

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Allison Katz, "What is at Hand?," *Essay*, February 24, 2014

WHAT IS AT HAND?

Allison Katz

(Transcript of a lecture delivered by Kerstin Brätsch,
Rutgers University, February 24, 2014.)

The lecture format is undeniably about submitting to language. You feel compelled to explain something about what you do, have been doing.

So let's start with a Warhol maxim: make your problem your solution.

First solution: get someone you trust to write something. Speak it in your voice.

Second solution: use language as the analogy by which to describe the paintings.

[10 kl. marblings]

What we already know is this: language lives a parallel existence to what it describes. It can never be it, though it does often make that claim, or gets mistaken for the experience itself. I know a dance critic who learned how to write her reviews by taking courses in literary translation. To move between French and English for example is, in her mind, the same as moving from seeing a dance performance to writing about it. The loss must be accounted for by an awareness that any translation is at best an approximation. A written description of an artwork offers a map, rather than an experience of place. Think of sentences like clues, pointing towards the unspeakable.

[10 kl. marblings]

Think about different languages, which come from different places. The voice on the inside versus what happens when it hits the surface, and flows out of a mouth. A mother tongue versus a language used daily. How easy it is to make mistakes. How often-times those mistakes reveal more about the language than those who speak it fluently, who more or less no longer notice that they too are always translating as they speak, from feeling or instinct into description. A flaw can summon the pun, joke, etymology,

slang, origins, and unconscious connections. To get mixed up is a form of re-enchantment.

[10 kl. marblings]

So I begin staging the various layers that account for these new works, paintings made using a marbling technique, the series *Unstable Talismanic Renderings*.

Firstly, there is the fact that I speak another language. I am always already operating with various tongues. German and English.

Secondly, consider painting a language. Consider craft another language.

Consider how materials speak different languages. Paint is one language. Glass is another language.

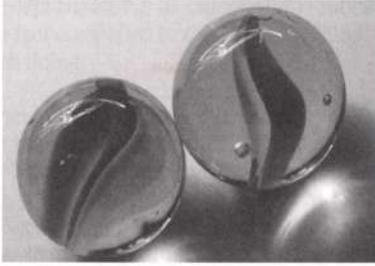
Is a brush a tongue? Is a finger a voice? A drop of paint from a certain height makes a splash. Tools are words.

[10 kl. marblings]

English speakers have marveled at my misuse of English. The most generative in this case is when I called the marbling paintings "my marbles." What did I accidentally unleash?

It took a native speaker to let me know how funny she found this... Marbles being an expression of sanity. Or anger. "To lose one's marbles." It can also mean something like good stuff, less commonly used; if one picks up a prize, "to collect one's marbles." It comes from the child's game of marbles, little glass balls which are thrown around and scored in various configurations.

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The previous body of work I made was the glass project, *Maler, den Pinsel Prüfend*, or “the glasses” as I also wrongly called them...

The glass before the painting
To spell out ones own name / to put a spell on / The New Spelling

[1]



During this period (2011-2012) I transformed myself into a neo-phyte, someone who must speak (or communicate) my works into existence through a glass workshop and its staff:

Brushstrokes;

Single brushstrokes in stained glass.

Brushstroke as Candy _____ Brushstroke as Dung

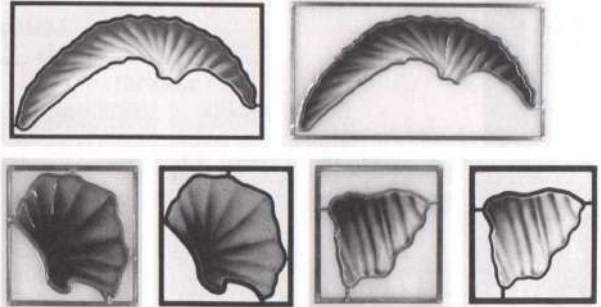
Brushstrokes not only as a signature (imitated and sculpted by the glass man) but as placeholder. An active reaction to painting from the inside out, starting with the fundamental building block: first tool: the primordial brushstroke. And even before that: optic foundation. Pre-painting: light rays. Refraction, surface transmission.

What is a sculpted brushstroke? A sculpted signature? A sculpted hand?

