

Allison Katz

The Pleasure of Doubt



1

1. Allison Katz, *AD*, 2015, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 122 cm. All images courtesy the artist.

2. *December 17*, 2013, oil on leather, 91.9 x 97.1 cm.

3. *June 10*, 2012, oil on leather, 72 x 64 cm.

BORDER CROSSINGS: What opportunities and vexations does painting present to you as an artist?

ALLISON KATZ: I don't even think about it as painting. That may be a defence mechanism, but I don't frame it through that discourse. When I think about painting in that particular way it's a kind of death wish. It will stagnate. If you open up the conversation, you have a chance to manifest your belief and doubt. If I don't actively nurture my doubt, it won't work. The discourse is really porous and I feel the less it is about painting, the more I can make paintings. Someone recently asked me what my upcoming show in Germany will be about, but I never think like that. It will be about what it has always been about and that is this simultaneous belief and doubt. There's never a preoccupying or dominant subject and things feel like motifs in the sense that they can be re-entered. They are all vessels or metaphors for deferral. I feel like each painting defers to the next one.

Your practice includes ceramics, sculpture, murals and installation. Is that breadth compensatory for painting's inadequacy?

No. It's more about energy and how it circulates. I always felt I was asking too much of painting, asking it to do things it didn't want to do, and then I questioned my own attachment to it. Like, why does it have to be in that form? So I thought about graphics, and taking control of the advertising aspect by producing conflicting versions of announcement posters for each show, which end up as works in themselves, which are either displayed alongside the paintings or as an edition. It's a way to bring up my references without condensing things into a single statement regarding what the show is about. I get to play with this other language that is about communication, while keeping it ambiguous. I didn't want to put that kind of graphic into the painting but I still wanted the information and the energy. It was as if certain ideas couldn't be painting but they could feed back into painting once they'd been something else. It involves a circulation where I'm copying myself and appropriating my own work to expand it from the inside. It goes off the specific surface of painting but it's still drawn from a painting sensibility.

I see echoes of contemporary painters in your work. Is that accidental or deliberate?



2



3

It's a combination. Maybe a good way to answer that question is to think about style. Earlier you asked me if style was important in painting and I realized I don't think about style. But I do think about methodology; how the painting is made, and how something gets made through a system or method. So I paint from observation, I paint from another work of art, and I copy one of my own works. There is no hierarchy. I just bury the source from which the information is received. But style also addresses the idea of the artist's signature and this obsession we have with the artist's touch. It's the thing I really doubted and I use it as content in some weird way. It becomes the subject. So I paint my signature as a face, using my actual signature as features. Or I use my sister's drawings. In high school my younger sister had to draw the nude model as part of her art class and her mark was perfect because it was so aggressive and disinterested. I could never do that, so I projected her drawings and copied her hand exactly. It was great because we share the same DNA but everything else is different. It may not look that way, but what I make is always connected to my life, like diary or notebook entries. So everything, including the obtaining of an image, is generated from an experience. I would say my biggest influence is language and how we name things.

When you're talking about language you don't mean literature in the form of poetry or fiction, do you?

No. It is more how language functions and connections through rhymes and puns and wordplay—that kind of mixing up of a name with an image. I feel that gap produces an image for me more than another image. I don't think we see things without naming them. It's not that I trust language more than image; I just feel there is something about the perception of an image that is so linked to the naming of it that I consider them simultaneously. I don't think of jokes or wit or puns as frivolous—and I really believe in frivolity—because they're ways of defeating morality and your expectations. You also know your mind is on if you don't take a definition at face value. I see painting doing the same thing.

Naming is the Adamite game. I'm sure Eve had something to do with naming in the Garden of Eden, but it's interesting that the first act is the naming act. For you, painting seems to be the act of naming through image.

Definitely. It took me a long time to realize that is also part of the excitement. It is not just image-based; it produces these other associations that can become generative, almost exponentially. They can circulate as an image that can be reproduced in a parasitic way and the language they generate can lead to other things. It can lead to a lot of coincidences and matchings-up. It can also lead to mistranslations or misreadings.

