

Interview – Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Questions for Karin Davie

1. How did this new series of paintings develop?

Over the last several years I've become increasingly more fascinated by the material and immaterial properties of light, its function in life and art and potential to be understood as a gesture. I've been influenced by film, in particular the early German Expressionist film *Nosferatu* by Murnau, Disney's *Fantasia*, and various other experimental films made by artists. The last series of paintings I made before the *Symptomania* series was *Chinatownblues*. Those paintings captured a certain mood and quality of light that I like to call "urban," and have a poetic interplay of light and shadow that's indicative of certain films and what I see around me daily in New York City.

I love the dramatic light qualities in Times Square and Chinatown, and its relevance as an image. The color and optical effects unique to these LED and neon light technologies are intense, hyper-saturated, fantastical, and mysterious. This theatre of optics, especially set against a backdrop of nature, inspires me. I use actual LED lights as a material (like paint) in the drawing series *Night Ways* and the new cast pieces *Introvert*. But for the *Symptomania* paintings I didn't want to use actual neon pigment because I felt that it would be too cosmetic and reminiscent of work associated with the Neo Geo art movement in the 80's. Instead I wanted to use color that would appear luminous and glowing, but be literally organic. The light source depicted in these paintings is in sharp contrast to the forms described through color that appear more organic, murky and bodily.

Several shifts happened in this new work to set it apart from the preceding *Chinatownblues* series. I made a definite shift in the color palette. I used a specific shade of light green as a background color to give the appearance of a cool piercing light source that both recedes to create a deep space and comes forward to optically vibrate on the picture surface. It appears to reflect and refract light off the coiling forms. It's the feeling of a light that describes an environment that's both alive and almost toxic. The tubular strokes in this work are reduced in scale to the length of the arm and go back and forth horizontally to give the sensation of tightly compressed layers one on top of another moving en masse in one direction. Instead of the image being primarily comprised of a tangled mass of twisting overlapping strokes (as in *Between My Eye & Heart*, and *Chinatownblues*), these coiling gestures densely squash together, but don't always reconfigure perfectly. Where the strokes don't come together to completely cover the field of the canvas, gaps are left to give the illusion of holes going back into the pictorial space. These irregular coiling gestures feel like viscera or dismembered body parts, all moving in a sea of debris.

In the previous *Chinatownblues* series, I imagined making an image of something that had come undone, in a state of collapse. It was loosely based around the idea of a

figure that had been knit together out of one material and then pulled apart left discarded as a mass of raw material. It was the feeling of this unraveled figure, gathered up and tossed back into the painting that became the image. The *Symptomania* paintings were conceived differently. I wanted to push the idea of a fragmented figure caught in moving field with figural elements appearing (surfacing) and disappearing (submerging). It's the result of obsessively overlapping smaller gestures but allowing for small gaps between these strokes to create holes that punctuate the pictorial field. I thought of this feature as my version of the "dot" painting where the spaces or holes between the painted gestures were as important as the strokes themselves revealing layers of material behind.

In general, the drawing for this new work developed from wiping many failed paintings off the canvas. I kept making paintings but struggling to arrive at an image I liked. In between the exhaustive experimentation process of painting and wiping, I would stare at the ghosting effect of the wiped off marks thinking...why is that more interesting than the painting I just did? ...It made me think of Gerhard Richter's early series of abstractions such as the painting *Red –Yellow –Blue (Greenish)* from in 1972 that I've long admired – the altered image – one reduced to a tangled mass of blurry strokes. I've always been attracted to making abstract work that teeters on the edge of representation and embodies some sort of unselfconscious destructive act, an off-handedness, or casual gesture that retains some vestige of representation. I finally realized that the wiped off drawing embodied the 'casualness' and literal deconstruction of image that I was seeking and helped determine the form. The straightforwardness and casualness of this act, akin to something almost domestic (like waving or washing a window), and its relationship to the body, underscores the subject in my work. The paintings are constructed from repetitive physical movements. I think of 'the gestures' as behaviors that are both informal (i.e., casual) and obsessive, as opposed to grand and aggressive. I am interested in a visual reflection of the complex psychological and social relationships that persist over time to processes of the "self" and "body" in painting.

2. Can you explain the title "*Symptomania*"

It's hard to fully explain *Symptomania* because it's a made up word that just intuitively made sense when it popped into my head. It wasn't until later when I wrote it down in my notebook that I realized more analytically (poetically?) how perfectly fitting it seemed.