The glassman as the extension of my hand, who is intuiting himself, but simultaneously interpreting my hand

A scientific / mathematical translation of my gut

[2-9]



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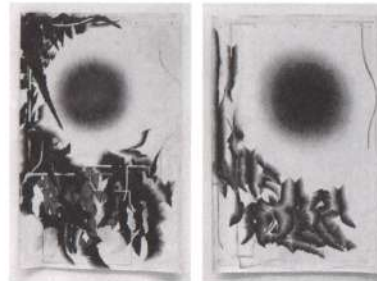
Blocked Radiants;

Abstract Anxiety/Radiation



friends
mysterious finger
shown

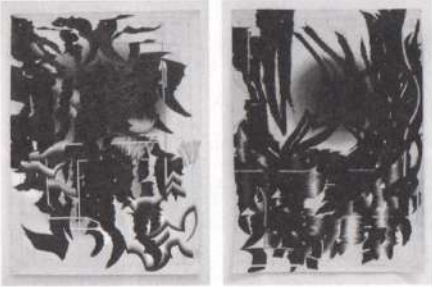
appeared
_____ chasing away
the false



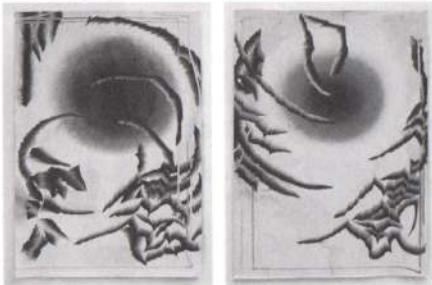
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purity
double identity

the eyes
two equal
points of view



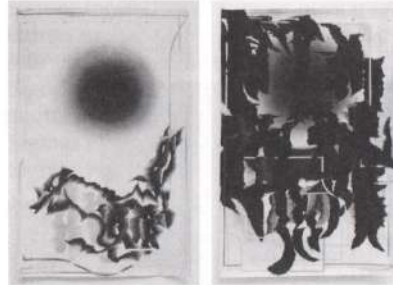
his eyes look
at me, double
and sufficient
already claimed by
absence and the
gulf



to bring everything together here?



(2)
transfusion _____
change in the manner
of being, that's all



(1)
myself _____
perhaps _____
the ambiguity
this can be!

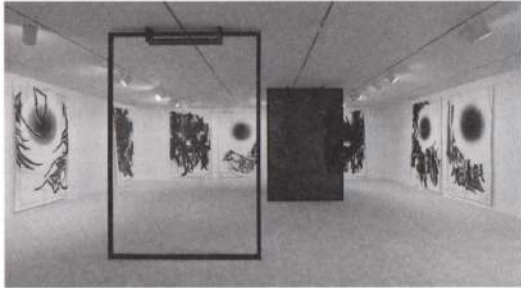
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(4

with the result that
purity emerges from
corruption!

[10-15]



Sigis Erben:



Agates like sampling,
a stone formation: creatures or characters just like my *Psychic*
paintings.

A brushstroke made out of agate shards,
Sigmar Polke's leftover from his stained glass window project at
Grossmünster Zürich

Sigmar Polke's heritage

Sigmar Polke's trash



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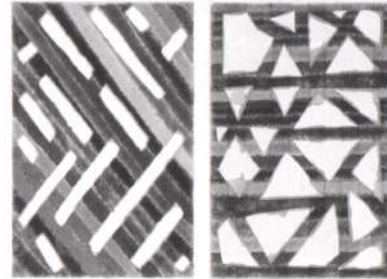
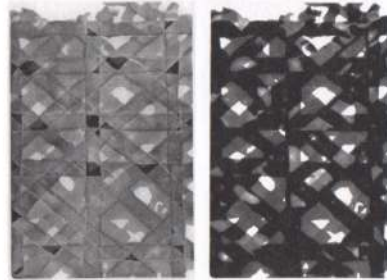
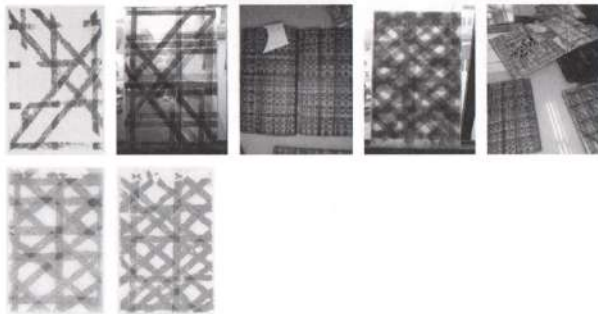


