fabric. It’s wood inlay. The effect boggles eye and mind.

Cederquist plays fewer perceptual games in his trays; they’re simpler illustrations of his mastery. He dyes the wood he uses for the inlays for color effect. “Kegani & Green Tea” does prod at 3-D — he uses marquetry to suggest a rim,

which is not actually there. The rest is pure picture: a crab on a plate, a small cup of tea — every detail rich.

Garry Knox Bennett’s lamps, on view in the back room at NAGA, go well alongside Cederquist’s chairs. The artist uses clean form and humor, so when the lights go on they inevitably suggest inspiration. In “Paintbrush,” a flame-shaped bulb sprouts from the end of a brush, which angles diagonally toward a truncated pyramid platform, where it musses with yellow paint.

Then there’s the third solo show at NAGA, Mary Kocol’s color photos of flowers frozen in ice. They’re strangely exuberant, given ice’s implications, from climate change to deep freeze. Light pours through, the blossoms retain their vibrancy, and the bubbles and streaks in the ice read like celebration.

“Morning Glory With Bubble” depicts a translucent, wide-open purple bloom with a bubble suspended just above it, as if the flower has just exhaled. A green leaf hangs to the right, like a stage curtain opening to the vivid scene, and blue sky can be glimpsed in the background. More bubbles — tiny, champagne-sized orbs, silvery white — rush all around, adding to the sense that this moment is not frozen at all. It’s fleeting.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com

Girls

LEIDY CHURCHMAN IS AN ARTIST LIVING IN NEW YORK. ARNISA ZEQQ IS AN ART HISTORIAN BASED IN AMSTERDAM. UNDERNEATH IS A CONVERSATION INITIATED DURING LEIDY'S RESIDENCY IN AMSTERDAM, FOCUSING ON HOW TO IMMERGE ONESELF IN THE WORK OF THE OTHER.



Untitled (Blood): 2012, 500 x 900 cm, oil on vinyl

MY GOOSE

Coming out of the greenish frame, the goose is looking with pointing eyes. Its beak is sharp and closed, but so yellowy pointy it might enclose violent words. Its anthropomorphic body, covered in a black cape like some magician or alchemist from an ageless age is firmly standing in a landscape of azure sky, lapis lazuli blue sea and damp brownish sand. The goose is an animal that has a face and two eyes. It is a form of undisturbed pure life, an absolute miracle looking at you. But, the pointy beak and the piercing look contain a flickering perturbation. The simplicity of this animal kingdom brings up a certain terror and a pulsing unrest. Churchman's paintings are close to the words of the poet Wallace Stevens on animals, colors, human estrangement, simplicity and wonder. Wallace Stevens writes about hacked and hunched bananas, pettifogging buds, rudimentary protuberances of plants, singing cockatoos, red cats with light fur, pungent fruits and bright green wings. *Is there no change of death in paradise?* the poet asks. For Churchman death and painting go very well together. Not that all the paintings are about death, but somehow they

stage death and how things perish. In his paintings dainty creatures and playful compositions of colors are caught between a jovial lightness and an unconscionable treachery of fate. His paintings show that there are distinct shades of fluttering



My Goose, 2011, 150 x 140 cm, oil on linen

things. In this painterly universe behind the white mouse, or next to the classic black puddle, death seems to sit quietly and languidly on the scene. The lurking void in the black cape of the fierce goose man in fact stands behind every human eye. How beautiful is the lurking void in the black mantle of the fierce goose man?

SEAGULL

Thirteen beige linen canvases alternate different shades of green, black, white and red. The seagull is triumphantly predicating its victory in a foreign language we can only glimpse upon. The canvases spread a map of sounds transferred in color. While the seagull could be a character from one of Aesop's ironic and moralistic fables, the geometry and chaos that accompany it point towards a more metaphysical estrangement. A geometrical order stands on the seagull's

