

I'm fine, thanks



Interview with Martine Poppe

Hazy Californian landscapes fade in and out of

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recognition, their faint impressions existing in a transitional space between the alien and the familiar. Crushed cars echo the crumpled photographs that intrude as sculptural objects on the gallery floor, the disposable image that nevertheless demands our attention with its presence.

While visiting Martine Poppe's most recent solo show '*Crinkled Escape Routes and Other Somewhat Flat Things*' at Kristin Hjellegjerde in London, I couldn't help but be reminded of Jean Baudrillard's philosophical meditations on the desert landscapes of America. To say that the desert is "*a natural extension of the inner silence of the body*" seems itself to be a natural extension to the quiet concerns of the work on show. The vague, pastel depictions of highways, signposts and desert landscapes from images taken along the iconic Route 66 introduce technical ideas of presence and absence into the already symbolic locale of the desert as a space of both critical and individual emancipation. In denying the specificity of the original images, dissolving colours and blurring details, Poppe's painted works take on new meanings and associations through the reproduction of their source material and address the final piece as a construction of both past and present, memory and physical existence, reality and an emblematic ideal.

What drew you to the American desert landscape, and how did your most recent body of work begin?

Last summer a group of collectors, led by Stanley Hollander, invited me to take part in Hooper Projects, their artist residency in downtown Los Angeles. The light there is fantastic! Whenever I wasn't painting, I was

running around photographing just about everything I saw. I couldn't get enough of the landscape, which was both extremely familiar and at the same time completely alien. The lack of detail and filmic look of the city made it possible to concentrate on photography in its own right, which made me want to explore that part of America further.

When I returned to London, I no longer had a flat so I found myself trying to balance house hunting, Frieze week and all the other things I'd neglected during the residency whilst also planning my next solo show at Kristin Hjellegjerde. London is a hectic city, both to live in and visually, making it too cramped for me to be interested in it as source material. As a result, I wanted to head off hunting for the light I found in LA, capturing images I would remain excited by after returning to the studio. Then I was offered a show for the opening of Sotheby's new S|2 space in San Francisco, which was the excuse I needed to drop everything and head back.

I started off in Albuquerque and travelled more or less along Route 66 to San Francisco, gathering source materials along the way. The landscape I encountered on the journey is fantastic, but because of that the imagery that came of it just didn't look real after returning to London. Coupled with the fact that once the landscape is painted it doesn't have the natural focal points that other motifs do, the unreal quality of those images became the formal starting point for *Crinkled Escape Routes And Other Somewhat Flat Things*. It was an exciting challenge that engaged my interest in using the repetition and emptiness in it to make space for the painting itself.

You reference the notion of escape in the title of the exhibition, but do you also feel that the iconography of the car and the highway holds an affinity with the idea of an in-between space, of something in transit? Is there a formal and theoretical rigidity in photography that might be transcended, or escaped, through painting, or do you find that kind of binary dichotomy too reductive?

Whilst I worked towards this show I experimented a lot with my handling of the photographs, making a bunch of hectic representation-on-representation type of paintings with a pile of Photoshop amendments in the mix. At that point, the show definitely had a sense of being in transit and I felt torn between the different directions I could take with my practice. However, after pushing the development of those representational works to its extreme, the painting of the cars, *Crinkled Escape Routes*, was the only one resolved enough to be considered for the show. In the end my reason for including it was precisely that ability to contextualise the rest of the works by referencing both the road trip and the transition in my practice. Simultaneously, it carries with it something of my situation in London at that time and my private reasons for travelling to the Mojave desert, which has to do with lack of space; both the source photograph and the cars depicted in it have been crushed. Usually I prefer the works to be less rigid in their narrative when I'm making a selection for an exhibition, but showing the most unresolved piece at the entrance is also the most open way I have of greeting the viewer. I try to make each group of works lead to a new step in my practice, and the juxtaposition between paintings representing images of the road and the blurs was one way of doing that.

As for the relationship between the photographs and the paintings, the way I employ photography was initially conceived because I found it was an effective way of liberating my paintings from my previous methods of representation without losing my involvement with light and detail. Representation isn't a driving force in my process, even though I enjoy being able to use recognisable imagery and juxtaposing it with the other materials of the paintings. When I'm in the studio my only focus is the act of painting, which is enabled by the colour relationships in photographs. As a result, I always have the sense that the end results exist somewhere in between, which formally comes through in the way the surfaces are forever withdrawing and emerging. They have an ambiguity that makes them evade capture, which is aided by the fact that they encompass both painterly and photographic languages. I used to think along the lines of finding a way to level the hierarchical difference between the two, but photography is such a natural method of communication and so widely employed that thinking of it as being in competition with or opposite to painting feels forced. Working with a camera is more natural to me than for instance sketching, which in itself feels like a stronger way of talking about present situation of photography and its relationship to painting than considering them as opposites.

There seems to be a consistent interest towards reproduction in the majority of your work, particularly in the relationship between original and copy. Is this extended in the association of theatricality and Hollywood in you most recent work?

