

Excerpts from
A Conversation Between Amy Sillman and Medrie MacPhee
1/18/21 9:53 AM

Amy:

You've made big changes in your work over the years, arriving most recently at this very physical, tactile kind of abstraction. Do you feel that this newer work is a big change, too, or do you see your whole body of work as having one continuous through-line?

Medrie:

For most of my painting life, I found images the best way to convey my preoccupations. But I arrived at a point where I was less interested in story and narrative. I wanted to make work where the content was inherent. Actually, the thing that finally changed things for me was the idea of a matrix

Amy:

What do you mean by a matrix? Or what is your matrix?

Medrie:

The concept of a matrix presents an armature or a frame out of which something occurs. It is multipurpose and open ended and is used as a beginning point by everyone from scientists to feminist theorists. The format and the resulting process are inextricably bound.

Amy:

So can you walk us through how the idea affected your work in a more specific way?

Medrie:

My matrix is a kind of "scaffolding." The scaffolding is the outcome of randomly gluing second-hand and discount clothing onto the surface of a stretched canvas. What I end up with initially is a flat structure of seams, shapes, decorative details, textures, maybe a zipper or a button. All of these different particularities are then erased through a white washing of gesso. I have no idea what the matrix will look like until after the whitewash. In order to realize the potential of the scaffolding-- the loose grid of low-rise clothing on canvas suggesting shapes, moves, and colors-- I begin to paint, to improvise, to erase, to add more stuff, until the painting fulfills the promise of the original set of conditions. It's finally out of that matrix that the painting gradually arrives.

Amy:

So this idea really changed the method of your work, its development...its space?

Medrie:

Exactly. For the longest time I viewed my paintings as having a kind of spatial arena where I could move things around, distort and play with perspective as well as

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figure/ground relationships.. I was obsessed by how the dimensions themselves could help maintain a sense of disequilibrium or an off-balance feeling in the final image. Over time the depth of field kind of kept contracting until it finally disappeared in a way that I hadn't expected.

Amy:

I'm lucky to know you well enough to know that after you moved to Queens, you started regularly raiding the local 99 cent store for clothes and objects to deconstruct. And many of our friends have been the recipients of your amazing deconstructions! The fact that this started as a joke/gift for friends is interesting to me! The idea that you were working with a gift economy, not a commodity one. Something freely given.

Medrie:

The search for cheap clothing and then the disassembling of it and the sewing of it back together into wearable collaged clothing was deeply satisfying. I treated an outfit like a painting where I considered things like opacity and transparency, shape and line, color and texture. And it was this act that eventually translated into the paintings.

Amy:

There's a palpable sense of humor in some of your work: for example, the "future species" series had an animated, burlesque, even grotesque look, because they were made up from composite sources. Is that also something still in effect in your new work? The humor?

Medrie:

The burlesque aspect of the "future species" was that the characters were still psychologically burdened by human emotion. You could see them getting into jams with each other, in need of consolation, fleeing the scene. In the new work the humor is more embodied by the cheap materials in a fine art form.

Amy:

Interesting: "burdened by human emotion" – that's a critical way to think about your own feelings, and it interests me: do you draw a comparison between those cheap clothing materials you use, and the idea of emotion as a "cheap material"? As in, being sentimental? Or being melodramatic?

Medrie:

That's a great question. But if there is any emotion attached to the cheap clothing, it's a sense of poignancy and not sentimentality.

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Amy:

I'm interested in this way you talk about the time in the paintings. It seems like your earlier work more often depicted an image of some kind of just past, like something collapsing that had been there. But then you started working on "the future"—and now you've changed to looking squarely at "what it is"—the present?

Medrie:

Right. I feel like I've moved from the long shadows of the past and have got up to speed. That the present feels more pressing. I think that as an artist you create a set of conditions that mirrors things in yourself that even you might not understand.

Amy:

Also just now, you said an artificial world allows you to "create or negate" - which highlights something for me about how you see this greater terrain that you position yourself in-- for example, when you talked about "creating/negating," or how this "past/future" time works-- it seems like you think of it as a kind of binary, or maybe a continuum, and you kind of work with both ends of the spectrum. Does that make any sense to you?

Medrie:

Hmmm. Well I know a binary can have a momentary "transitional" state. An in-between state, like with a coin - neither heads nor tails. In the representational paintings I messed around with the perspective to enhance a feeling of slight vertigo and in the "future species" the color relationships could create a sense of imbalance. Maybe that duality that you speak of is my wanting to take the viewer into a psychic gap.

Amy:

How does that gap FEEL?

Medrie:

Not sure if this describes a "feeling" ...but it's an essential space and one that is strangely impersonal at the same time. A place, to borrow from **Philip Guston**, where everyone- all the critics, the artist pals, other paintings, even YOU leave the studio in order to create the painting. So what's left is your body, higher thinking and the reptile brain in some inchoate collaboration.