I see an ongoing theme in my work as the struggle between what gets revealed and what gets concealed and the discovery of an image that looks back at us. It's an image of the irrepressible and the irrepressible image. In giving form to something that is both an emotion and an idea, I've imagined a kind of corporeal being with its raw parts discarded, in a sea of debris, exposed and in a state of collapse. I titled an earlier series *Interior Ghosts*, an actual term used in Chinese medicine to describe excess energy trapped in the body. Those paintings were about how we perceive

things differently than how we actually experience them in the body. They took on the likeness of contorted smiles or squashed body parts or whole cartooned figures seen through a fun house mirror. I thought of them as false displays of emotions – they functioned as ‘expressions’ of ‘expressions’. In looking back at those images I see how in the desire to express one extreme state of mind revealed another truer deeper expression hidden in its opposite.

A symptom is technically defined as a subjective evidence of disease but it could be thought of as a synonym for the word ‘expression’. It’s the language that we use to describe living in our bodies and the way the body expresses itself. It’s the body’s language for what’s internal made external – another form of expression

3. The line in your work has evolved from stripes to wavy lines, to tangled circles, and now these collapsed coils. Could you discuss how this change developed?

In the beginning I used a modernist stripe motif as an image. I used it differently by bringing back the evidence of the hand through gesture, playing with ideas of the masculine and feminine and making it appear to have representations of the figure. Conceptually I wanted to take this modernist ideal of purity, perfection, and dominance and turn it into an image of something more vulnerable, imperfect and playful.

The process grew out of my interest in physical memory, the mechanics of the gesture (ideas informed by dance in the 70’s) and identity. I formally manipulated the stripes to have evidence of my hand and body. I wanted it to mimic my movements and suggest a living breathing entity. Each stroke resembled a modernist “stripe” that was imperfect and organic, literally and virtually contained so that it had to bend, bulge, and undulate across the canvas surface. Collectively these stripes appeared to almost obsessively caress the contours of the shape they defined, while at the same time optically breaking it apart. I feel these are images depicting something very repressed but barely containable. There was an erotic subtext to this work. In these early diptychs, the viewer experiences the image, as something that can only be viewed from its exterior. Over time as the work shifts and methodology changes, the images reverse, becoming something that appears only seen from its interior. It’s as if the earlier images have been literally turned inside out. The *Interior Ghosts* and *Pushed, Pulled Depleted & Duplicated* painting series have a looser gesture and unstable form, which creates a sensation of vertigo for the viewer. The paint quality becomes more liquid, more spontaneous, bare canvas is left visible to both highlight the physical act of the brush’s inability to enlarge and fill out the area and the illusionistic impression of highlights on the form. The image that that emerges is very different. In comparison to earlier work, I feel these images look unstable and hyperbolic like distorted images seen through a funhouse mirror.

As I shifted away from using shaped canvas, diptych formats, and later blown-up cartoons as a pre-drawn image, to a different more direct process, the work changed. What originally gave the work its content now got in the way to become an obstacle and felt too restrictive. I'm always looking for ways to keep the work developing and for me at that time meant finding a way to make the work with an approach involving more risk. When I knew that I was coming to the end of the *Pushed, Pulled, Depleted & Duplicated* series and wanted to make a large conceptual shift, I knew in order to make it happen successfully I had to paint myself completely into a corner where there was absolutely no way of turning back. I had made several failed attempts previously that took me back each time. But once I made going back impossible, things a lot easier. Eventually this led to the painting series *Between My Eye and Heart*, *Heart's Guest*, and more recently, *Chinatownblues* and *Symptomania*.

Ironically, at the time, I was looking for a way to slow down the painting process. But by using a wet on wet application technique that's so direct it created an even faster ground and stroke and demanded that in order to achieve the image I wanted an even more intensely compressed session of time working. I intentionally blended colors together within one stroke. This gave the work a representational quality and the illusion of one very large, tangled stroke that bounced around inside the canvas dictated by an imaginary force. It's my compulsion and desire to resolve the image quickly that gives the image the feeling that it was made out one continuous stroke from a brush that didn't leave the canvas. I remember thinking that I needed to make the images feel more elastic and exaggerated. I wanted the viewer to experience a tension in the image of something teetering on being totally out of control or dangerous; as if at any moment the image would burst out of its container into the room.

In the most recent work, *Symptomania*, the paintings appear unplugged, direct, continuous and raw. It's an image of the irrepressible and an irrepressible image. I see an ongoing theme in my work as the struggle between what gets revealed and concealed and the discovery of an image that looks back at us. In giving form to something that is both an emotion and an idea, I've imagined a kind of corporeal being with its raw parts discarded, in a sea of debris, exposed. Evoking the "guts" of the painting come un-done, it's not fixed but liquid, always in a dynamic state of transformation and perhaps an image of seeing ourselves feel.

