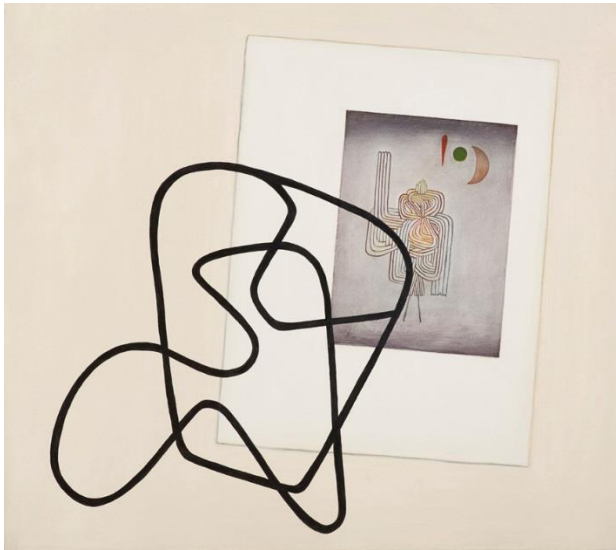


## Educated Copyist: The Work of Jen Mazza



Space CH 4, 2014, oil on canvas, 15 x 17 inches

Bascove  
March 25, 2014

Jen Mazza's latest paintings mix *trompe l'oeil* with the school of appropriation. Adding overlays of heavy punctuation marks and solid geometric shapes, they can convey the harmony of a duet, or the mischievous twist of black bars hiding the face of someone in a compromising position.

The muted colors and meticulous details perfectly evoke the reproductions in art books and catalogs of the 1930's and 40's. She has lovingly observed and recreated their discolored, brittle pages, corners often bent or missing, and brown stains of once clear mending tape now long gone. The copies of pages are usually somewhat askew on a pale warm gray background. The art is carefully reproduced, the text identification done with a keenly precise hand.

Mazza has chosen the works of Non-Objective artists Mondrian and Klee, and several lesser-known Cubists like Rudolf Bauer, Jean Xceron, and George Morris. Anyone willing to sink into the sensual pleasures of a second-hand bookstore, with its fragile volumes of aging paper and unexpected discoveries, will share in her delight. Seeing familiar paintings, now icons of non-representational art when they were freshly created and relatively unrecognized, one will understand her desire to both preserve and integrate her own voice with that history.

There are also several paintings obsessively reproducing small open notebooks complete with penciled note-taking and opened security envelopes in varied states of undress. Mazza shares a world of the signs and language of intimate communication.

**A Bascope: What brought you, someone who painted brightly colored, highly-charged female nudes and lush still lifes, to work in the subdued tones of this recent work?**

Jen Mazza: Good question! Funny, I did not really think about the figurative works as nudes as there is so little of the body shown, but I suppose they could just as well be nude as clothed. To me the work has always been about painting and about language. From the still life, to the narrow focus in the figurative pieces on the mouth and the hands—both locations of expression; verbal and gestural language—to the new images focused on formal elements of both written and painting language: the abstractions, the intervention of shapes or structural aspects of written language—punctuation etc. But I suppose, although what I depict in any given series is certainly not an accidental choice, I do generally consider the “subject” is a means to an end, a catalyst in articulating an idea, so it is common for my subject matter to change. And though it is probably surprising to say it, my palette has not changed much as far as what colors I use—the grays still have a lot of color in them—though you are right that the overall effect is quite subdued, no more the flush of blood just under the skin! The chromatic grays allow the background to operate as surface, but also as space — keeps it more ambiguous, more open.

**AB: What drew you to the images of Cubism and Russian Constructivism?**

JM: Though I have been looking a lot at Malevich and his contemporaries, the new series of paintings relies on reproductions of abstract paintings that are mostly American, or made in the U.S., and usually from the 1940's. These usually black and white reproductions are on pages I have literally cut or torn from books with heroic titles like “Pioneers of American Abstraction” or “New Frontiers in American Painting.” Black and white reproductions once frustrated me in their lack of correlation to the original artworks, now seem somewhat in the nature of “authorless texts”, or perhaps unwitting collaborations between painter and printer. In the paintings, the formalist reproductions are represented still circumscribed within the rectangle of the page, which, with its dog-eared corners or other signs of age serves both to enclose the image and to push it back in time. In this way the images seem to remain in a citational form, as quotations of an original.

Though initially, through the process of painting, I really do inhabit these works as a maker, when this layer is complete I subvert the images by overlapping my own interventions: geometric shapes — and constructivist forms as you mentioned; an organic shape quoted from a Moholy-Nagy painting or a red oval taking its color palette from a Liubov Popova painting — add to these the formal compositional elements of written language: punctuation, parentheses, asterisks and so on.

**AB: Your subject matter seems to be constantly evolving. What's inspiring you now?**

JM: I am still interested in verbal and written language and the language of painting, though what form the upcoming work will take is still vague and illusive — I am sure it will come into focus soon enough. I've come to trust the process over time.

Last spring I took a trip to Bulgaria, out of a desire to be confronted with a language that would not only be opaque to me, in that I did not speak it, but would also be visually incomprehensible: Cyrillic characters literally make no sound when I look at them. Whether this experience was a parallel to the “soundless texts” of symbols I was already incorporating into the “Graft” paintings, or if it will lead to some new level in the work I have yet to discover.