

The White Part, or An Avalanche Every Day

We're out in the ripping February cold, crossing the Canadian border in a beat-up box truck. It is very dark. We follow illuminated signage to Customs, where commercial transport must declare their cargo. For this, we have an invoice listing the contents of the truck from a gallery in Toronto: 10 paintings, 5 sculptures. Declaring ourselves "commercial transport" seems like a joke to us, as transporting our own work to an exhibition 10 hours from home feels more like an exercise in DIY.

We park and enter an office. The customs agent, in a bulletproof vest, looks over the invoice.

"So who made these paintings?"

"Me," Ryan says.

"And what kind of paintings are they? If I was to open the back of your vehicle, what would I see?"

"Well... I take all the trash from the floor of my studio and I tape and glue it to canvas and then put them over canvas stretchers. They look like garbage, basically."

If I were to stop writing now, and allow this base description to Canadian border control remain the summary of Ryan Wallace's latest exhibition, it would not be a lie. His paintings and sculptures are indistinguishable from the cluttered floor that he works upon. They are documents of their own making. But buried within the surfaces of his works for his show, *Slo Crostic*, is a tangled visual lexicon embedded with deliberative thought and impulsive action. For as hermetic as compositions of one's own trash could become, in a cycle of consumption, expulsion, redemption, and repetition, Wallace's works are actually pieces in a puzzle of analogous meanings.

Meaning accrues like sedimentation on Wallace's surfaces. To call them paintings confines them. They are alternately collages put together with painterly bravado, assemblages without taxonomy, weathered bas-reliefs, or artifacts of a private performance. They could be called surfaces, in the way one would refer to the "surface of the moon." Appearing like a synthetic geology, they are full of intrigue and secrets, their compositional totality taken for granted, yet full of rich detail and revelation. They are a camouflage that hides the artist himself from plain site. The fact that Wallace refers to his latest works as "Redactors" indicates that he is playing a game of disinformation, as he both shows and reveals the information forming his documents.

Much as modern camouflage conjured cubist compositions that confused subject and background, a visit to Wallace's studio confounds the ability to discern floor, wall, ceiling, architectural elements, furniture, art supplies, and the final product of a finished painting. The pieces that hang and lean throughout the space mirror the floor where they begin above drop cloths meant to protect the floor. For Wallace, these drop cloths become his ground, the stage on which he performs, accumulating all the marks and actions of the making. The paintings shift back and forth between lying and standing. If one does not work, he cuts it up and arranges it again as one becomes multiple, salvaged as parts of others. Piles of materials find their places on cut up tarp punctuated by grommets: orbital sanding pads, perforated window vinyl, window tints, powdered metals, rusted staples, trails of glitter (remnants from a prior series of works), all bound up by a variety of tapes, glues and adhesives. When asked about one strip of dirty white gradient, Wallace responded: "those are Ikea curtains embedded with years of Greenpoint pollution. The white part is the top where they weren't exposed."

Last I saw of him, Wallace was standing over a future painting in a pair of white canvas Vans that matched the dirty white palate of the *Redactor* he was toying with. He began to adhere a silver T-Square to the surface of the canvas, as if it were a bold paint stroke. He placed it measurement side down, its function as anything other than a formal element obliterated. His shoes disappeared into the pile of shifting material below him, his legs stiling above the fray.

The methodology of these works has antecedence. Wallace reveals traces and hints of a lineage of abstract painting and collage: Schwitters, de Kooning, Clyfford Still, Robert Ryman, Jo Baer and Agnes Martin. The predominance of the white of canvas is clearly important to Wallace, and it calls to mind the rabbit-hole of modernity sparked by the unpainted parts of Cezanne's paintings. Yet, the *Redactors* remain defiantly grungy, conjuring the deconstructionist tendencies of Paris' Lettrist and Situationist movements. The anonymous violence in material usage shares the spirit of the torn up advertisement-compositions of Jacques Villeglé, yet in place of impersonal upheaval of extroverted culture, Wallace balances between absorbing and expelling the outside world. The continual churning of material within the ecosystem of his studio is evidence of an emerging phenomenon that could be called the "introverted sublime."

In an essay from 1972, Leo Steinberg tried to contextualize the paintings of Robert Rauschenberg:

"I once heard Jasper Johns say that Rauschenberg was the man who this century had invented the most since Picasso. What he invented above all was, I think, a pictorial surface that let the world in again. Not the world of Renaissance man who looked for his weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, "precipitation probability ten percent tonight," electronically transmitted from some windowless booth. Rauschenberg's picture plane is for the consciousness immersed in the brain of the city. The flatbed picture plane lends itself to any content that does not evoke a prior optical event."