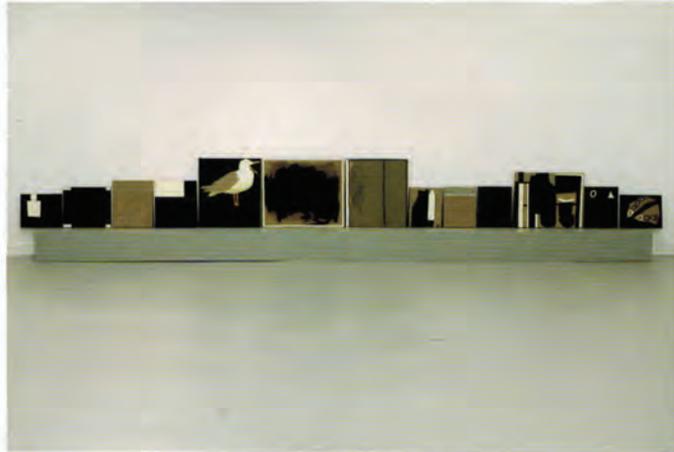


Seagull, 2012, 45 x 50 cm, oil on linen

back and a black reddish chaos in front of its beak, only to be followed by more patches of color. The seagull stands still like a contemporary *Angelus Novus*, the Angel of History painted by Paul Klee in 1920 and made famous by the words of Walter Benjamin (in his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History*). *Where we perceive a chain of events*, writes Benjamin, *he (the angel) sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage*. For Benjamin the angel would like to stay and awaken the dead, but a storm from paradise, the storm of progress propels him towards the future. Unlike the bird/angel of Klee, the seagull is looking directly

towards the future and seems to scream at the chaos in front. Its open beak is not so consumed, rather stubbornly funny. Yet, just like the angel, the seagull seems to resist the chains of events, rather it is pointing towards a mysterious cosmic rhythm. Its grey wings are closed, and its feet are still standing firm on a small black block, but one leg is clumsily about to slide in the immensity of green or towards the black chaos. What are this green surrounding it, coming back in a strange cosmic rhythms and protecting its wings from the chaos catastrophe of history? Is the seagull stubbornly creating the vast green or is it just being in its natural habitat?

Green is a color famously banned by Piet Mondrian who, just like the composer Franz Schubert would abolish any green objects from his house and paintings. But they were not the only ones to suffer a phobia and to be terrified by green. For many centuries it was considered an elegant but deadly color. Especially actors would often die after wearing green costumes. The fact is that green is an unstable color chemically. It is fleeting constantly. To capture it people experimented with toxic pigments obtained by acid on copper. From this poisonous mixture clothes and objects were made. This is why the actors died and the color became cursed. But green is also one of the most present colors in nature. The trees are green, green the grass and the plants, often green the water. Somehow green is also the color of the tables of gambling games too, a man made natural order. Maybe green is simply the color of



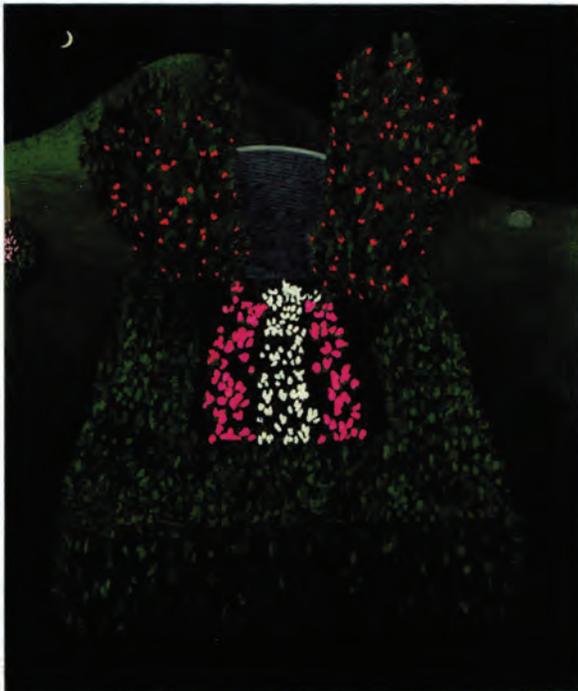
Lazy River, 2012, 60 x 900 cm, oil on linen

destiny: of both mindless fortune and misfortune. It is a visual metonymy for both hope and despair. The seagull with its open beak might not be conscious of these chromatic truths, nor of the *Angelus Novus*. But for me the sound it emanates incorporates the clinical chemical failures of green and point towards immanent transformation. The words of Lisa Robertson come to my mind:

You walk in the green park at twilight

*You read Lucretius to take yourself
towards death, through streets and
markets.*

*In a discontinuous laboratory towards
foreignness*



GREEN SNAKE



Black Green Black, HD video still, 2011, dimensions variable

A lazy movement of sticks and socks on heaps of colors and drawings. Again green, black, and white. The sticks move slowly but firmly like one would move a body part in an encompassing heat during a summer afternoon. Yet, the careless movements and the sleepy like interactions cohabit with a general sense of impulsivity, excitement and impatience. The film points toward how work emerges, how something becomes and happens, while nothing is really moving forward. For Churchman it is sometimes like throwing dice or like being a dog looking at the environment for a surprise.



