



TOM BURCKHARDT *157 Elements of a Painting*

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by John Yau

What do you get when you cross a cartoonist's animation sense with an abstract artist's search for pure form? Answer: Tom Burckhardt, or at least one part of him and his uncategorizable project. For the past decade, Burckhardt has fruitfully subverted the last persisting traces of the boundaries separating abstraction and representation, sculpture and painting. In *FULL STOP* (2005), he undermined the materialist aspect of installation art by constructing a remarkably detailed artist's studio out of cardboard and black paint, including a blank canvas sitting on an easel in the center of the room. In his exhibition, *Slump* (2008), he made curved paintings that rested on *trompe l'oeil* paint cans, "slumping" against the wall.

The theme of *FULL STOP* and *Slump* circles around the absence of a big subject as well as the artist's rejection of institutionally approved content. However, I suspect that Burckhardt also recognized that calling attention to the absence of a big subject could easily devolve into a mannerism, even when one is being whimsical. Alongside his larger works, he has painted on the endpapers of book covers, book pages, and molded plastic. All of these shifts and contradictions, coupled with Burckhardt's penchant for painting on something other than canvas and making sculpture out of non-art materials, suggest that one part of his project is to destabilize the grand tradition of painting and sculpture while simultaneously finding non-nostalgic ways to honor them. He knows painting and sculpture are dead, which is why he is devoted to revivifying them. In this he shares something with Francis Picabia; they inject their art with a humor that is both mischievous and serious, even self-mocking. In Burckhardt's case, he seems to be most interested in the slippages that he can generate between seeing and knowing, touch and sight, and the nameable and the elusive. Recognizing the instability of the world, and the way we use categories to apprehend experience, he probes this zone of experience with a deftness and humor that never slips into the slight or eccentric. In fact, it is how close he

comes to the precipice of these often charming realms that endows his work with a quiet pressure.

In his most recent exhibition, *157 Elements of a Painting*, the artist shows two bodies of related work, 157 oils on modest-sized book pages and twelve acrylic and colored pencil paintings done on the blank endpapers of clothbound book covers. In the oils on book pages it is as if Burckhardt is a cartoonist merrily channeling Ellsworth Kelly, Paul Feeley, Robert Therrien, and Myron Stout, among others. Like *Red Grooms*, for whom he worked as an assistant, Burckhardt ransacks his influences yet ends up with something unmistakably his own. The monochromatic silhouettes range from abstract horseshoes and boomerangs to what looks like a blue water balloon hanging from a peg or a gray breast in profile with a bullet-like nipple. For all their flatness, the shapes come across as things. A couple of works appear to be simple house-like shapes. Others are more elusive. Mounted directly on the wall, like studies one might see in a geometric artist's studio, this lexicon of forms plays with the permeable relationship between connotation and denotation.

In his paintings on book covers, Burckhardt goes further, exploring our deeply ingrained impulse to anthropomorphize clouds, so to speak. Using the two joined covers and the seam between the endpapers, the artist embraces the irresolvable tension between a multipart abstract shape and an abstract head, complete with two eyes, nose, and mouth in some cases. The artist doesn't announce this in any way, as each work derives its title from the book's cover. Rather, it is a framework to be discovered on its own. But once the discovery is made, we begin looking for the head, which inevitably makes us self-conscious. Within this state of consciousness, all sorts of readings begin to bloom, including the realization that the book (something you look at, and read) is now able to look back at you. They parody the popular view of abstract art as hiding something the viewer must find. They combine reading and looking, as well as evoke the Rorschach test.

What is remarkable about the book cover paintings is that Burckhardt infuses the tension between abstraction and representation with freshness, enthusiasm, and humor. He has absorbed, and ultimately made his own, the layered space and interlocking forms of the Indian Space painters, while adding elements basic to both minimalism and New Image painting: monochromatic abstract shapes inscribed with lines, fields of dots, and repeated forms. The result is a masterful combination of the comical and the pathetic. The pain of being is inescapable, but, to Burckhardt's credit, we feel sympathy rather than pity or sorrow. We have seen the schlub, and it is us. In this artist's hands, the book becomes both a portrait and a mirror.