In a way there is certainly a dramatic element in the works, especially because they are so quiet. However, if they do carry a relationship to the theatricality, it is mostly through their refusal to act. Employing photography relieved me of any need to search for a 'style' or method of self-expression, even though that is exactly what it became. That tension between my process and the end result is an important part of what drives my practice, an example of which is the relationship between the original and the reproducible, or more specifically the relationship between painting and image. I concern myself with finding ways of working with images without reducing the works to mere imagery, which is where the element of copying came into play. It started off as a question of what is permissible when making something that not only should be an original, but which is also traditionally read by looking through the physical object, searching for meaning in the image content only. Using photography removes the need to 'invent' an image and negates the idea that the images I work from are the entire narrative of the painting, as they already existed before the process began. Curiously, that method of making paintings has made them both analogous to their source photographs and impossible to reproduce. The camera always ends up capturing either just a pale image or pure marks, but not the painting itself.

In paintings such as *'Crinkled escape routes'* and *'Knowing it was a safety zone we drove on'*, a tension between stillness and apprehension begins to emerge, as if the viewer is interrupted by a sudden awareness that it might be 'too quiet'. Are the images or titles intended to bear any kind of

sinister or uncomfortable connotation?

Whilst working towards *Crinkled Escape Routes and Other Somewhat Flat Things* in the studio, I found myself interested in the type of disposable imagery that is used as default screen savers and back drops for computers. My Mac currently opens a blurred image of Half Dome in Yosemite as a backdrop for my signing in box. Although that engagement began unconsciously, it seemed poignant to acknowledge that although I travelled to discover and capture a landscape, images of it have been with me all along in the shape of standard, mass-produced photos. As a reference it brought light to the problem I had of bringing landscape photography to my London studio, where they translated differently - even to me - which in a more general way speaks of the issue of working with images. Painting in itself, the texture, the record of movement and millions of subconscious decisions that are made during the process is what makes it an experience from my point of view. As such, the works in the show greet the viewer with calm or quiet that require them to spend time just looking for a while in order for the eyes to be able to read their colours and discover their material engagement with light and subject. Although you mention paintings like *Crinkled Escape Routes and Knowing it was a safety zone we drove on*, I suspect it is especially the blurs that make that experience more apparent than in previous shows. They require a couple of minutes before the brain eventually reverts them back into some kind of landscape.

Initially my motivation towards making 'quiet' works developed from my process and was kept because it felt right in relation to loud and chaotic everything else

was at the time. However, as an influence it has grown in partially as a reaction to the pressure on image based work to be able to shout for the viewers' attention and be easily resolved in the split second it takes before one moves or scrolls to the next image. In return, working on this show has taught me a lot about how the mind deals with that type of almost pixelated abstracted imagery and the enormous degree of subjectivity that goes into engaging with that sort of work. By extension, a point of interest for me is that depending on the viewer, some find the quiet uncomfortable, whereas others revel in it. To be with that silence is a challenge that I set, but the viewers' reaction to it has been an exciting discovery.

Is the duration of production important to your work? The practice of obscuring and transforming seems to lend itself to the slowed down precision of your technique.

I have a very fast and meditative painting process which is key to making objects that are able to record the energy that goes into making them, creating a space that the viewer can spend time in. It became important when I began looking at the photo through the canvas, allowing each mark to conceal the source information. As a consequence there is a certain element of precision required when I work with the colour relationships in each piece, but they have to be made quickly since the paint dries a great deal lighter, creating a ridge that disrupts the surface. Besides, anything applied on top of the original layer does not directly reference the photograph underneath.

That time restriction is one the more important parts of my process as it gives my surfaces a great deal of

energy. In fact, it was time constraints that initially led me to the mark that the works rely on, by making me let go and allow my hands to work in the way that comes naturally.

How did you come to use the materials you use now, such as taffeta or polyester fabric?

My original attraction to translucent materials was the way they diffuse and hold light. I spent almost a year working with polyester restoration fabric before I arrived at my current practice, which divides the painting between itself and the image in a useful way. However, those types of fabrics have always been a part of my life; polyester restoration fabric is developed from sailcloth, which the first canvas I ever worked with. My father used to own a sail-making factory.

How is your work progressing now? Do you set out certain projects and continue them to completion, or is it more of an exploratory and experimentative process?

It's a bit of both. Because I work from photography, my process begins with finding a new group of images and those quickly become a fixed element that the intended paintings will derive from. However, since I cannot correct 'mistakes' and because my mark is so dependent on my energy and degree of focus, each piece develops more or less in its own direction.

Sometimes I get lucky and something unexpected happens as a result. In the case of the blurred paintings at Kristin Hjellegjerde, their development was to a large extent through watching the way my materials reacted

to the process. I have been working a lot with landscape photography over the past year and found that in images where there are no man made objects, obvious focal points or formal interruptions in the image, a strange vacuum develops in the completed work. That is what led me to go the other way with the hectic paintings that preceded my current show, and finally to the decision that rather than to 'fill' and represent a landscape, I wanted to create works that are landscapes. In this case meant that I exchanged representation for mark making. Since then, I've been wondering how they would react to brighter colours and more defined shapes in the source photo and how they would work in a more hectic context than a solo show. Those thoughts resulted in six paintings that Kristin has just shown at Volta Basel. Discovering that blurring goes with my process, I think that will be a key element in developing my practice in the immediate future, but beyond that I'll just have to see where it takes me.

See more of Martine Poppe's work at

www.martinepoppe.com

View more info about her most recent solo show *here*.

Update: 27 June, 2016 Posted By Gracecamillelee

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