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Bosko Blagojević, "Casual Encounters: Painting in the Wrong Light," *Essay*, 2012

Casual Encounters: Painting in the Wrong Light

Boško Blagojević, New York City, 2012

How would a painting respond to the harsh artificial light of a tanning bed? I wasn't surprised to hear about Kerstin Brätsch's incipient flirtations with this technology last year. She does keep a studio and apartment in New York after all, and tanning is a beauty industry here that makes an indelible mark on the city's younger and lighter-skinned professional classes. It's part of the collectivized lifestyle and beauty standards that every large city cultivates in its own unique way, where cultural narratives temporarily alloy into evolving geographic "looks." Tanning happens in other places too of course, but it's the perennial mark of the yuppie New Yorker—often more subtle than the ridiculed excess of down-market Long Island or Jersey shore party culture, but seasonally ubiquitous come each year in early May.

Brätsch's relationship with this social technology, like the many technologies that constitute her galaxy of interests, begins with a friendship. Ei Arakawa, whose brother Tomoo Arakawa owns the tanning salon *Blacky* in the Fukushima district of Japan, collaborated with Brätsch and a host of others on exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Zürich, Gio Marconi, Milano, and the Halle für Kunst in Lünenberg, Germany. Incorporating ultraviolet-light emitting tanning bulbs in the exhibitions, Brätsch and her cast of collaborators (carefully recounted in the Marconi press release, echoing the labor delegations of film credits) filled each show with digital prints, slide projections, sculptures, exhibition display structures, and of course the large abstract paintings for which Brätsch is by now well known.

Entering into orbit of the easy sociability and productive friendships of Kerstin Brätsch often feels like a respite from a professional sphere of art known for its bitchy and paranoid territorial pissings. Without any kind of inflated ambition or discourse, Brätsch actively and aggressively networks the making of her art. She has produced ambitious projects with artists like Adele Röder (as and for DAS INSTITUT), Debo Eilers, Ei Arakawa and Sergei Tcherepnin, Viola Yesiltac, and many others. One could compare the habits of the young painter, who makes no effort to elide her own authorial presence when she works with others, to the promiscuous working patterns of post-Internet hip-hop artists—in which camps increasingly dissolve and everybody seems to be working with everybody; where hits commonly feature four, five or more performers contributing to a polyphony of sound. The making and doing of the thing is key for Brätsch, and she excels at inventing new contexts for her ever-expanding field of activities. Her formidable energy in this pursues a kind of Warhol logic, but her insistence and tireless engagement with the fabric of her time and place is anything but vintage. It's this insistence that drives the artist, a painter with robust technical abilities and knowledge, to constantly devolve and abuse her foundational discipline.

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Over the past five or six years, Brätsch has made unruly, oversize paintings on paper and Mylar. Like a short-tempered teenager suddenly grown stronger and bigger than his father, these paintings are materially precarious: heavy with washes of oil, often torn and bent at the edges, frequently unframed. They are paintings that demand considerable attention in their moving and installation and actively respond to—breathe even, often through clenched teeth—the atmosphere around them. They invite damage and disaster, both intimidating and attractive in their size. The forms appearing on these works are often atomized painterly gestures recursively serialized to produce rich, expressive surfaces that deliver compelling if disjointed art historical narratives on abstract painting. Her newer works (like some of their predecessors) sample and quote earlier paintings and sketchbooks, but do so with glass, the latest material support upon which the artist has seized.

These new glass works widen the gulf between Brätsch and her paintings, transforming the artist into a neophyte, someone who must speak (or otherwise communicate) her glass paintings into existence by mediating their making through a workshop. Working with master glassmaker Urs Rickenbach in the workshop Glas Mäder in Zürich, the growing body of work deploys a suite of techniques by which the workshop craftsmen approximate and respond to material Brätsch makes available.

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Brätsch provides ongoing instructions to her fabricators along with her handmade artist books and sketches that function more like inspiration than any kind of exacting technical documentation. This is a different kind of collaborative relationship than the comparatively open and easy friendships Brätsch activates to produce works and exhibitions with her fellow artist friends. Her way of working is perhaps at times frustrating to the craftsmen of Glas Mäder, as the artist herself confesses. Preferring clearly defined and precise goals, the workers instead are encouraged by Brätsch to explore the possibilities of the medium and respond to her sketches and brushstrokes without striving to recreate or mime them.

