

The Presence Tense

Thoughts Prompted By Fifteen Years of James Hyde

“Is a picture ever material?”, James Hyde asks (us? himself?) in a nineteen-part questionnaire dating from 1998 that can be viewed on the artist’s website.

Many questions are of course really meant (i.e. posed) to remain unanswered forever, and their ceaseless rephrasing and reformulating is essentially what drives the very idea of “artistic research”: how shall I put this so as to avoid a definitive response that will forever put me out of business?

Hyde’s practice is motivated (obviously) by many queries, and although the above question may not necessarily be the final or even most important one, it is certainly one that has gained in pertinence and urgency over the years – years, that is, that have seen the dizzying acceleration of the dematerialization of pretty much everything in the sphere of human activity (whether cultural, economic, political or plainly social). Asking of anything that has historically been viewed as immaterial whether it is really material after all, therefore, is fundamentally a *critical* question, reminding us of the basic fact of the world’s irreducible materiality and physicality. All that is solid may well continue to melt into air, but thankfully art is here to warn us that even the image is ultimately grounded in the irreducible truth of matter, and Hyde’s long-standing interest in the exploration of the very thingness of painting is deeply rooted in this intuitive, literalized materialism: depictions, images, pictures are things too – just like we are, in fact. [I’ll resist the temptation – for now – of diving into the history of the theological disputes that pitted iconoclasts against iconophiliacs: they are based on the assumption that the icon *is* an incarnation of the divine – literally embodied, physical.]

Things (as opposed to representations) live in the present tense; our encounter with them could even be said to *produce* the present tense – or at least an experience of it: the ‘presence’ tense. Rendering something ‘thingly’, therefore, means restoring it to a kind of presence that help us regain an inexhaustible present. This is precisely what happens in Hyde’s photo-based work: they break the natural logic of photography’s transparency, the basis of its truth claim, by burying the photographic image (as the sole source of this claim) underneath meticulously applied layers of paint. The very materiality of paint activates the image’s originary thingness, delivering it from the past tense in which all photography, by its very definition (as a recording device of that which has happened), is locked. What may initially strike the viewer as a variation upon the endgame of abstraction (and/or modernism, in so far as these terms are exchangeable) thereby becomes an altogether more hopeful gesture – one that simultaneously also restores abstract painting to a certain degree of relevance outside the institution of art. [Exploding the twodimensional picture plane to become a palpable physical presence – sculpture – in space is another way of securing such a measure of relevance: it is related to the notion of *application*, ‘applying’ abstraction.]

To conclude: there lurk many more questions here, besides that of the materiality of the picture. One of the bigger ones, which I enjoy asking at every step (and obviously not just to Hyde’s work), is the following: “*where* is (the) art?” Not ‘what’, not ‘when’, but ‘where’ (questions of whereness have long been underrated, and obviously not just in art): at which point in space (rather than time) does the artwork materialize and appear exactly? In the studio? The sketchbook? The artist’s mind, or in the space administered by his hands instead? In its encounter with the public? In the gallery or the museum? Whatever the definitive answer may be – and I don’t suggest we dream of coming up with one – in James Hyde’s work, this question again reaches back to the picture’s assumption of true form: not just *when*, but *where* the photograph is forced out of the past tense, for instance, or *where* the painting leaves the wall.

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