

Visual Discrepancies

White Things – Daniel Levine

Posted on February 9, 2014 by BRENT HALLARD



Visual: You know I've always loved the idea of making a white painting, a monochrome, a square, white, monochrome painting. And a lot of my colleagues have had that love too. And I think we've all tried our hand at it. I remember when we got close, when we thought it was time, we could talk about the philosophical aspects for hours, about the purity, taking the self out of the work, working within the limits, the unlimited, the vastness, the ever present 'present' presenting itself differently, and every time...

But seldom in the studio would we have that same conversation. There was either no white monochrome painting there to discuss, or if there was, it wasn't something you wanted to talk about. In idea each of us had understood what it means to make a white painting, but in the making, the real – the content, drama, and the dream – it could not be fulfilled.

You would think that deciding to make a white monochrome painting would be enough, and the rest surely would follow, but, no, that's not how it goes.

Daniel, give me a little insight into this making, especially having tried to put my hand to it and failed. The tiffs you sent are fucking beautiful, it really annoys me that we cannot see them firsthand, but you can, and I know about failure, so you'll be able to point out clearly, in your terms, *the success*...



Daniel: A lot of painters have succumbed to the desire to make a square white monochrome. It's a right of passage, like when a kid gets their hands on their first guitar, they spend months learning "Smoke on the Water." Sure, I can see the appeal, the simplicity, the perfection: three chords, three little words, a three minute song, a white painting: all the tropes. But, as you well know, painting a successful monochrome is extremely difficult and frustrating.

Because the practicality – or more to the point, the impracticality – of it knocks you. And with the ineffable quality of monochrome, the lack of any end game, you're in an abyss. I've been asked how I make decisions once I start a monochrome; but, really, what you have to understand is that the decision to make a monochrome may not be the wisest one. It's like taking a walk in the desert: seems like a good idea at the time, but as the hours pass and there are no landmarks to guide you, you're on your own.

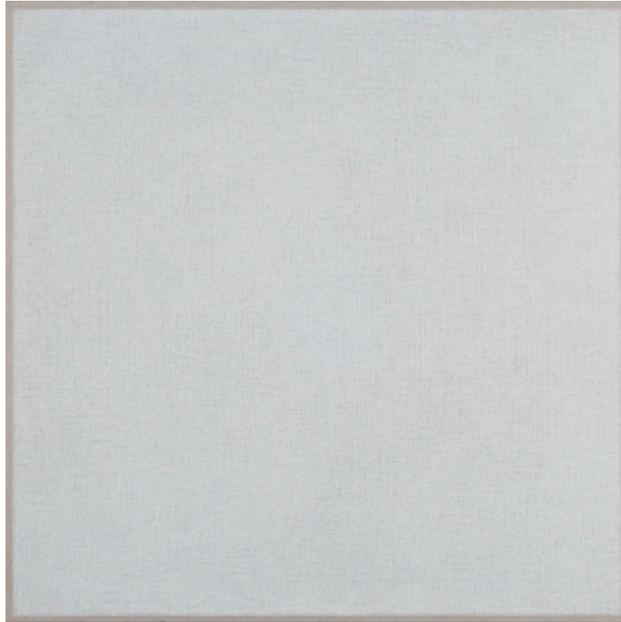
When monochromes are successful, they are sincere, well painted, intelligent, and transcendent. As much as the work incorporates my own experiences and the world around me—I paint to understand the world and my place in it – the viewer is free to project onto them. As much as I'm making what appears to be a monochrome, I'm not making a Monochrome; I'm making a painting, with all its tics and quirks and successes and failures. A monochrome that fails is one that is presumptuous, where the paint is put on without any depth, or surprise, or meaning besides fulfilling the role of "monochrome." It looks simple, but it's extraordinarily complex. In a way, monochrome is the ultimate parody of and the ultimate tribute to painting.

Visual: It's been said again and again, that the givens are what actually give the freedom.

Daniel: Most monochromes abide by a set of common expectations, and I enjoy playing off of those. Since most are square, my work is off-square, and since most are painted to the edge, mine have borders; and, as is often the case, a monochrome aspires to be large, so mine are small. But don't get me wrong: everyone should make those paintings.