Ideas of note-taking and the compulsion to scribble are ways of deliberately pulling the weighty feet out from under the act of painting.

Yes, and again it's this question of personal source material. My instant reaction to the question of whether or not it is desirable to make something new is to make it personal. Then it's new and it also contains the past.

Signing your name can be insignificant but it can also be the most significant thing we do because it is the readable evidence of our being in the world. So you get to have your painterly cake and eat it too.

You also get to make fun of the fact that no one signs their paintings anymore. Once people started making abstract paintings the signature was a distraction. I think there is still an obsession with being able to identify someone's work, and that becomes a kind of signature. It is also a way to ascribe value very quickly. I always want to slow things down, so it was one way of doing that and of re-examining the basic foundation of any mark.

Is it the pace of looking at your work that you want to slow down?

I think as viewers we have seen so many images that we often know what something is going to look like before we've even seen it. It's also easy to not really see something that you are looking at. So for myself first and then ideally for the viewer, I'm always trying to find a way to make it so that you don't know what to expect, so that you can notice things again. To be what Saul Bellow called a "first-class noticer."

One of my favourite paintings of yours is *Models and Monkeys*. In your version it's not the models who are sexy; it's the monkeys.

Monkeys are supposed to have one hundred percent touch. This past January I went to Indonesia and spent some time with the monkeys. I was genuinely stupefied by their proximity to us and their difference; they really are surrogates for humans. We give them human qualities, these mischievous or cheeky attributes, but at the same time we see them as being less evolved than we are. The cultures that consider them as gods have inverted that. In Bali the monkeys live in sacred forests. Once you go into those forests the monkey has precedence over you; if you do something that pisses the monkey off, the monkey wins. I'm interested in the figure body, so it's also great to paint a monkey because it presupposes a lot about human evolution. That's why I paired them with the models. The whole thing is perfect as a subject.

Is the all-touching monkey not just a surrogate for the human but also a stand-in for the artist?

Probably, but it also doubts the seriousness of the artist's role. It's part of the joke.

***The Opening (with R.D.)* is quite literally a cheeky painting. It looks like it might be connected to a fairy tale. What was going on in your mind when you started that painting?**

I was in Athens at a very glamorous opening at the Dakis Joannou Foundation and I saw a young woman wearing that outfit, although she was wearing underwear. I was mesmerized and made a little drawing of her on a napkin. By sheer coincidence I sat next to her on the plane back to London and we struck up a friendship. She is from Bahrain and a filmmaker and was unlike anyone I'd ever met; she entered my consciousness, you could say. Two years later I got this nine-foot tall canvas made, and the only appropriate thing I could think of painting was that small drawing, the most opposite thing in scale, but which had



Belo Horizonte, 2015, oil on canvas,
243.5 x 152 cm.

the same ambition. I was looking at a lot of René Daniëls at the time and wanted to activate that conversation by involving him directly in one of my own paintings. It's one of the few times I've been so blatant, using his trees and the general composition, which is why I added "with R.D." in the title. So I had seen the outfit at an art opening; there is this opening into the woods; there is the implied

opening of her legs; and there is the opening of us being able to see through her. Then I was amazed that she wasn't embarrassed wearing that outfit and I wanted some of that courage. It was also about transparency, being both a technique of oil painting and an emotional condition, as well as functional; people in London use these clear umbrellas so they can see where they're going, which I thought was quite funny and helpful. So the painting was like a diary entry, it didn't have any other meaning except a kind of ambience. It made sense at the time. I remember reading about William S. Burroughs and the private investigator he invented named Clem Snide who solves crimes by going into the dead man's house, listening to his disco music, and inserting himself into the life of the person, recording and playing back random sounds like the toilet flushing and the shower running, or the sounds of the sea and the wind as he walks along the beach. I always thought that was such a great way of describing the use-value of ambient energy. If you put yourself in a certain mind frame and you go to a certain place, you will pick up on stuff.

