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Painting as Taboo

Harlan Johnson, Galerie McClure, Centre des arts visuels,
Montréal. 30 May — 21 June, 2008

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Actualités / Expositions

Montréal

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alerie McClure presents an exhibition of large format paintings by Harlan Johnson entitled *Puits d'huile*. Part landscape, part abstraction, Johnson's paintings place stark images of industrial architecture within marine settings. Johnson's canvases depict oil rigs drift on a sea of multi-colored, sombre pools of watery brush marks. Translucent acrylic paint washes over the looming structures of drilling platforms at sea. The paintings are connected by their consistent use of an offshore oil platform that dominates its watery environment. From another point of view the paintings can be seen as accumulations of strokes and colors that, in particular instances, collaborate to show us the mining tools that are sitting in the middle of our oceans.

In the past, the artist has produced many works informed by photographic documentation of the natural world. This present series marks the first time the artist has addressed the genre of marine landscape painting.

The blues, greens and ochres that dominate the pictorial space of several canvases, create the possibility that the drilling platforms in the seascape are captured seconds of reflections caught in the paint, water or oil. The interactive relationship between subject and methodology in the paintings – abstraction, landscape, and rendition – bring a dialectic action that prompt me to consider the writings of Georges Bataille. Although Johnson's work does not address the taboos of death and reproduction that we as a society enforce, we can apply Bataille's description of taboos and transgressions to both the paint handling and the subject of the work.

In *Erotism, Death and Sensuality* Bataille writes "Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it."

The act of painting and making more objects that capture one person's aesthetics on an already overcrowded planet in the 21st century is becoming a social taboo. The paintings, when compared with the popular, disposable and recycled, cultural billboard

images of slick. Fast-paced cars represent a venerable and forgotten visual dialect. We are seduced these days by minimal, clean spaces with controlled, natural wood veneers and aluminum appliances. No messy intuitive splashes of colors or forms are allowed into our consumer-driven images.

Johnson's beginning point for this series comes from the consumer-driven supply of images at the source – the Internet – where everything can be found. Rather than reinforcing the illusions of a clean, clear reproduction, he begins a personal type of investigation as to what the images can mean. Derived from low-resolution jpeg photos, these marinescapes are reconstituted through *filmy spatters of acrylic pigments*. There is another sense of history here, in reference to the choice of colors in the paintings. The light in the paintings has a feel similar to romantic, pre-impressionist scenes of J.M.W. Turner or Whistler.

Johnson captures a fiery glow of something

burning in one canvas or in another the light cast on the seascape amounts to warm mauves or oranges fading off the canvas.

There is a gentle, almost lost purity of the brushstrokes; the loose handling of the paint shows us the potential of the material. The viscosity of the paint can be seen as a metaphor of the oil that the paintings are depicting – the process of retrieving. The lack of any human presence within these large-scale extraction images reinforces the distance at which individuals are kept from the violent processes being inflicted on the planet.

The landscape dimension of the paintings portray the cold and calculated rape of the natural world that we condone and keep hidden so we don't have to feel remorseful about robbing the black gold.

The paintings as taboos are, at the same time, reminiscent of the transgression. Rather than signing a petition or choosing a hybrid car (both of which are great choices in creating a healthier life style for us all), these paintings place us at the scene of the crime, which we must include as a part of our history. The awe and marvel we once had in the face of technological advancements still play a part in how we place importance and value in our lives. However, our inability to completely foresee the future and determine whether we are doing the right thing must be clarified by making ourselves aware emotionally.

Painting retains a quality of mystery to both the artist and the viewer that can stimulate the emotional values of our interactions with the world. The representation of contemporary society's utilization of the earth, acts as an expiation and/or transgression. The emotional drive that plays a larger part in the creation of the mining process than we would usually like to think about is exposed. The raw energy and force that is needed to dig out materials, at the same time, is a desperate, ambiguous act. It is much easier to revere the cars and heat that are produced from the oil than to consider the implications of the process of how the raw material is obtained.

By including the painting process, as a part of the subject of the paintings, Johnson attempts to expose the damage between portraying oil rigs and harnessing the movement of natural liquid.

NATALIE OLANICK

Natalie Olanick is a visual artist, writer, educator and curator. She received her Master's degree from the University of Windsor in 1998. She has written for various art magazine and catalogues including *Ciel Variable*, *Lola*, *Mercer Union* and *B-312*.