Painting and nature

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My work studies painting in relation to and as an aspect of nature. For my purposes, nature refers to all the operations of the universe apart from the imposition of humans. My definition, as an example, extends not only to plant and animal life, or the mountains and oceans, but also to the functioning of celestial bodies and the notion of time. The foremost interest of my work is how painting fits in among pre-existing forces such as these, especially those which operate cyclically, or for which there is no definite beginning or end.

Cyclicality is essential to my conception of painting. Painting is non-linear. It is without definite progress both as a tradition and an act. Isabelle Graw summarizes the stance of some minimalist artists regarding progression in painting: “For artists like Stella and Judd, the idea of composition was associated with the European tradition of “relational painting,” which they felt should be completely abandoned. For them, relational painting referred to an obsolete idea of painting” (Graw, 94) This view, held by Stella and Judd, suggests that painting has a natural, singular progression, and that painters are working to reach some platonic ideal of painting. Similar to how evolution is confused as a process of objective refinement and improvement in natural beings, rather than the reality of it being entirely non-linear and contextual. Paintings result more from their immediate environment, existing as products of a moment, the only moment in which they could have been made, rather than as stepping stones on the way to solving the medium. The process is still iterative, of course. Each painting is made in relation to all the other paintings that exist at the time of its creation. On an individual level too, a painter
makes a new piece with the knowledge of everything else they have done previously. The mistake is just in thinking that iteration is synonymous with progress. No new approach to painting can make irrelevant any others.

Paint is a deeply sensitive material to handle, in that it records so thoroughly the actions of the artist. The variables in how it can be applied are so numerous, and all so impactful on the final surface, that the conscious and subconscious intentions of the painter, the confidence and interest they approach the painting with, the rapidity or slowness with which the piece comes to be, among many other factors, have tangible effects on a painting, no matter how slight it may seem. Paintings are not merely dependent on context, they are their context. Thus, we cannot surely outmode any sort of painting, or any individual painting, because it and it’s apparent successor result from entirely different worlds. It is not as though the earlier painting could have been the later one, or vice versa. Each required their own exact circumstances to become what they are the. Concluding that “relational painting” can be made obsolete simply by the conception of a new sort of painting is folly. Such a view would require that we divorce all painting from context to a degree that renders them entirely meaningless on any level besides literal description,

My concern could be summed up as wanting to make paintings which model time. Before any image evoked by the arrangements of pigment, I want my paintings to appear as records of their own history. The purpose of source imagery in my paintings is under constant reassessment; I often imbed figures or suggestions of a certain space into my paintings to solve some formal issue. At other times, a subject is chosen because I see it as having some significant relationship to painting’s history or the act itself. The animals emerged as a common subject for
several of my recent works on account of how I saw painting as a natural activity, but I slowly phased this out. I found myself hoping to dismantle the recognizable forms, and they proved to be more of a hinderance the longer I took working on any particular piece. It occured to me that to use these subjects as a metaphor was unnecessary because, on my view, painting was not merely a metaphor for natural process, it was itself a natural process (or something very close). It didn’t need any help by my curation in appearing to be what it already was. My paintings need not reference nature so blithely, the material makes this point for me.

I do not feel that my paintings discuss painting in terms of a natural cycle. Rather, they exemplify the natural cycle of painting, as it plays out on a canvas over some period of time. The real variance and interest, then, arrives from the amount of time involved. Some of my paintings have been steadily worked for the better part of a year, some, of the same size, abandoned in less than an hour. Neither is more or less ‘done’ than the other, they just express different amounts of time.

We experience some natural processes many times over, they are comprehensible to us. We accept that seasons change, that new things die and are born. Other aspects of nature we only glimpse. The theoretical expansion and contraction of the universe, for example. My hope is to express both the full potential and limits of our observations. Some ideas we can easily grapple with, we have full scope of them, and our understanding of them is able to be iterated upon. In other cases, we must accept our ultimate smallness, the narrowness of our view into the workings of everything. The scope and scale of our existence makes some processes unnoticeable, some definite and significant, and others almost entirely impenetrable, to the point they can only be guessed at.
Painting is able to express the workings of nature tangibly. The means of painting, the act, and the products are distinct in their primacy among other creative acts for how neatly painting fits the tenets of natural process. Oil painting is of nature. The tools are derived from nature. Paint is dirt mixed with linseed oil, brushes are made from animal hair. It follows that the act of painting is itself a sort of natural processes. The practice of painting acts according to rules observed throughout nature and I see, among many, a few key intersections that describe and support this interpretation of painting. These intersections between painting and nature are:

1. Inconclusiveness
2. Plasticity
3. Oneness
4. Ongoingness

The sense of inconclusiveness exists materially and procedurally in the simultaneous necessity and futility of representation in painting; First, towards the necessity, it must be established that the perception of paint as becoming something else is an inescapable fact of its being purposefully arranged. Donald Judd explains this phenomenon in an interview with Bruce Glaser:

when you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole - the rectangle of the canvas - and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite whole and maybe no parts, or very few. (“Questions to Stella and Judd”)

