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work

Babak Radboy



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work

Jeremy Liebman



AA

Jeremy Liebman and Landon Metz (AA,BB)

When you initially compare the work of Jeremy Liebman and Landon Metz, it's the differences that stand out. One is a photographer who documents sublime moments of happenstance, while the other is an abstract painter who fills his canvases with unconstrained emotion. But look closer at the pair's output and their separate processes and you'll notice similarities beginning to arise.

We asked the New York-based friends to discuss how they both go about making an image – the motivations, prompts and processes they use. The conversation they sent back was a fairly intense, two-and-a-half hour discussion about medium, content and the importance of art not necessarily being about other art, from which an edited text appears below.

LM As an abstract painter, I find that much of the subject matter of my work has a direct relationship to the process of painting. Does the medium of photography play a role as the subject of your work?

LM Definitely. There is a very fundamental illusion at work in photography where the viewer engages the ostensible subject of the picture and begins a process of imagination and separation. This would apply to both staged and documentary methods of photography. I'm interested in finding ways to short-circuit that process, and to resist that tidy pictorial window that photography opens up. I try to do that using the traditional methods of street or roving photography. I don't do it in all of my pictures, but I feel it's important to disrupt that ease of consuming an image.

I think it's basically a way of dealing with time in photography. Painting almost always bears traces of its production, and acts as a record of itself. In photography, we're restricted to a period of usually a fraction of a second. Disrupting the act of seeing creates a secondary effect that extends that by a little bit.

On the surface, I think our work would seem very different – photography and abstract painting – but I think we might be dealing with similar questions of referral and representation. I wonder

how abstract your work really is, because it seems that you are concerned with the “actual-ness”, the “is-ness”, of the paint and the experience.

LM It's been my experience that the revealing of production in the image of a painting is not an inherent quality of painting itself, but an active decision made by the artist. Take the shaped canvas work of Frank Stella for instance – the picture that is ultimately created is not one of the act of painting. It's my understanding that his work was actually interested in masking the hand of the artist and revealing as little as possible of the happenings behind the highly graphic imagery.

I hope that the vernacular of my work can be understood as that of a natural process and so the decision to, say, show my strokes, is made before my paint covered hands ever dance across the surface of a canvas. While the forms in my work are abstract, the subject matter is a narrative of the act of painting, I make paintings of painting. My process is an additive response to an initial situation. A splash of paint will lead a dialogue of relationship concerning scale, form and colour, choreographed across a field of action that embraces, without judgement, gesture and material.

Do you feel that process has an influence in the picture content of your photographs? What is the narrative of your imagery?



^{LM} I'm drawn to content that in some way lends itself to thinking about vision – things like mirrors, lenses, holograms, and reflections. That's a way for me to play with bigger questions about existence and perception: What is the nature of any object or phenomenon? In what ways do they exist in non-material forms? A photograph always dematerialises its subject and turns it into something that exists in an abstract plane. There's something I like about performing that action on something that doesn't have a material form, or that is itself a distorting object.

I don't try to make photographs that contain moods or tell stories. I just don't think narratively in that way. I'm much more excited by the possibilities of creating images that have a primary activity to them, rather than pointing to something else. In the end, though, it's important to me that the work feels alive, that it's not just taking a position.

In a sense there's an attempt to make photography respond to its own history. In what ways does the history of painting figure into what you do? Are there artists whose work has led you in this direction?

^{LM} Rauschenberg once said, "You don't work with one foot in the art book." I couldn't agree with his sentiment more. I believe that as an artist I am part of a continuing dialogue of creativity that has streamed through human consciousness for the entirety of our evolution, and I consider this an honour and a gift. But, I also feel compelled to exist outside the collective consciousness as often as possible and create work that is poetic and sincere in its own unique way and true to my personal philosophy. I fill my life with art and situations I consider to be beautiful and significant

and they will indefinitely inform my aesthetic language. That being said, whichever pieces end up permeating into my work happen organically, and it's never an intentional replication or nodding to a specific artist or movement. I respect a great deal of artists, but they do their work perfectly well without my help.

I have a massive amount of reverence for my art practice and consider it to be a main driving force in all aspects of my life. When it becomes time to paint in my studio, I want to paint. At that moment any mental chatter is completely useless and unwarranted (even more so than usual). In which ways do you believe your photography is responding to the history of the medium? Do you feel loyalty to this medium or are you interested in testing other waters?

^{LM} I agree that art that's only about other art can be alienating and circular. It basically dismisses any audience that isn't already familiar with the reference point. Photography, though, is such a fundamental part of our daily lives and possesses so much non-art-related history that to address those functions in an art context doesn't seem esoteric to me. This small amount of theory and philosophy doesn't have to be central to the interpretation and reading of the image. It just helps me think about what I'm doing and challenges me to make more interesting work. Straight photography doesn't really have a clear intention and artistry – it's very easy for a photograph to be coy in a way that something constructed from scratch isn't, so I think it's important for me to have some sort of theoretical component to what I do, while being mindful about not letting it dominate the work. That's led me to consider what I can do outside of photography.

I've been doing drawings lately that are based on texts that I wrote when I was a teenager. These writings were kind of philosophical, and had a functional component – they were written for debate competitions. I've optically enlarged and traced them. There's some connection to photography in that kind of enlargement and in the texts' prior existence in the world. Ideas develop in a very fluid and slippery way that's hugely affected by language. That development set against a background of teen angst is interesting to play around with. It allows me to think about my own relation to time and existence, while simultaneously stepping outside of myself. That type of reflection is my main goal in making art. It's a very direct question, but perhaps a good one to close on: Why do you make art?

^{LM} I make art because I love to make art; it's what makes me feel alive. There is unquestionably nothing else for me to do.

Jeremy Liebman

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Landon Metz

BB. A Portrait of a Man (XV), 2011 (Previous page) A Portrait of a Man (II), 2011