

Ivan Morley

September 18 - October 29, 2014

Artist statement

I have been working on the same four or five pieces since 1999, each one made from an unlimited number of paintings. Each of these pieces are groups of individual paintings that respond to anecdotes that I have heard or read, each anecdote containing enough problems, or generating enough questions, to make it hard to stop thinking about. Each of my exhibitions is just a segment of groups that extend beyond it. It is a failure to presume that an artist's work must progress in a line. These paintings proliferate.

One group, individually entitled "Tehachepi, (sic)", responds to a first-person account of a nineteenth century visit to a place outside Los Angeles, where "a straggler Indian lived with his three lovely daughters". They survived by salvaging bullets out of the sides of trees, (and there were a lot of bullets because it was a violent place), but it was so windy there that the bullets only hit one side of the trees.

My paintings never depict the characters or settings of these stories, but feature what is peripheral to them. I look to the strength of the not-depicted, where the alleged subject of an image is not in the frame. It belongs to feel – as though the 'content' relation expands, maybe goes to the viewer. So the supposed topic of these works is not necessarily only what is depicted, but is a state of being or affairs. I hope the visual seems partial. I hope all of the paintings in a group generate that.

They are vertically-configured, making them portraits, yet they are also often vertical landscapes. Subject matter is forced into the center of an image to avoid 'composition'. They only depict facial features if they are part of a mask, or a sculpture, (in the case of Selket, the Egyptian goddess), because the face suggests a brand of psychological portraiture that I choose to avoid. If they illustrate anything, they illustrate states of temporal confusion, artifacts that may have fallen out of a narrative, or the paintings themselves might be souvenirs of a fictional as well as actual place. It is important that these pieces, which are made of individual paintings, are described as 'groups' not 'series', and that they are never numbered, only dated. A series implies a sequence or passage of time, and I would prefer that a group function in the present tense. The painting materials themselves contain the duration of their making. The thick tactility of layered areas of colors, or the stitching of embroidery, carry out a passage of time, and the stitch remains a singular mark like in drawing. All of these components complicate temporal experience, which is one of the things that painting does best. Sensation is desirable while sense is not. I have never been particularly fond of drawing. Therefore, I use the breakage of glass to establish the drawing in the larger 'abstract' painting, "A True Tale", and again to avoid the need for composition. Pattern also evades composition and becomes an excuse to decorate, arranging colors as a tonic for trauma and acting as a surrogate for a lost or broken story.

While groups of paintings continue beyond the space of an exhibition, someday I hope to show them reunited. Similar, color-coordinated 'Tehachepis' could fill a room and use repetition to form something whole, yet multivalent and contradictory. This is not unlike how a symphony orchestra is made up of a range of instruments that combine to build something larger than the sum of their parts. Instead of the paintings having to maintain a fidelity to something original or factual, which was never established in the first place, the anecdotes that motivated them fall apart due to the repetition of visual information.

The rendering of the goddess Selket in a version of the Tehachepi narrative has less to do with established meanings or symbolism, and more to do with rendering a person without showing their particular psychological identity. Painting a sculpture is simply a way to paint a person without painting a person, or maybe it contains a person because the original sculpture was part of a sarcophagus. "Tehachepi, (sic)," renders, as in many other versions, the shell or container of a personality. This carries-out one of Blake's Proverbs of Hell: "The cistern contains; the fountain overflows." This concept has been conveyed by my other depictions of snails, a lobster, a crash helmet, an obese, headless, androgynous body, etc. Containing energy increases its power, like an undetonated bomb.

Though this work is obviously contemporary, I wish that where and when it was made could remain a mystery. The combination of materials could confuse geography as well as history. Dying canvas, moving color through a surface that was traditionally rigid and opaque (in western european painting) is like batik, an Indonesian tradition that I learned from the California Stoner tradition. Art unhinges history and geography from needing to be responsible and scientific, it allows them to be senseless and irresponsible, and changes them from science into poetry.

Ivan Morley lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Anecdotes

Tehachepi, (sic)

A straggler Indian and his two lovely daughters
dig bullets out from the sides of trees at Tehachepi.
Bullets only hit one side of anything here because
no matter which direction they're fired in,
they always fly east with the wind.
The Indian can remember a lost civilization in the Mojave,
when the desert was still a valley of perpetual bloom.

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A True Tale

Peter Biggs is the only barber in town.
He's more than happy to introduce a stranger to female society.
Afterwards and during the war between the states, he's known as the Black Democrat.
He comes here as a servant of Captain A.J. Smith, of the dragoons,
then makes a ton of spondulix in various speculations,
and marries a Spanish lady, in all the glory of a swallow-tailed coat with brass buttons,
white vest, and gloves, redolent in all the perfume of "Araby the Blest."
Mr. Biggs makes a "corner" shipping cats to San Francisco as a remedy to their rat problem.
Los Angeles is overrun with cats, and it is left to the fertile brain of this distinguished Virginian
to equalize this great seeming inequality in the nature of things
by gathering up all the cats he can get, either by hook or crook,
to be sold up north, at prices from \$16 to \$100 a piece.
Two coops of cats are left exposed to the wind and weather on the vessel,
and some 100 cats are drowned. He sues the shipping company and wins,
yet like all great men of the period, Mr. Biggs is addicted to gambling,
and the pay from his magnificent enterprise helps
fill the coffers of the casino princes of the Bay City,
before the crestfallen forestaller of the San Francisco cat market returns
to the bosom of his beloved angel, a wiser if not richer man.