Visual: Okay, so I've openly declared my inability in the white department, but also stated that there needs to be this ideal painting, I want it to exist: and want to understand, even if I can't make it myself.

Daniel: With each monochrome painting that one makes, there's the realization that it's not, and never will be, ideal, so you keep working.



You learn to work within your limitations. But the ideal isn't as important as certain successes. I was fortunate enough to have been able to look at a John McLaughlin painting every day for ten years, and I never got bored of it. I could never figure out why it worked so well, why it kept *ongiving*. So it is a matter of aspiring to that quality in my own work, and hoping, one-day, to come close to what I had taken away with me from this experience.

I imagine the first time I was in front of a monochrome, I saw myself in the presence of an exotic animal, or a Shaker – something part of my world, but not of it; I expected something transcendent and even magical. But a monochrome painting for a painter is part of the vernacular: there is a surface, scale, there is process, use of materials, there are marks, and there is light; and there are elements of success, and of failure (yes, failure can be used to a painting's advantage), all of which define the painting.

Visual: I'm not going to ask you to explain what led you to monochrome as you have that up on your website, but just to quote here from your statement:

The limitations are what led me to monochrome in the first place.

[I]n the 1980s, I expanded the self-referential and systematic process that I used for drawing to make paintings about paintings. Monochrome seemed to be the obvious choice – a severe program, which on a bad day can seem myopic, self-righteous and beyond reproach, but on a good day reminds me of Tuesday Weld at her best: cold, controlled, an ethereal and sexy beauty on the surface, but with an obsessive, tragic and gap-toothed core, slightly uncomfortable with and misunderstood by the world, somewhat tangential to popular culture, and absolutely not boring.

Working within specific and selected limitations – color, scale, format – and freely co-opting, but not adhering to, the tenets of Radical, Post-Radical and Formal painting, allowed me to comment on and explore longstanding issues that are inherent to (reductive) painting: beauty, elitism, content, narrative, representation, form, scale, light, space – all the fundamental properties of painting, all within a ruthless and uncompromising genre. 1

Daniel: Pursuing a program in monochrome for three decades did not start as a love of monochrome painting; it was more a way to learn how to paint (and what better way to start painting “seriously”?). What it became, however, once you fall deeper and deeper into the ascetic well, was a life-long endeavor, a hope for some small transcendence, an attempt to make paintings that *work*.

Part of the process of making monochromes is, of course, choosing the materials – the numerous whites, the differing sizes and thicknesses of the stretchers, and the tonal variations of the supports and grounds. Each option reflects a starting point. Then, there's the paint application: if a brush is used, what thickness, what type of bristles? Or, is the

paint applied in another manner? My studio has a full bank of windows, facing a low, nondescript industrial neighborhood in Brooklyn – no views to distract; just light.

I've been using an easel for a decade now – as opposed to painting flat on a wall – mainly because it allows me to interact with the painting, to move around it, to be in it, to have a more physical relationship with the thing itself.

Visual: Because it is also about painting as a *thing*. I can understand that. It certainly does put a lot of pressure on this *thingyness*. Or takes the pressure off of the surface and mark. But there are more to the marks and the thing, and the thing that conjoins the thing to the architecture, and it seems to me that this has to do with experience. And then, sure, in a dark room the painting tends to lose its glow, so we all know that for painting light and its absorptive and reflective qualities matter. And I think this is close to the point where I had failed at my attempts to create a monochrome. I understood all these things well that they go together to make up the experience: the town, the streetscape, the bicycle, and the pedal.



And I could visualize all this perfectly. The reality, instead, was a wreck – a bloodied knee, and a howl.

Daniel: Yeah, I've learned to accept my limitations and bear the burden with my own psychic injuries every time I'm at the studio!

Visual: In your show at Churner and Churner paintings go together. They create a dialogue, space and spaces.

Daniel: There were nineteen paintings in my show at the gallery. They ranged in size from less than 9 inches to 66 inches, and we hung them so that as you moved from painting to painting, the variations played off and informed each other. The hanging was an intuitive endeavor as opposed to something systematic. Together, the paintings form a proposition: *The Way Around*. For the viewer, a way around the work – a map to enter; a circumnavigation and a route around those challenges inherent in monochrome painting.

*18th Century Solutions to 21st Century Problems. Daniel Levine
Images: Courtesy of Churner and Churner*