

A commissioned text for Boomerang

by Oscar Tuazon

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After our shift was over, Oscar and I went out in the rain to find a bundle and just, I don't know, die. We was stuck in Texas. That's what it felt like sometimes, trapped in a low-ceilinged basement kitchen, too oily to get let in the front door, actually not allowed to even taste the food: animals die all the time from eating too much—I once saw a bird choke to death on a fish. We overcompensate.

I was about to lock up for the night. Oscar stood there, dipped a stick into a bucket full of solvent and just casually kind of tossed it across the room. I watched as it left his hand in a gentle arc. It spun slowly end over end until the wet tip bounced from the wall and fell to the floor. I'm not sure why I even remember that as an event when if I think about it there was a lot else that happened that night, but it left a mark that's still there on the wall, a small greenish drooping oval that I guess other people never noticed or if they did didn't mention it. But of course I never mentioned it myself, and I probably spent more time than anyone else looking at it, off to the left of my station where the wall protrudes a few inches for a column or some water pipes. I would stand there and absent-mindedly look at that thing, though I could never really trace whatever structural requirement that volume represented, assuming there was one. Almost no walls are really uninterrupted planes if you start to look around. And at least around me Oscar never said a word about the solvent stain on the night he made it or any other day. Which probably means it's meaningless-- I mean apart from him having made it and the fact that it stayed there, practically invisible, for at least a few years without anyone painting it over. A valueless mark, if you want to give it a name, which I can tell you from experience is about the only thing in the world you would be glad to stare at at work all day.

A conversation for Boomerang: Joseph Montgomery, Oscar Murillo and

Marianne Spurr

June 2011

Oscar Murillo:

*Joseph, I wanted to refer to a couple of texts written about your practice, in particular one written alongside your solo show *Lie lay lain Lay laid laid*, at Laurel Gitlen gallery (summer 2010), while also referring to your current two-person exhibition at the Kunsthhaus Basel, titled *Curating the contemporary* (April-May 2011).*

To start with the more recent of the two I wanted to redirect this idea of process, which seems to constantly come up in relation to your paintings. Could we perhaps discuss the studio as a site of production, without moving as far as an end product? My interest here lies in the inevitable influence a studio or place of production has in the foundations of a singular or series of works. I am thinking of contemporaries such as Josh Smith and his collage paintings, this notion of making work out of left over work, or masters such as Franz West.

Joseph Montgomery:

I have had many studios: corners within apartments, sheds out back, attics, University designated walls, basements. Whereas when I was learning I put one painting on an easel to work on it, in the last three working areas I put multiple paintings on long shallow shelves and lean them against the wall. Sometimes these shelves are three tall on the wall. The shelves are pine, butt joined with screws out of ready-milled lumber, white pine, a 3/4" x 3 1/2" x 8' or 10' joined perpendicularly to a 3/4" x 1 1/2" piece of the same length.

Both finished and unfinished work rest along the length of the shelves, maybe 3 to 8 inches apart from each other. In the gaps between works are small piles of detritus, portions of materials that are made from scratch or have been removed from the context of one image for potential use in another. As this practice continues in the space, the piles of materials increase and where I once made everything I put onto a painting from scratch now most is recycled from other images, a nearly closed system. The proximity of one image to another makes the fall of some portion of it on to an adjacent surface a bullying system.

In my current studio the walls are not white, they are field stone, the irregular masonry of a nineteenth century townhouse foundation. The shelves are attached to this stone and the paintings lean against this wall. As I build them, they must beat the information of the wall to become images.

The situation above is pragmatic, however, in the service of image making. Yes, the space is influence, but the use of that influence, in my case, is better described as patient adjustment.

It is a dark studio, and my eyes adjust slowly to what light there is.

Oscar Murillo:

Your notion of patient pragmatism to me can only offer rich ground in which to have a fruitful practice. I am interested in the description of your shelves, as fantastical yet pragmatic devices... but also not far from the idea of these useful looking devices existing as a chosen staged platform for modes of production. I on the contrary have opted to raise the floor by 2" inches with left over chipboard to cover an area 5m x 3m - the perfect stage one could say. The raised floor becomes a press tool, knee cushion, easel, when making un-stretched drawings off the wall, and due to a 9mm thick board not been the strongest ultimately creating roughly size 8 shoe size hole. Holes become pockets of dust, debris, shredded segments of paper. In this environment exist pieces of canvas varying in size; plain, pressed, folded by the quarter, tossed from one side to the next a week or so after. Drawings off the wall are usually 170cm x 200cm, black gold paintings employ similar methodology, and so this process goes on navigating the space with this idea of carrying forward the history of my practice.

a nearly closed system = hang – exhibition design

Going back to your solo presentation at Laurel Gitlen 6/2010, I was drawn to the installation shots I found on the website... I could not help but to see the work in context of the infringing or not pillar in the middle of the gallery floor. I am not proposing an architectural discussion here, as architecture is utilitarian, but I guess the pillar has a function in the similar way that your shelves and my floor are functional devices.

Marianne Spurr:

I find myself imagining what lies beyond your studio, to the street the studio is on, the neighbourhood, the city. In some ways I think Oscar and I share certain studio processes whereby it is a site of activity, but rarely, certainly in my case, where the work itself gets resolved. This part, which can be a good 50% of the work, is realised or activated in the exhibition space itself.

From looking at your work I am struck by the sense of weight, of history, the accumulation of matter over time, and the sheer duration of the life span of their coming into being. I suppose this interests me because I often work fairly quickly and spread across space, rather than condense down. I guess I always wished I could work more in that way.

How do you know when to stop, or rather, to trust when to stop?

Joseph Montgomery:

The staged attitude.

Functional architectural devices.

