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SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

by Ben Davis

Caragh Thuring, "Assembly," Sept. 9-Nov. 1, 2009, at Simon Preston Gallery, 301 Broome Street, New York, N.Y. 10002

I wandered into "Assembly," Caragh Thuring's show of new paintings at Simon Preston's space on the Lower East Side last Wednesday with two other art critics. Both were immediately blown away by the work. "This is some of the best painting I've seen in a long time," said one.

Thuring's large, messy abstractions on unprimed linen don't have the same visceral impact on me that they did on my colleagues. They are, nevertheless, arresting, and possess a certain mystery.

Each of Thuring's paintings consists of a collection of seemingly haphazard, abstract squiggles or splashes of pattern, spidery drips and checker patches, distributed across the surface unevenly, with the occasional, free-floating recognizable object -- a bunch of cherries, a cane, a leafy something or other -- as if just to be contrarian. They deliberately court a half-finished esthetic.

Despite this ragged appearance, Thuring's works have a clear, if hard to pin down, sense of order. And indeed, if you scrounge up a press release for Thuring's recent show at London's Thomas Dane Gallery, you'll find her describing a rather methodical procedure: "The paintings are built and collated, as if making or installing sculpture," she explains.

Earlier works by this Belgian painter (b. 1972) offer still more clues to the ideas behind "Assembly." Thuring always works on unprimed linen. She trades in this kind of inchoate, drippy esthetic. And at the same time, her paintings are heady plays on rather abstruse art references. For instance, a recent painting, *The Marriage Tradition*, overlays a floor plan for Le Corbusier's Côte d'Azur house with patterns recalling the more banal mosaics from the same building's interior.

If you stand long enough before the paintings at Simon Preston (or just ask someone) you will probably get the game. Slowly, you will recognize that the central feature of a number of the paintings -- a white skeleton of brush strokes in 1, the ghostly, overlapping assembly of checkered plains in 2, etc. -- corresponds to a figure that is quite familiar from art history. It suggests the central nude from Édouard Manet's *Luncheon in the Grass*.

From there, everything else quickly crystallizes. The "trick" of these paintings -- and the reason for the nagging sense of organization that you feel when you stand in front of them -- is that Thuring's random marks reference different aspects of Manet's painting, disconnected and isolated, floating on the canvas like Cheshire Cat grins. This cycle of paintings is a sort of abstracted disaggregation of Manet. Thus, in 1, a spidery circular formation at the bottom left is the picnic basket from Manet's luncheon, while three orange bits near the center correspond to the man's hand in Manet's painting, planted at the waist of the nude. In 3, a random oval is clearly the head of



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Édouard Manet
Luncheon in the Grass
1863
Musée d'Orsay



Tiziano Vecellio, known as Titian
The Pastoral Concert
ca. 1508
Musée du Louvre

the woman slouching in the background, while an incomprehensible black circle with connected squiggles corresponds to the top of the second man's head and the contours of his sideburns. And so on.

But there is another reference hovering in the background as well. The great French painter himself, we know, was an early master of historical pastiche, plundering paintings past in his oeuvre. His *Luncheon* is supposedly a tribute to *Pastoral Concert*, a masterpiece of the Venetian Renaissance, these days attributed to Titian. That mythological work also featured two female nudes and two male figures reclining in the grass, an allegory of artistic inspiration. For "Assembly," the gallery has commissioned a dense essay by Bart van der Heide reflecting on the Titian work, letting it stand as an explanation of Thuring's painting. Based on that text, we might infer that a vivid slash of red that passes diagonally across the canvas of 1 is a reference to the "ray of sunlight" which "captures the bright red colour" of the mandolin player's "rich garment" in the Titian. Maybe this is a stretch. But we are meant to know that Manet's interest in Titian is an important part of Thuring's interest in Manet.

All of this, of course, offers a nerdy, "spot-the-reference" kind of pleasure. Painting-about-painting is a popular mode to justify the practice in these post-painterly days, though in its lesser incarnations such exercises seem rather insular and in-joke. Once you identify that this is where Thuring's passions lay, her woolly abstract marks take on an altogether more calculated character, and you notice how she skips between brushy, sketchy, cartoony, geometric and drippy, as if deliberately shuffling through a library of acquired painterly tics.

Such strategies sound hermetic when you describe them, and they are hermetic, but Thuring is not totally complacent or comfortable about being so. These are wonderfully self-conscious paintings, awkwardly and endearingly self-conscious about their historical place. You could even say that they are *about* performing an artistic gesture that is hermetic, about painting's failure to add up to anything more than a collection of its own parts, and that the emotion that they convey is the brittle, closed-in feeling that goes along with this awareness.

Titian used myth as living allegory, and painting as a vital way to generate mythological imagery, to give it force for its intended audience. Manet filtered contemporary Parisian life through that mythical imagery -- but the icy, frozen way that he painted the whole thing had the effect of emphasizing that myth was no longer a living container of meaning, but an abstract formal referent. In his painting, the allegorical template is no longer socially edifying (and indeed, Manet's *Luncheon* famously scandalized its public with its representation of bohemian indecency). In her "Assembly" paintings, it is as if Thuring has drawn a line through these two points, extrapolating this trajectory to its entropic end -- the traces of the mythical *Pastoral Concert* are now almost purely, arbitrarily symbolic, while Manet's composition itself is reduced to a skeleton of references, and the final painting lacks any flash of Thuring's own contemporary reality at all.

Caragh Thuring takes seriously the idea of carefully assembling her paintings -- they are crafted, "built and collated," as she puts it. But they are built from broken parts. The most important symbolic element of these works, almost certainly, is the ever-present unprimed linen background itself -- signifying the idea of painting reduced to a state in which its main function is self-referential, standing for itself, producing imagery of itself, for its own sake. To say that these are the best paintings one has seen in a long time is, in the end, perhaps true -- but that statement also has a melancholy

ring to it, because in their way, Thuring's paintings are about what a lonely thing it is today to take painting seriously.

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