Second, as argument for the futility, here is a quote attributed to Alberto Giacometti by James Lord:
It's impossible to paint a portrait, he said. Ingres could do it. He could finish a portrait. It was a substitute for a photograph and had to be done by hand because there was no other way of doing it then. But now that has no meaning. The photograph exists and that's all there is to it. (Lord, 9)

On account of the gradual unbinding of oil paint from realist depiction, the finish of a piece has become elusive. The goal can no longer be merely illusionistic, as paintings have been outmoded as the most convincingly “real” looking images. Now, the painter must reach beyond the visual, but still by the means of the visual. This is the impossibility of painting. The dilemma is described in Balzac’s “The Unknown Masterpiece,” where the aging, master painter Frenhofer seeks to make a painting which transcends its material reality, and is left with an indiscernible mush on his canvas. The painter must create an imagistic illusion, but can never adequately complete such a task. The painting must come to rest at some point and that point cannot be entirely satisfying, hence, inconclusiveness.

The inconclusiveness in nature can be variously observed. A parallel could, for instance be drawn to natural deaths. All living things cease to live at some point, simply because they must. Further, those living things would not go on doing anything different than they had been doing given the opportunity to keep living. The “final” state in which we observe a painting or a dead animal or a decaying plant, is no more than a random frame in its lifespan, indistinct apart from it being the last.

The plasticity of paint, especially oils, is readily apparent. They respond directly and entirely to their handling. The amount of paint applied at once, the composition of the paint being applied, the pressure and duration of that application, among innumerable additional
factors have immediate and unmistakable effect on the surface. The fidelity of this reaction is unparalleled in other mediums. James Elkins explains this sensation viscerally:

Paint records the most delicate gesture and the most tense. It tells whether the painter sat or stood or crouched in front of the canvas. Paint is a cast made of the painter’s movements, a portrait of the painter’s body and thoughts. The muddy moods of oil paints are the painter’s muddy humors, and its brilliant transformations are the painter’s unexpected discoveries. Painting is an unspoken and largely unrecognized dialogue, where paint speaks silently in masses and colors and the artist responds in moods. All those meanings are intact in the paintings that hang in museums: they preserve the memory of the tired bodies that made them, the quick jabs, the exhausted truces, the careful nourishing gestures. Painters can sense those motions in the paint even before they notice what the paintings are about. Paint is water and stone, and it is also liquid thought. (Elkins, 5)

Further, the definition of painting is absorptive. Isabelle Graw describes painting as a “success medium” partly on account of this trait. Graw’s claim is that “Painting can be understood not only as a set of artistic practices but also as a historically situated set of rules that can resurface and remain effective under new historical conditions.” (Graw, 17) Painting has lasted for as long as it has because it is able to absorb other practices and incessantly recategorize itself. When new genres and mediums emerge, purporting to replace painting, they instead become a part of painting; painting is so encompassing in purpose and potential scope, that anything which seeks to outmode it will fall under its purview.
Nature, too, is plastic. Natural life is constantly being reshaped in response to a shifting environment. The current state of natural life of earth is the result of billions of years of iteration, informed by a sensitivity to this shifting. I feel one of the greatest divisions between natural and unnatural objects is this adaptation; the natural invariably responds to the greater context, molding itself to fit new requirements, while the unnatural is static and can be made entirely obsolete. Painting fits in with the natural, both in its use of material so influenceable and in its loose, constant redefinition which adapts it to any cultural context.

The oneness in painting arises conceptually in the way Judd explains, where each mark exists in context with all the others, and together they give the sense of a whole. It also happens practically. For one, as a result on the visible surface being composed solely of paint (as opposed to drawing, where the ground remains in dialogue with the marks made on top of it), and for another in the way the paint layers and bleeds into other paint, sometimes becoming so complex that one cannot discern the order in which it was applied.

Similarly, the natural world is singular. There are distinct parts, though they all link to each other, feeding and supporting the rest. Water from the oceans is carried inland to support plant and animal life, then that water is returned to the ocean. Plants and animals are recycled back into the environment which supports them. Nothing exists independently, apart from the rest of nature. Each piece is understood by its relation to the rest, it is inseparable from its context.

This leads me to the issue of ongoingness. In the examples of oneness of nature, already one might notice that these are cycles. Endless ones. This is not necessarily on purpose, it is simply that nearly all of nature is cyclical; it would be harder to find an example which is not
explicitly so. Painting is no exception. Paint dries, and the surface becomes open again, ready to accept a new layer. When the painter puts down new marks, the cycle begins again. In painting, there is no definite end. Paintings are endlessly paintable. Titian worked his late paintings for upwards of a decade. Milton Resnick piled onto his massive canvases hundreds of pounds of pigment. No painting exists that could not absorb another layer. The only way the process ceases is by some imposed notion of finish. Only an by an adequately parochial perspective can we truly believe a painting is over. The closer we look, the more unsettled everything is. Just as the end of a season brings us closer to its beginning. Just as death leaves room for new life. The final coat on a painting is nothing but the inhibition of the painter.
Works Cited


