

On Figuring Out What Does Not Hold Well

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In *Don't Look Now*,¹ vision represents an extrasensory perceptual mode of knowing among lived temporalities, but it is a haunting gift. As a potentially lifesaving responsibility, vision constantly threatens to disorient. As a privileged access to truths, vision repeatedly fails to make these truths legible in time. Hinting at how vision is conceptualized, Kim Neudorf's *the signs appear as in aspic* projects how, through seeing, knowing is always obstructed. Painting as a (dis)opacifying apparatus is used to re-actualize the seen of the unknown and the known of the unseen. Seeing differently through painting, therefore, may be analogous to seeing through aspic jelly, through the surfaces that mediate subjects and objects, and through the psychological surfaces that mediate one's access to their true self.

Back in 2009, David Joselit introduced the argument of transitive painting through his article, *Painting Beside Itself*. Joselit referred to transitive painting as a, "capacity to hold in suspension the passages internal to a canvas and those external to it."² Like a gelatinous substance used to preserve ingredients, paintings are a holding space; transitivity announces their rupture. Like a knife that cuts through jelly to disrupt a composed whole, the transitive body of painting turns its insides out and outsides in. Neudorf's work embodies a distinct aesthetic tension that demonstrates the queer ways in which such disruption to the holding space is handled.

Within the work *Dysphoria mundi*, Paul B. Preciado compares the etymological roots of the words "dysphoria" and "metaphor." Both words contain the Greek root *phoros*, signifying the action of carrying or holding. While *metaphorà* speaks of a transfer of meaning, the prefix *dys*—associated with abnormality and illness—is used in dysphoria to suggest that something does not hold normally.³ In relation to gender, dysphoria indicates a sensed misalignment between someone's assigned gender, biological sex, and the gender for which they identify. The discomfort that sits with this incongruence is often unbearable and traumatic. Trans and gender non-conforming folks understand what gender dysphoria means. It chills us to the bone. What Preciado calls for in *Dysphoria mundi* (the displacement and redefinition of dysphoria as a nonnormative transgressive mode of being) is precisely what I see upon looking at Neudorf's paintings. The dysphoric logic in which their process subverts the conventional pictorial holding space brings to mind aspic when it turns out wrong. I believe its effect on the viewer resembles the horror of the dinner-party host as they realize that their jelly did not set properly. In Neudorf's paintings, what does not hold well is left as is. From one painting to the next, the internal stuff leaks, decomposes, and invites contamination in a freakish parasitic fashion.

Dysphoria in this body of work is suggested through the reappropriation of Gothic aesthetic in which central figures emerge as grotesque construction. In *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Jack Halberstam defines the Gothic as a "technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known."⁴ The otherness of the Gothic subject is always too noticeable, exaggerated, and characterized as "ornamental excess."⁵ The monster, therefore, is the ideal Gothic subject as it embodies a dismantling of boundaries.⁶ Its body is almost always, "in a state of decomposition, [threatening] to unravel, to fail to hold together."⁷ While the figure as a concept has always been present in Neudorf's work, its monstrous return to the pictorial space over the last few years aligns

with the artist's desire to go back in time and apprehend the affective impresses of trans and queer subjectivity.

The process by which Neudorf Gothicizes the figure begins by looking through their own archive of cinematic and art-historical references in search of what might have been picked up or missed signs of queer and trans resonance. A selection of fragments is then pieced together before and during the painting process. I think of this collaging practice as a form of figural masochism, a queer tactic that combines ruination and pleasure to “image” healing through a radical mode of (un)becoming. In *Sex After Life*, Claire Colebrook reminds us that the concept of becoming in Western philosophy is deeply rooted in normative and binary constructions. What queering the concept of becoming does, rather, is encourage a turn towards a passive kind of vitalism that embraces the non-desirable, the counterproductive, and the unresolved, in favour of rejecting conceptions of becoming that resent deviance, incongruities, and inconsistencies.⁸ To experiment with queer (un)becoming, Halberstam invites us to put our trust in masochistic pleasure because it, “precisely references the space in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other.”⁹ To this, Elizabeth Freeman adds in *Time Binds* that masochism, as a mode of depersonalization, also affects normative time; it is a practice that most self-consciously uses the body to “alter the flow of time.”¹⁰ The way Neudorf approaches fragmentation recalls the masochist's aim to rewrite one's bodily history, “so that there is an ‘after’ to violence appearing as ‘before.’”¹¹

Through collage and gestures of abstraction, both the bodies within the paintings and paintings as bodies let themselves be possessed. This occurs in a kind of burial of a pre-monstrous anonymous body from which agendered features partially resurface. In several instances, the presence of the body is only suggested through the anthropomorphizing of natural motifs, or is camouflaged by its own internal bodily structure, maintaining it in an ambiguous position between being taken apart and taken over. As skin—the body's façade—dissolves, nerves and veins turn into the roots of an inhuman, mycorrhizal force that sinuously invades the bodily holding space; and disregards its fleshy boundaries. The figures are no longer distinct entities. They have merged with the ground, yet none of their parts comply with a harmonious whole, as if in a state of perpetual dissociation. I believe that Neudorf's own Gothic way of figuring out what does not hold well is even more singularized by their repurposing of the Gothic trope of the double (which is central to the enigma in *Don't Look Now*) through the painterly use of dissociation as a queer and trans tool. Such a virtuous dissociative style, as seen in Neudorf's work, is what Maxi Wallenhorst defines as having, “a formal infrastructure in its own way.” One that involves the control and surrender of “something like noncoherence, while neither romanticizing nor vilifying what's noncoherent about it.”¹² Neudorf's paintings convince me that dissociation and painting can become co-constitutive grounds for queer psychic power. They make me want to stay there and let my dysphoric self monstrously, but safely, disaggregate within the jelly.

¹ In reference to the film version of Daphne du Maurier's novel, *Don't Look Now*, directed by Nicolas Roeg and released in 1973.

² David Joselit, "Painting beside Itself." *October*, vol. 130, 2009, 129.

³ Paul B. Preciado, *Dysphoria Mundi* (Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2022), 20.

⁴ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of the Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), 2.

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ Jack Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of the Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸ Claire Colebrook, *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 2* (Open Humanities Press, 2014), 89.

⁹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 136.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 143.

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² Maxi Wallenhorst, "Like a Real Veil, Like a Bad Analogy: Dissociative Style and Trans Aesthetics", *e-flux Journal* (Issue #117: trans | fem | aesthetics, April 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/385637/like-a-real-veil-like-a-bad-analogy-dissociative-style-and-trans-aesthetics/>