Amy:

Over time you have unburdened yourself from the rules of depiction and yet you still depict the feeling of being a witness to something, even if it's the unfolding logic of your own work. You got rid of perspective, then you got rid of the creature/figures, whited out the colors and textures and you ended up with this

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procedure: making something that springs from, yet in some way opposes, the thing its based on...?

Medrie:

.At this point, through this process, I've been able to reverse things so rather than taking you into a space, the painting actually puts you up close to the surface.

Amy:

But you imbue a sense of joy in that sense of being up close – I think your new work feels unburdened. It's not burdened with the task of representation. You assert that you are not a fiction writer in the new work. But you do represent your world by obtaining the materials where you live, and then taking it apart and rebuilding it.

Medrie:

The whiting out involves erasure to bring me to the underlying structure – that more abstracted place in order to move forward.

Amy:

But the gluing versus the fixing seems like two very different impulses. Whiting out as you're describing - it is a kind of leveling the field, like plowing a field, or ironing or something...You're building and then whiting these surfaces out, so that you can do them again..

Medrie:

Yeah that's good...the destruction or burying of the clothes into a new "field" is critical to the process even at the same time as there is something inherently absurd and funny about the activity.

Amy:

That's the kind of contradiction I am trying to get at in your work throughout. In this sense your operating system is very complicated and contains its own consciousness of consciousness. Not just depicting things, but showing the paradox of perception itself, in its very materiality. Maybe this is related to the process of abstraction itself.

Medrie:

Yes, in a way abstraction is never pure. There's a kind of perverseness to abstraction when a painter makes a self-conscious reference to the world they're taking in, absorbing, but then making it abstract.

Amy:

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Your work does feel impure, and restless. You deal with these remains in the form of what you find in 99 cent stores, which is essentially kind of tragic, nodding to a kind of doomed situation. That's also funny – like a kind of pessimistic productivism.

Medrie:

I like the idea of “pessimistic productivism”!! I feel that our time on the planet is highly provisional. Basically what you do is to cobble together, you scavenge, you try this, you try that. And I don't know whether it's doomed, but there is some pleasure in resourcefulness, in figuring out, “Okay this is not looking promising. What can we do with this?”

Amy:

Yeah, it's a kind of desperate improvisational act, putting yourself on the line, throwing yourself into this moment. It seems like the improvisation is part of the freedom you allow yourself in your work. In a sense you have always established a kind of freedom for yourself, by not knowing even yourself what's gonna happen 'til you do it.

Medrie:

Yes! That's the most exciting part. Both in my early work as well as the present, I'm evoking that psychic space and one that emerges out of surprise and improvisation.

Amy:

To respond to a system, to keep making new stuff that you don't know in advance takes incredible trust and rigor. It makes me think of those Gee's Bend quilts.

Medrie:

So fantastic. They embody everything that matters – improvisation, resourcefulness, gorgeous materiality, community, history!

Amy:

Yeah, quilting is a way of working that both deals with the harshness of conditions in which the thing has been created, and offers a pleasure in being there, being made. And it seems like your studio operating principles are also partly about a scrappy kind of speed: “Get the stuff, cut it up, tack it on, move it around, paint it white, start again.” That does have a different relationship to time. Not that your work is churned out quickly, but that the decisions you make while building it are made by the seat of your pants.

Medrie

Yes. And it's something language doesn't lend itself to very well...this way of working. People are generally much more comfortable when a process can be

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defined and its intentions laid out in language. Maybe it's because there is a precision in language that is eluded by certain forms of expression.

Amy:

You said before how hard it is to talk about your work, and I feel that you've embraced a way of working that CAN'T be talked about, totally. It is resistant to narrative. Not that you're not conceptual and linguistic in your own ways, but trying to turn away from language as THE only matrix, and to search for a visual matrix in distinction from a linguistic one. But there is something funny going on too.

Medrie:

That's exactly right. I'm not making fun of bargain basement clothing, much of which I wear myself! It's more that the clothing has no dignity when it's being pawed over in a large bin. There's a kind of Beckett-ian humor in elevating these sad remainders into a new and loftier realm.

Amy:

Yes, an attitude of, "it is what it is." I think at some inner point, your work is a wish NOT to necessarily explain something.

Medrie:

I told you once that I'd wanted to be a writer from childhood on.. But I discovered that language failed me at a critical moment.

Amy:

This whole interview should be called "words fail me." (LOL) All the "failure" you've experienced has been an opportunity for some regrowth, or weed, to come out of a field that wasn't worked right, or was abandoned, or that you've gone over twice. You literally moved away from narrative TWICE, once in language and then in the strictures of so-called representational painting.

Medrie:

Yes, something just popped into my head: it's about the spirit in which I make things. I called a painting that I did recently "Favela". It reminded me of being in Rio de Janeiro. I was so amazed and touched by the favelas. The way the residents painted their houses in incredible colors and details and what they did with the pathways connecting them all together. I just loved it. I thought it was a triumph, and in some ways, it has something to do with my feelings of humans as a part of a very failed species, both magnificent and terrible.