With this ostensibly gentle approach, Brätsch foregrounds a dimension of labor that is often minimized in traditional crafts workshops and the manufacturing sector. This dimension is one of interpretive and affective labor, a kind of work where actively responding to changing contexts and the passing of time is more important than reaching for explicitly defined goals and demands. What would be easy to mistake as a kind of freedom imparted on the craftsman in this situation is in reality a solicitation for interpretive and intuitive thinking to deliver the final work. Brätsch isn't the first artist to shift the terms of production in this way, of course—toward a kind of open logic, where the “open work” is open not only to multiple readings, but also to as many possible destinies in its production—though the shift certainly puts her new work in contrast to the old. This is because the new works are inflected along the route by which they are realized, away from the artist's hands. The interpretive labor enacted by the craftsmen is not the work, but is encoded into the personal history of each work—like a happy childhood, or a distressed adolescence.

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Glass, in its material sense, offers the viewer of art a special vantage over which to glance back at the constituent materiality of painting in our young century. If we stay with the vernacular sense of the word, it is possible to argue for glass as a kind of trickster cousin of the painted surface. Painting enacted, both in its production and display, is a discipline that functions first of all as a consumer-connoisseur of light. For good painting to be produced and displayed, a correct or “right” light must be found and harvested. To put a great painting in bad light is considered a disservice to the work, preventing its surface from ever becoming fully activated. To paint in a bad light, meanwhile, is to paint blindly—or worse, dishonestly.

Inversely, glass is our greatest mediator of light, perhaps one of the most culturally and technically definitive materials of the moment. Its increasingly dominant presence in the architecture of the 20th century suggests less the older modernist aspiration to structural transparency than an evolving social dialectic of mutual peer surveillance and control. Glass likewise often finds its way into application in the industrial and design world for the filtering and controlling of light. Technical glass in designer eyewear filters harmful UV rays while tinting a wearer's view and creating an aesthetic mood. The various touch screens of our rich catalog of mobile computing devices and smart phones meanwhile administer an entirely different kind of light, lightness, and surveillance. These tablets and devices integrate sophisticated glass surfaces to form a network of *touch*—from the gloved hands of the global workforce that assembles the devices to the bare hands of a very different kind of workforce that uses them in their homes and offices, a single uniform surface for work and pleasure.

To return for a moment to the heavy glass of the tanning bed: can we imagine how a painting might be changed when submitted to such a light? Brätsch's new works on glass function in a fundamentally different way than their predecessors did on paper or plastic. The colors and forms that constitute the glass pieces work *with* their material support instead of simply resting on top of it. When these works are viewed, the light that makes them apparent has literally passed through the work on its way to the viewer.

The glass pieces sample and quote Brätsch's previous bodies of works, presenting a kind of fragmented retrospective of her activities as an artist. Some magnify her practice as a bookmaker: intersecting and semi-transparent geometric patterns on glass can be combined and layered in display, much like the cutout and colored pages of her books can be viewed, or the clear Mylar paintings exhibited. Other glass works echo previous series on paper: it's easy to spot notes potentially lifted from the Blocked Radiants series or the Psychic series. The agate works meanwhile approximate the brushstrokes of her larger Mylar paintings, atomizing the network of individual gestures that constitute the larger source works. Some of the agate in these works was taken from the collection kept by Urs Rickenbach, leftovers from an earlier project the glassmaker completed with Sigmar Polke. From 2006 through 2009, Rickenbach worked with Polke to

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realize the agate windows for the Kirchenfenster Grossmünster, one of Polke's final major projects before his death. While Polke used mostly whole circular slices of the stone, Brätsch sources the fragments and unused debris left over. These bits are reanimated by the younger artist and offered a second life in her own glass works.

The art historical references of Brätsch's complex abstractions on paper and Mylar are transformed as they are reprocessed by her fabricators and rendered in glass. A large circle from the Blocked Radiants series that might echo a Hilma Af Klint canvas appears familiar but fragmented in a glass piece, suddenly putting the original reference in question. As light passes through the glass pane and activates the surface, the lit hue recalls less a mode of abstract painting than the luminescent green of a backlit LCD television—brightly emitting the shifting green slivers of a geographic weather map, or the opening animation of Call of Duty, Modern Warfare 2.

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Rather than modulating skin tone directly, tanning beds work by exposing the body to a controlled amount of UV-A rays, engendering a process by which melanocytes (cells on the bottom layer of the skin) produce melatonin. This chemical slowly disperses throughout the skin and deepens skin tone, all the while strengthening resistance to the harmful rays that initiated the process. When thinking about this, it's important to remember that the transformation of the skin, of the self, comes as a response from within the body to the outside world, and never the other way around. The change comes from below, slowly rising to the surface.