



Salcman, Michael. Little Patuxent Review, Summer 2011.

PROFILE | LILLIAN BAYLEY HOOVER

How does a young painter today make peace with an art world in which photography and image-mediated reality reign supreme, an art world supposedly after the end of Modernism, in which self-reflexive art-historical irony is all the rage (i.e. Post-Modernism), hierarchical thinking has disappeared and painting is thought dead except in the hands of Gerhard Richter? If you are Lillian Bayley Hoover (b.1980) you ignore the bad news, learn everything you can about the constantly mutating form and function of painting, and soldier right ahead. That painting changed irrevocably with the invention of photography in 1837 is an old story. That painting lost its primacy as the optimal medium for portraiture, scientific documentation and a realistic depiction of outer reality cannot be denied. But photography also freed painting to become more abstract, to become more like music or poetry, an exploration of psychological or philosophical truths and inner verities.

Initially, both photography and painting seemed damaged. The small black and white photographs of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not appear to share the “aura” and uniqueness of a masterpiece created on canvas. Possessed of a flat surface and produced in multiple copies, photographs did not bear the autographic touch of the artist. At the same time, Leonardo’s “Mona Lisa” was also somewhat damaged; one no longer needed to visit the Louvre in order to commune with “La Gioconda,” but could easily turn to a magazine or newspaper.

The power of the mass media and the world’s drowning in a flood of images only became worse with the invention of moving pictures, the subject of Walter Benjamin’s essential essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), the brilliant exegesis in which the concept of “aura” was first bruited and the fascistic use of mass media predicted. What he could not foresee was the use of computer programs to “edit” or fictionalize photography through colorization, massive enlargement and other types of manipulation. Computer-generated effects made it far easier for the photograph to “lie;” it was no longer a reliable record of objective reality.

In fact, artists like James Casabere, Thomas Demand and Adam Fuss use tabletop models and walk-in installations made of cardboard to provide completely believable alternative realities available for photographic documentation. Typically, the models are destroyed after the photograph is made. And that master of self-disguise, Cindy Sherman, the doyenne of Post-Modernism, uses her own unrecognizable face and figure as the sole subject of the dramas she enacts in front of the camera. Photography became the feminist’s weapon of choice and a substitute or “simulacrum” of painting, aping the coloristic effects and grand scale of the older medium, taking upon itself the functions of nineteenth-century history painting and twentieth-century surrealism and fantasy. For the umpteenth time in the course of the twentieth century, painting appeared to be well and truly “dead.”

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Into this debate on the role of photography in late Modernism and the relative importance of painting stepped Gerhard Richter (b. 1932), who has spent fifty years utilizing painting to comment on photography rather than the other way around. With the technical virtuosity of a Vermeer and the conceptual brilliance of a Duchamp, Richter has managed to recuperate all of the classical tropes of painting, its usefulness in scientific documentation, portraiture and history, its ability to fool the eye, the concept of the masterpiece and the uniqueness of the author while, at the same time, eschewing all evidence of emotion, and denying the possibility of a “signature style.” By signature style I mean all those elements of a picture—like paint handling, color palette and range of subject matter—that make any authentic Monet or Rembrandt self-evidently look like a “Monet” or a “Rembrandt” whether or not the painting is signed.

Richter’s two apparently separate styles, one photorealist and one abstract, are linked by the fact that he paints photographs, that is to say, photorealist paintings that look like photographs, some he has taken, others travel souvenirs and postcards or found snapshots in the meaning that Duchamp gave to his “readymade” objects. Richter sometimes paints on photographs directly thereby expunging the physical separation of the two media, the

photographic ground contributing the representational (i.e., figurative) component of the picture while his brushstrokes add the abstract element.

In Richter's hall of mirrors, it is possible to buy an original photograph he's recently made of a painting that he once painted, a painting itself based on a photograph taken or found by Richter. Richter has even painted wholly abstract paintings based on photographs of brushstrokes randomly made and smeared on specimen cards kept in his files and documented in his on-going project, Atlas. In this way and others, Richter eliminates the conceptual difference between photography and painting since all of his early work, whether wholly abstract or wholly figurative in nature, is based on an image-mediated world (i.e., photographs) rather than any actual experience of the real world. Richter believes in the essential equivalency of abstraction and representation; he has painted hundreds of works in each mode but rarely combines the two. Hoover does not avoid this conflict; she too makes paintings out of photographs but, increasingly, she combines realism and abstraction on the same canvas."

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In fact, Lillian Hoover has chosen to go Richter one step better by making paintings based on photographs of imaginary structures constructed through the conceptual model-making or table-top strategy of Casabere and Demand. Her painstaking technique results in half-a-dozen paintings a year, some of which require months for completion.