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[16-28]

Die Namen Die Linien;

lineglasses; based on linebooklets:
color patterns



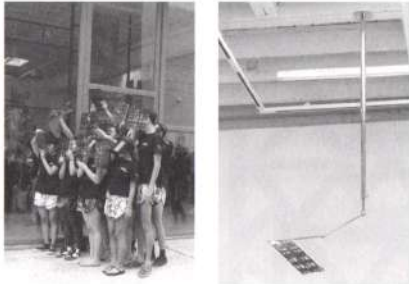
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[29-38]

Sunshields;



Re-call painting , pre-state painting, flexible positions
protection to be able to look into high density rays of the sun
Fukushima:
DI is built on friendship
United Brothers counts on them.



United Brothers tanning salon in Iwaki, Fukushima, Japan



Iwaki Odori parade

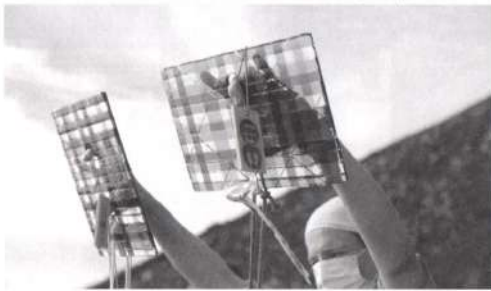


Nakoso Beach: man made fire by the sea and discovered glass by
accidentally melting sand.
Bring the glass back to the sea.

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Fuji Mountain: a Volcano, the highest point in Japan towards the sun,
A Volcano is also made out of Glass (Lava)



[39-49]

Antique glasses;

Brushstroke as Mask — Brushstrokes as Masks



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[50-58]

By this chain of language, you can see how the current body of work was embedded in the last one, without me being entirely conscious of it. In this case, language provided the fluid clue, a sort of code, about where to go next, after the glass.

[7 offene gr. marblings (Topos ____Topology)]

The marbling paintings were therefore encased in the glass works, just like a little glass marble.

I describe the marblings as being made by dropping a drop of ink from high—the height determines the width of the mark—so the description noun is also the verb: to drop a drop. A raindrop functions in the same way, and a teardrop. Are they voluntary or involuntary? How much is marked, how much is instinct? How much is a ready-made drops? I imitate drops, and I drop the glass marble, I shatter the glass, so to say, into a marbling technique.

[7 offene gr. marblings (Planets)]

Here is a good moment to interject and explain the fact that I frequently use the expression “so to say,” or at least I am told I do this, I am not so aware of it. But a friend sees it as evidence of my unconscious mistrust of language. “So to say” or “so to speak” as in, “watch now as I make a metaphor, and let me highlight the fact that I am describing something in an usual way, that isn’t exactly what I am describing, so suspend your expectation, and shift it towards this new proposed description, this unnatural one.” The Online Dictionary provides this example of the expression’s usage: “Delving into the body’s secrets, I looked death in the face, so to speak.”

[12 gr. Perlenmatten marblings (totemic)]

I want to break apart the brush stroke, so it is only naturally that to shatter it I must drop it, and so to drop it I must literally drop a

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drop of paint. This shattering produces a brush stroke out of a destructive impulse. It undoes the hand by involving gravity. The micro touch versus the macro universe. My hand is still working, but in connection with elemental forces.

When one drops something, the effect is a shattering; and to use the language of dropping, I might be also dropping boundaries, genres, expectations, limits, history. I am also dropping down, going low. Breaking the boundary between high and low, between painting and craft. I am moving between them.