In this passage, Steinberg conceives of the label "flatbed picture plane" as a way to describe the breakdown of medium specificity operating in the realm of painting, allowing in confusions of performance and readymade, and abandoning the traditional function of painting as a window into an illusory world.

For our exhibition in Toronto, Wallace and I decided to call our show *Flatbed Bends*, alluding to Steinberg's terminology, but suggesting an additional notion of aesthetic space more reflective of our contemporary condition. Instead of conjuring a kind of pictorial surface that "lets the world in again," in ways both macrocosmic and ethereal, Wallace's work is more reflective of the digital engagement of consciousness that is more fragmentary and fleeting. Consider the way we spend our time: neck down, navigating screens comprised of layers upon layers of windows, applications, pop-ups, tool bars, cursors, keyboards, touch-screens. Our eyes scroll and scan shallow space. We leave the screens of our apartments and offices and follow new ones, held fast to our palms, as we walk the streets. A hyperactivity of repetitious and self-referential behavior becomes habitual.

Wallace's *Redactors* suggest rendered segments of layers of information, rather than the totality of systemization. They appear momentary as if they were scrolling past. In places shreds of information converge and are torn away, revealing past histories. Their use of scrim, screens, perforations, and films allows for layers to dissolve and reveal. Glue is used not as an adhesive backing but a compression agent. Each part vies for futile autonomy within the shallow field. Ultimately, these works are emblematic of a conflict of consciousness, attempting to give form to competing pressures. They dance between the emerging insularity of a virtual consciousness and a humanist impulse to defy rigidity and systemization.

Recalling Wallace in his studio, I trace trails of thought as he punctuated our discussion with physical animation: flipping paintings around, unfurling ribbons of material from the floor, looking up images and references on his phone. The recollection itself seems a collage: in amongst talk of angularity, abruptness, camera filters, and ethics, Wallace made a comparison to the formal construct of a Fugazi song.

As I write this in Microsoft Word, flipping back and forth between references (PDFs open in Preview, archived emails in my inbox, web-pages piling up in my toolbar), I am listening to the audio of a pirated

copy of the movie *Instrument*, a documentary about Fugazi. More visual collage than narrative document, it calls up a tangential back-story to describe Wallace and his work.

Archival footage presents an interview on a public access television show of the group's founder Ian MacKaye, who explains that their name means "a messed up situation," perhaps reflective of MacKaye's (and by extension, the underground culture of which he is a figurehead) own path: his transition from the deconstructive fury of hardcore punk to a kind of music that incorporated an evolving eclecticism, evidenced by MacKaye's interest in the clashing collage aesthetics of Jamaican dub music.

Listening to Fugazi now, through a minimized window on my laptop and played through a wireless speaker, I am reminded that they seemed to provide a template for culture that both Wallace and I have emerged from. Instead of dictating they would *respond*. Each musician of the whole responding to the formal maneuver of another (both in conflict and harmony), but also responding as a whole (as the band) by establishing an evasive and shifting definition of contrast (aesthetically and ethically) to culture of the larger world.

For *Slo Crostic*, Wallace presents his own template of response. For the first time he will allow a public glimpse into his process by presenting a working stage, emblematic of how the *Redactors* are made, while the paintings hang near by, engaged in the kind of dialog operative in his studio. This stage is anchored with a series of sculptural units, cast cubes of plaster, concrete, and studio detritus. Like the films and scrimms of the *Redactors*, the plaster and concrete attempts to contain the jumble within. The planar surface is gridded with the casting elements from which the cubes were made, allowing full transparency of his method. The interplay between sculptures in space, paintings on wall and stage lying on floor imply that the *Redactors* are part of a larger cosmology.

Like his titles (*Redactor*, *Slo Crostic*), not all of Wallace's intentions can be discerned easily. When looking up "crostic" the closest word in a dictionary search is "acrostic" defined as "a poem, word puzzle, or other composition in which certain letters in each line form words." Wallace, through his churning, recycled and insular working method has essentially created his own language of material usage. His template is a net flexible to catch all the stuff of a life filled with labor, from polluted Brooklyn curtains to straight edges no longer required (his paintings are so thick and layered, that when stretched, they no longer adhere to polite geometry). The net is like that curtain: the white part a blank surface, the rest a history of embedded action, the residue of existence. *Slo Crostic* might be a puzzle, clues popping out of the frozen avalanche of Wallace's psyche.

How to explain all the things that go into being an artist without fully being one? What was Ian MacKaye's response was asked in *Instrument* what Fugazi is about? "It's about being in a band," he says. How coy. We all know that is the whole story and only part of it.

- David Kennedy Cutler, 2014