Lumber / Brain (work in progress), DV video still, 2011, dimensions variable



The film investigates how objects become part of the picture. Different body parts enter and exit the frame at different points: a black sock filled with grass stands next to two drawn jugs and then is surpassed by an even more lethargic white sock among sparks of green and black; a stick-like brush ordered by a human hand draws a black ear which will be erased by the stronger slothful grass filled sock.



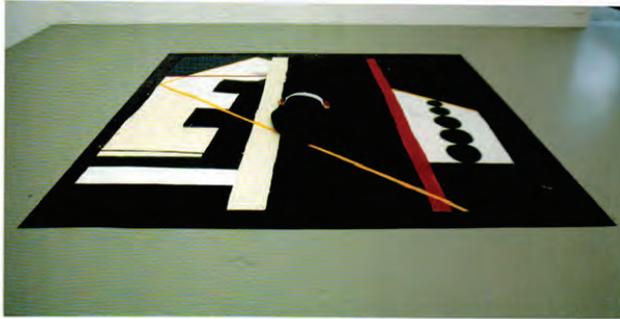
THE CROCODILE; THE FAT MAN; THE FLOOR PAINTING

This process of painting where bodily elements are constantly pushed through erased, and re arranged awakens old rituals and myths of creation and transformation. Wasn't after all Dionysus dismembered and ripped in pieces by the Titans only to be reconstructed and grown into his father's thigh from where he had a second birth? As a reminiscence of this violent and dismembered birth, the Maenads, Dionysus female followers would rip people to pieces, so intense their drunken ecstatic celebration of the god. Just like the dismembered and reassembled body of Dionysus, in Churchman's film the process of painting is continually re-arranged within the frame. The film positions painting within the struggle between ritual, human instincts and artificial nature. The sticks could be sacred snakes as the colors could be vast fields of grass, but they are also simply commercial products, perfume bottles, department stores accumulations, and advertisement memories. It is in painting that they are recombined, re given life. If nature goes on undisturbed, indifferent to the human quests and desires, if the sleeping sheep perishes and is reborn without ever understanding the human anguish, can we ever mess with its order? Can painting become a wooden stick in between the eternal return?



Snakes, 2011, HD video still, dimensions variable

I had carefully walked around the large painting on the floor; slightly stretching and bending my body to better see the shine of the yellow or the darkness of the green. There would be just enough space for my feet to stand in the safe grey surrounding the painting, as if it was a very thin line between two converging universes. I strongly remember being engulfed by color. Somehow all the elements of nature, trees, birds, seas, and skies were contained in the colors spread on the floor. Perhaps to enter an artwork is one of these phrases that when casually said secretly conceal archaic and conjuring desires. The large floor paintings of Leidy Churchman definitely question those ancient cravings and fantasies. Huge in size and positioned on the floor, the different and contrasting tones of color seem to invite the passer by for a jump. To enter an artwork sometimes obscures its meaning. One loses the Icarus point of view of the distanced beholder. Of course one might know many elements of a recurring painting, just like the wrinkles of a beloved face. There is a humble vulnerability in this entrance point. The colors are laid bare on the floor, encompassing all the different insecurities connected with proximity or at least its illusion. Just like in the desire to enter and get lost in a human face and body, in the possibility of entering a painting, the periphery and the centre are vividly intertwined. But how does one enter a painting, an artwork? And how does this entry illusion/collusion affect the body of the beholder and that of the painter? Often when referring to the floor paintings, Leidy would talk about crocodiles. These animals are almost monumental in their primordial bulky extension. Could the crocodile be like



Untitled, 2012, 400 x 500 cm, oil on vinyl. Photo: Anne De Vries

thy of movement in one single split second it could engulf the beholder in its mountainous mouth. And as one would try to enter and jump into these spatial and colorful battle scenes, one would be lured suddenly towards death and body dismembering. One's subjectivity would be rendered to pieces for a second, and then rearranged among the color fields.