I am drawn to the occult power of the misunderstood. Craft is a language different to painting. I exaggerate craft and I am not versed in the language very deeply. I import foreign hands, in this case, those of the German paper marbler Dirk Lange. *Unstable Talismanic Renderings* need to be made by four hands, two of an artist and two of a craftsman. One cannot pick the paper up alone. The wall is useless to the process. The painting is made inside a basin filled with water, a sort of analogue flatbed scanner. Dramatically oversize, they loom like ambient projections of smaller fetish pages. Talisman-monster mocking the amulet, only to become a haunting specter itself.



To import, a verb from DAS INSTITUT: an import and export agency. The agency to import, or to speak, another language,

with limited knowledge. In doing so I can perhaps bring out the unconscious power of craft, by determining it within a painter's language. I am mistranslating the concerns of craft, as they have become known to us.

The talismanic is unstable. How else to explain the way it takes on a life of its own? Hyper-real details transform solvents and dyes into characters, reminiscent of anime, cartoons, insects. Wild-eyed and breathing, alchemy or witchcraft seems suddenly the only explanation behind these creations: painting as pot-stirring. Like Voodoo or Candomble, the same random drop that creates chaos can create order, the order of another existence. From the margins to the centre and back again, fluidly. One drop produces a creature in an alternative cosmos.

Simultaneous planes of existence interface. We can not enter into the other entirely, but exchange only glimpses. Parallel existences feed off each other, like parasites who have evolved to survive off the blood of a mammal, whose very existence they are not yet aware of, but wait, without waiting, for it to walk by... So the eyes, assholes, belly buttons, voids, mouths, holes, hairy edges, antennae, and all other parts ramble along the paper, with and without purpose.

They could be from deep space, or deep underwater; both miasmas we normally need machinery to see into.

Now think about the associations of marbling. Marble. The hallowed material of monuments and Renaissance sculpture. Purity. Italian white marbles. Austere, high culture. Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*. It was in the Warburg Institute in London actually where I first saw some small sized paper-marbling on the walls.

They were delicate and used as passepartout frames for xeroxed images from Warburg's collection.

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It occurs to me that the craft of marbling paper was developed principally to use as a background for words, starting with official documents in 15th century Japan, to protect them from forgery; and for poems, as the dreamy irregularity seemed to suit and warn readers of poetry's unconventional and magical placement of words to gain sense. Later it went via Turkey (Ebru) and the Middle East to Europe and became most highly recognizable as the front and back covers within books—"endpapers," as they are commonly known.

Front and back: standing before and after language. Offering a visual equivalent of the origins myth. Cosmic soup, grey matter. An effervescent mix of thoughts and feelings that remain undifferentiated; and only through which the strict and careful crafting of language can any of these elements be distinguished, be laid down neatly, separately, in black press on white pages, turned into ideas. The marbling inside the covers of books stage the chaos of our minds and interiors, setting up a non-verbal blast so that the words which follow will look especially clear; and descends back into chaos once the words end. *Logos* rules. The marblings have been offered as a glimpse into the other territories of our existences. They are also patterned, and fractal, like nature. They seem sometimes to have a logic. They might repeat, like a film-sequence, but each marbling paper comes out differently, despite

the same technique, so we perceive them as timeless. The structure of the book offers comforts from the formlessness of lived experience, but it is necessary to have the marbling paper in there too, small decorative emblems of our true nature, which by inversion, hint at how constructed language is.

In an echo of that structure, in this lecture, images are endpapers, and these words that I speak are a small offering, a parallel movement that dips in and out of language, like a whale in a current. Playful and heavy.

[10 kl. marblings]

What is my problem? The language of painting, how to describe the limits of language when it comes to visual sensations.

What is my solution? Use the language of painting, all the languages, not only one. Describe painting as a language itself. Show how language mistakes, mix-ups, muteness, a paranoia of speaking about it, and misunderstanding are all valid ways to speak about painting. Shared root words, sometimes connected properly, sometimes pure coincidence, create a network of meaning.

Craft dissolves the I. Question the voice. Use 4 hands, use another voice.

Play it back, like hearing my voice on a voice-mail.

The appeal of each marbling being unique, contradiction because it is made with a technique...

so subjectivity is undermined by material and process, though it would seem to speak over and beyond the impersonal...

cloud and wind, smoke, floating
elemental, body (blowing), comb... touch