In the first stage, Hoover decides on a theme, not infrequently a highly charged topic about societal power structures, and builds miniature environments for the store-bought doll-sized figures that she situates within her artificial spaces. In Hoover's second step, she obsessively relights and re-photographs her models, compulsively making millimeter adjustments. The use of dollhouse figures and props in the first two steps relates Hoover's artistic program to that of Laurie Simmons (b.1949), a pioneering feminist photographer. In both artists, there is a whiff of the romantic and a frank desire to create an emotional response within the viewer. Simmons has admitted as much, and in recent years has actually designed a dollhouse that comes complete with contemporary paintings and sculpture.

In Hoover's third and final stage, having built her models and adjusted the resulting photographs, she finally begins the painting by roughing in certain shapes projected onto the canvas, then continues free hand, making changes by reference to the photographs she has shot. The three-step process of model-making, photographing and painting results in a subtle chilling effect or "distancing," an emotional coolness superficially similar to that of Richter's, in which the viewer is encouraged to spend time slowly surveying the surface of the painting without immediately engaging its possibly incendiary content.

In "Uncle Rudi" (1965), a Richter painting based on a family snapshot of his father's brother proudly posed and smiling in his Wehrmacht uniform, our conscious horror of the family's situation (and that of the artist) in regard to their Nazi history is slowed and delayed by the intentional use of turpentine-loaded implements to blur the image as a camera lens might. This conceptual trope catches the viewer's eye and obscures critical information. Similarly, in "Stop" (2007) Hoover first engages our eyes with the beautifully painted foliage and carefully posed middle-class dolls she's placed within a model of a Baltimore Light-Rail station before we notice how oblivious the figures are to the horrifying photograph inserted into the advertising frame on the station platform. This carefully painted simulacrum of a found photograph of suffering humanity in a war-torn country is a subtle indictment of casual indifference."

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Of course Hoover is much more than a crafty polemicist. A graduate of the University of North Carolina-Asheville, where she received a liberal arts background in art history and philosophy in addition to her Bachelor of Fine Arts, and of Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore where she sharpened her studio skills and earned her Master of Fine Arts, Hoover is highly aware of the theoretical situation surrounding her own work. She constantly challenges her technical proficiency by creating compositional "errors" to cue the viewer, create unease and challenge our expectations of a "perfect" painting. Other contemporary artists have used the related strategy of "de-skilling" to disturb their otherwise immaculate surfaces with randomness: by allowing gravity to determine the final placement of paint on the canvas (Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis), by painting subjects upside down before righting the painting (Baselitz) or by using a long shrubby branch rather than a brush to reduce the manual control involved in making a mark (Brice Marden). Hoover's subtle "mistakes" introduce what she calls an element of "awkwardness" through the elision of a critical detail in the photograph or a failure to edit out clues as to the artificial nature of the "reality" she presents to us. This strategy is much more telling in her recent work; I take this awkwardness to be the equivalent of de-skilling but it's also a way of telling us there are no utopian spaces in either her painted world or the one we inhabit."

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Many of the new paintings are based on a trip Hoover took to visit Istanbul and its remarkable Miniaturk Park, a permanent outdoor installation in which Turkey's most famous architectural structures (mosques, palaces, bridges, airports) are faithfully reproduced on a scale appropriate to a child's playground. Some of the models have not weathered well and the adventitious cracks and displacements introduce their own subtle imperfections, like the off-center column in "Observatory." The Miniaturk experience radically changed Hoover's approach in at least two important respects: first, she no longer needed to build a model in order to photograph it because the Miniaturk structures were readymade models or found objects in the Duchampian sense, and second, because they were purely architectural in nature, eerily free of people.

Her almost monochrome painting of three jet bridges in a deserted airport has a disturbing sense of menace, one that the presence of her dollhouse figures would only reduce, not because of any deeply buried criticism of corporate institutions, but because we subconsciously associate cleared airports with the threat of terrorism. The three jet bridges in "Ataturk Airport" (2010) surround a large open area of concrete like menacing claws. This area empty of any realistic reference clearly indicates Hoover's profound and growing interest in the abstract composition of her pictures and her blank color scale echoes Richter's favorite palette of silvery grays. The new architectural paintings also link her to a much younger German artist, Eberhard Havekost (b.1967) of Dresden. However Havekost's tilted-up balconies and strangely cropped cars and buildings usually have a lick of bright white or red, a dab of slathered painterly cuisine Hoover eschews in her rigidly flat surfaces.

The Miniaturk paintings reach a kind of apotheosis in her beautifully composed study of a model of the Suleymaniye Mosque, a picture in which shadows of two of the four minarets slant in from the right and cross against an intricate V-shaped pattern of walkways from which every brick and paving stone has been expunged. Hoover alerts us to the true nature of the painting's source by giving us a little clue, the up-turned nose of the Astroturf lawn where it's seen peeling away from its support. Nearly a green monochrome organized almost entirely in diagonals, "Suleymaniye" is a perfect collision of abstraction and reality, two primary modes of painting that most artists keep rigidly separate, two modes that Hoover handles here with utmost delicacy and power.

—Michael Salcman

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