I am intrigued by your insistence on doubt. Is there any epistemological certainty in painting? Is there anything that can erase that doubt? The question that arises is when do you stop making a painting and does stopping mean the doubt has gone away?

No. I think the doubt is the pleasure. It's where that allowance happens of being able to linger in that doubt and have it bring up a whole host of questions about ability and perceptions and meaning. That's why I'm still making paintings and why I like looking at paintings because I feel the good ones can do that.

The shifting terrain between representation and abstraction is something that doesn't seem to be of interest to you.

The work I was making in Montreal during my undergraduate years and afterwards was all about the figure and representation, and when I got to New York to study at Columbia that was very bad. There was this huge embarrassment about painting the figure, or painting any kind of self-referential body. It had to be mediated in a serious way and for two years I tried to understand how my own abject taste functioned. Then I started to use that embarrassment; the gauge for whether a painting was working was if it embarrassed me. The artist and writer John Kelsey visited my studio and said, Your paintings all look like they're blushing, and I took that as a compliment. I'm convinced my thinking is abstract enough. I actually feel relief

when I can lodge abstraction into some kind of representation. Also, because it's a recognizable object, language comes in. For me, it can destabilize it in a way where it feels like an abstraction. It's an abstraction to call a chair a chair and while



1. Allison Katz, *Last Seen*, 2015, oil on linen, 260 x 180 cm.

2. David Salle, *Silver 12*, 2010, pigment transfer on linen, 84 x 60 inches. © David Salle. Courtesy Skarstedt, New York.

I know that is classic conceptual art, it still holds water in terms of trying to find a subject and how you would approach what's worth painting. I can still find the abstraction in a recognizable thing and that's why I feel it has to be image-based and not just generated from gesture.

When you did your screen piece with noses it put me in mind of Robert Gober and Sue Williams.

I wasn't thinking of them but I appreciate your references. Again, it's very personal. I had always wanted a nose job when I was a teenager, so the shape of a profile was a definite point of fixation. Then I got over that, with the positive result that I had thought a great deal about silhouettes and caricature. And there is that 1962 Warhol painting of a nose, *Before and After*, which is one of my favourite paintings. It is a perfect self-portrait of Warhol's ambition, of his taste and general aesthetics, and of what he would sacrifice to be a part of something.

It's also a jump cut because it doesn't show the actual removal process, which is the interesting part. The nose wallpaper pattern actually started because I was invited to contribute to a show about flowers at 1857 in Oslo. I kept trying to design wallpaper using floral elements, but nothing was working. Then I realized that flowers are useless without a nose, so I went to the device, I went to the thing that makes a flower possible. The more I drew it the more I became aware that I was also drawing the emanation of smell, the squiggle of a nose when you're trying to show scent or some kind of evaporation. The pattern was the kind of rhyme where the nose dissolves into the act of smelling or the smell itself.

The other thing that you haven't dealt with is photography, which has been the bugaboo of painting since photography was invented.

People are always trying to blame photography for something. I just see it as one other observation or experience. It's another source. There is a show of Luc Tuymans's drawings on now and I was reading in the press release how the sensuousness comes from the impotence of the photograph. That is a total load of shit because it's the opposite. The talk of photography's impotence or withholding never rang true for me; I see it as a source of surplus, excess. No one would take photography as being a kind of ultimate truth. It's got so many ways it could go, which is why you can paint from a photograph, because you can decide what to steal, what to discard. The direction of the photograph changes how it is interpreted. So I never saw photography or cinema as a problem because painting goes through a body and the relationship to photography is never direct anyway. It's through a personal history of how to look at things and how one has been exposed to things.

Because doubt is your constant companion, you're never not going to paint because you'll never be free of doubt. Is that right?

I wonder sometimes why there is such an urgency. I don't know where it comes from. Years ago I compared it to the game of Boules in which the goal-throwing strategy is to displace another ball. I need the next painting to make sense of the one before and to also make space for the next one. So there is an instability to it, which means I never feel satisfied. I don't mean that in a pretentious way. I just mean there is no goal that will be satisfied. That's the urgency to keep doing it. ■