4. Critics often talk about your work in terms of the body, but your emphasis is much more on gesture. Could you explain this distinction?

I think a lot about the Existential ideas connected to the America Ab Ex artists. What used to be termed the "self" in painting has been replaced by the body. There's a slapstick quality to my work where the movement appears hyper-physical and the image hyperbolic. The last several bodies of work have been decried as intestinal, viscera or corporeal imagery. The drips are not staged, but become evidence of two things: gravity's actual effect on the material, and one that's virtual, to become a part of a fictional narrative within the painting. I view the performance of my body and

the making of the work a bit like a parody where the painting's image mimics what it is that I have to do in order to make it. But each individual gesture functions like a visual onomatopoeia where the feeling of the stroke's physicality equates to a meaning. The viewers are invited to experience the work with their bodies through scale and materiality. I believe my work engages the ideas of how we perceive and define inside and outside – private and public – through process and representation.

5. Movement seems central to your work and the paintings seem to evoke a similar sensation in the work. Is that a conscious choice on your part? What kind of experience are you trying to create for the viewer?

Originally, when I began painting the diptych paintings I didn't realize that the work was filled with movement. (This was something brought to my attention by others.) It was a direct result of my process, obsessive, repetitive mark-making, and a function of color. I would look at the work and think it looked still. But I did consciously want to push the perceptual tension between the object and the illusion. I was also very cognizant of setting up an installation where the rhythm and specific movement between each diptych, and the group as a whole was controlled. I viewed it like an album with silent moment between songs on a record being as choreographed as the music itself. In this way, it was an attempt at making a "moving painting," one that was active and engulfed the viewer's space and activated the architectural space it inhabited. The movement in all of my work is a direct result of the mark-making, the particulars of my own nervous system, but I don't consciously set out to make work that looks agitated or anxious. I do want the work to feel bold and alive and activate the perceptual space of the viewer. With the *In Out In Out* series I took this ubiquitous 60's wave motif, where there were already several associated layers of meanings, for example, to water, psychedelic altered consciousness, and inserted through gesture, repetition and scale an allusion to an anthropomorphic form; one that suggested parts of the human anatomy – specifically a cavernous cleavage.

6. These finger hole cast paintings signal a new direction for you. How do they relate to the *Symptomania* paintings? How does the light in them relate to the light in your paintings?

I've always liked the idea of blurring the definitions between painting, drawing, and sculpture. In graduate school, I experimented making constructed 'paintings' out of non-traditional materials. When I first came to New York, I made large sculptures in my small Brooklyn apartment. At one point I made an interior wall out of hand-made bricks and bricked myself into the apartment. I also did a group of Polaroids titled *Becoming Things*, which document several private performances where I costumed myself to become a painting or sculpture, or I literally inserted myself into a large group of stacking chairs (ironically used for some public purpose). Most of my early sculptures either never got made or weren't documented.

I used LEDs as a primary material for the first time in the *Night Ways* series. I think of the actual LED light as just another material like paint with a potential to be seen

as a 'gesture'. The LEDs are set behind the holes, surrounded by rubber grommets, which literally punctuate the paper surface and are programmed to fade in and out very slowly. This light visually pierces the ground and paints with light, simultaneously breaking apart the space and unifying the image as a whole at the same time. There are no programmed moving LEDs in *Introvert no 1 or 2*. The variations in shape, size, and angle of the actual finger holes cause the light to be reflected and refract differently, enhancing the gestural aspect of both materials. Similarly, the illusion of light in the *Symptomania* paintings is reenacted through the use of color. Those orifice-like gaps between gestures behave like the actual LEDs as holes lit within. Basically I've been totally absorbed in re-using the 'polka dot' image turned into a hole. I used my fingers to push into a soft material making intrusions in the surface that is then cast. The 'strokes' are replaced by 'pokes'. These images bring to mind the Kusama dot or the Fontana slash or puncture, but in my work the attention is ultimately on the performance of this bodily act and what's beyond the surface interface. I wanted to bring two very different materials together with opposing ideologies to create an unsettling image. We associate very differently to the gesture and something hand-made than we do to technology.

I recently exhibited the photographic series *Wanting to be a Painting* and *Wanting to be a Sculpture* from 1998 for the first time. It's imagery of me covered by a white sheet with holes cut into it and a light source held underneath. Revealing a striking resemblance to the *Introvert* pieces it seemed prophetic. I'm always looking for a way to fuse the sometimes humorous, sometimes serious, inconsistencies that exist between how we see and how we perceive things in the world.