I think that we are writing about similar things here. Marianne when she writes of finishing the work within a space outside of the studio and Oscar you writing about letting the building props impart patina to your canvas/work are invitations to the pre-constructed to produce both commentary and physical change on and within the work.

I'm reminded of the edges of my studio when the stone walls and ceiling meet. The ceiling is 2m from the dirt floor, finished with and taped with sheetrock and penetrated by the 2 inch iron heating pipes that travel from the boiler to the radiators above. Above the sheetrock, I believe are the wooden beams that support the floor of the bookstore above. I imagine these to be 3 to 4 inches thick and 12 inches tall. I also imagine them rotting a little bit and have evidence that they shed. Given the irregular surface of the fieldstone foundation walls, the straight edges of the manufactured sheetrock boards do not meet and join their horizontal with the vertical wall.

There are numerous gaps. And my shelves and the paintings that lean on the wall on top of the shelves are directly beneath these gaps of 1/2" to 1/16". From these gaps falls what looks like dirt or wood dust, especially when the bookstore is full during a reading or a busy weekend.

Often the top edge of an image has a pile of this debris and if the paint is wet it stays forever. If there is a piece I don't want sprinkle with the salt of the building, I move it to the one or two spots where the rock and the sheetrock meet completely thereby isolating it a little bit. But the studio is full of chances for entropy and it will be seasoned regardless of my half-hearted attempts to keep it pure.

The thing about the column in an installation be it specific to Laurel Gitlen or not: there is always a column; it is a given.

The studio is in a funny spot, in Chelsea, on 10th avenue between 21st and 22nd street. Above it is a bookstore and above the bookstore a triplex apartment occupied by a very nice Dutch family of a mom, dad, a son and a daughter. To enter the studio I open two metal doors that are flush to the concrete and bluestone of the sidewalk. At the street opposite this sidewalk door is the bus stop for the M11 uptown bus. Beyond the bus stop and across Tenth Avenue are the galleries, the big kahunas of New York dealers. East of 10th avenue is mostly residential, townhouses, older apartment buildings. West toward the river, amidst the galleries are newer condos and a sports complex called Chelsea Piers. Being near the river, the water table is quite close to the basement floor and a heavy rain will flood it 3 or 4 inches.

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I think I have written before in a press release about the stopping a work. It is the moment of satisfaction, which can't always be trusted, but returned to over the course of a few days and re-asked. Multiple pieces are in progress at the same time so in a sense they are also spread across space and occasionally one falls like a domino or the movements per piece are quick in themselves, maybe just a change or two, but the sitting and looking takes the longest. Also the waiting for the space to take effect, for the image to emerge from the wall.

Differences in working I want to write about more...Makes me think about Sherrie Levine, who I think about in the studio.

Marianne Spurr:

Yes... differences in working.

In the studio at least, I am beginning to slowly close down the gap between how I always think I should be working, and how I actually work. The two have always been at odds in many ways I think. I'm not sure why exactly, but when you write that your studio is 'full of chances for entropy.....despite halfhearted attempts to keep it pure', I think it hits the same chord; something to do with control and chance.

I am a forager of fabric and materials; drawn like a magpie to cloth and it's varying patterns, textures, weights. Collected materials get taken to my studio, where they may then undergo a series of interferences and alterations - be it hung from a hook, folded, stained, torn, or painted. Often they just incubate, simply waiting. Sometimes nothing at all.

The patterns, forms and simple material relationships that emerge can become the reference source for the work, or the work itself. Rejected material and negative space often becomes fodder for the next thing; a momentum builds.

Much of my thinking or processing takes place whilst in transit on the hour-long journey from home to studio. I've always found journeys a great untouchable space in which to become immersed in thought.

I'm intrigued that you cite Sherrie Levine as someone you think of or refer to.... she is not someone who immediately springs to mind. Could you perhaps expand a little on this? I'm just curious to know where the intersection lies, for you.

Joseph Montgomery:

Re: Sherrie, I was thinking about her in terms of a collector (not in the art market sense, more a gatherer). We have been writing about a way that the studio precipitates work, pieces, art, images and from what I understand, both you and Oscar both bring in outside materials as well as use the studio and or exhibition space as material changers -- with the intention that the climate of their temporary residence will change them, alter them, either by your hand, and or architecture rubbing up on something, spills, etc.

Sherrie already starts with the readymade, a foil for the kind of working that we do. To gather an image or sculpture that is already made and then the "studio" if there even is one (there is not in the personal sense) uses specific mechanical processes to change authorship (re-photographing, casting, averaging squares of color, etc.). I often like to recast my idea of painting in these terms, as though it already exists and my additions on top of it are false parts of it, not the original but a material or object that approximates paint. I am interested in our own

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assumptions of sincerity in the studio, especially when the I think about how often I sabotage myself, lay traps, when I am ashamed of earnestness.

As for journeys, I have a very conventional sense that the unconscious does a lot of work for me, especially while I am sleeping. I don't often remember my dreams; in order to console myself, I am convinced that my gathering of parts into images in the studio recollects some of what was happening during the eight hours a night.

Oscar Murillo:

I too have countless thoughts... they aren't dreams - but are however a coping mechanism set in place to digest a practice driven by a performative making process... approached by ideas of manual labour - making and being active in a space at a given time. It is not so much like a job, but closely interpreted as having a big fuck off wall and chipping away day by day, something akin to a mining process. 'Black gold paintings' or 'drawings off on the wall' emerge.

More and more I am beginning to get away from this idea of the gallery or exhibition space as material changer or space for the studio residue. I have felt compelled to show more than just the paintings, sometimes I feel the work really resides within this false floor I constructed... very much like your enigmatic but not very pragmatic shelves.