Moreover, to present contained, large and simplified patches of color on the grey floor enables a more complex shift of sizes. One's body becomes big and small at once. Leidy himself told me that his true gender is that of a big fat man and that the large floor paintings relate to slow but acute movements of this body. In a way, as a beholder one's arms and legs also become big like the painting, in an attempt to make sense of it, in an attempt to defeat the crocodile. But then one realizes that it would be impossible to encompass the patches



Studio in Amsterdam, 2012

of green, red, yellow, white and black between one's arms. Leidy told me that a big fat man is like a little mouse. For Leidy, as for the beholder, the desire to be bigger brings up a luscious feeling of being very small, like a fly on the window sill, or like a big heavy lake within the vast universe.



Painting Rooms, collaboration with MPA, Stroom Den Haag, 2012. Photo: Eric de Vries



Untitled, 2012-2013, 50.8 x 61 cm, oil on linen

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Frieze

Features /

BY MANUELA AMMER

22 MAY 2012

Leidy Churchman

Ab-Ex clichés, living canvases and graveyards



Here, 2011

'You cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture', remarked Mary McCarthy in her review of Harold Rosenberg's influential volume of essays *The Tradition of the New* (1959). She was referring to Rosenberg's *The American Action Painters* (1952), in which he casts the canvas as an 'arena in which to act': 'what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event'. Approaching Leidy Churchman's work via such a digression may seem inappropriate if one considers Rosenberg's contribution to establishing the enduring clichés about Abstract Expressionism: fetishization of the (male) gesture and existentialist pathos.

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Nothing could be further removed from Churchman's painterly praxis, which positions bodies in a wide range of subject-object constellations and makes them just as much part of the form-finding process as the painting itself.

In his *Painting Treatments* videos (2009 and 2010), Churchman performs painterly actions recalling spa treatments on friends, never specifying whether painting is being subjected to a treatment here or the participants are. They lie, sit or crouch alone or in groups on the white studio floor, some naked, some clothed, usually covered with towels, cloths or newspapers. Branches, books and building bricks are then arranged on these 'living canvases'; potatoes, breakfast cereals and snow are poured over them; they are sprinkled with flour, ground coffee and various liquids. Paint is applied, rubbed in, dabbed on and banged in with brushes, ladles, mops and tape dispensers. The bodies 'treated' in this way lead a curious double existence: although immobilized in their role as picture supports (one scene recalls an autopsy), they nevertheless have a life of their own: someone has a smoke, a couple hold hands, a dropped bar of soap is politely returned.

Painting Treatments suggest that Abstract Expressionist vocabulary and bodies can be examined afresh; perhaps the 'power of transformation' Rosenberg saw in painting can be attributed to Churchman's praxis. This reading applies not only to his video works, which by definition possess a certain 'event character', but also to what are probably the artist's 'quietest' paintings to date: a 2011 series depicting graves. Contrary to one's expectations, the pictures are neither morbid nor dark but depict the graves as peaceful, charming places lying in the landscape like carefully-made beds. In spite of their quasi-naive rendering, the pictures perform complex compositional manoeuvres: with their formal rigour, the memorial stones, grave enclosures and floral decorations have an anti-spatial effect, tending towards flatness as geometrical figures and fields of colour. This effect is manifest most drastically in *Here: the final resting place of Rolf Guhl* (according to the inscription) has a grey border and is decorated by a disproportionately small tree which stands in the otherwise monochrome brown surface. The grave – embedded in the green meadow, with no horizon – effectively becomes a signed painting within the painting: an ambiguous figure caught between figuration and abstraction, between pictorial space and picture plane.

In these works, the question of the relationship between the body and the painting is addressed far less explicitly than in the videos. Yet the body is present here, too: as a motif implied by the deceased's name and years of birth and death, as a reason for the burial site, the headstone and the floral borders, and indirectly for the painting itself. As in *Painting Treatments*, the body – gently covered with a layer of paint – seems to shine through the composition and unsettle the picturesque landscape. Once one has seen the body, it cannot be 'unseen'.

In his foreword to the second edition of *The Tradition of the New* (1960), Rosenberg is prompted by McCarthy's admonition to ponder the 'activity' of painting outside the studio: 'The Bolshevik Revolution may have turned into a picture on the wall, but it was a picture that pulled the entire globe into it, and even outer space. No room was left for the spectator who merely looks, as there was in the days when the earth had empty spots and the heavens were full.' Although Rosenberg had an entirely different kind of picture in mind when he wrote these lines, I feel this same 'pull' in all of Churchman's painting – a pull towards more than mere contemplative looking.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell