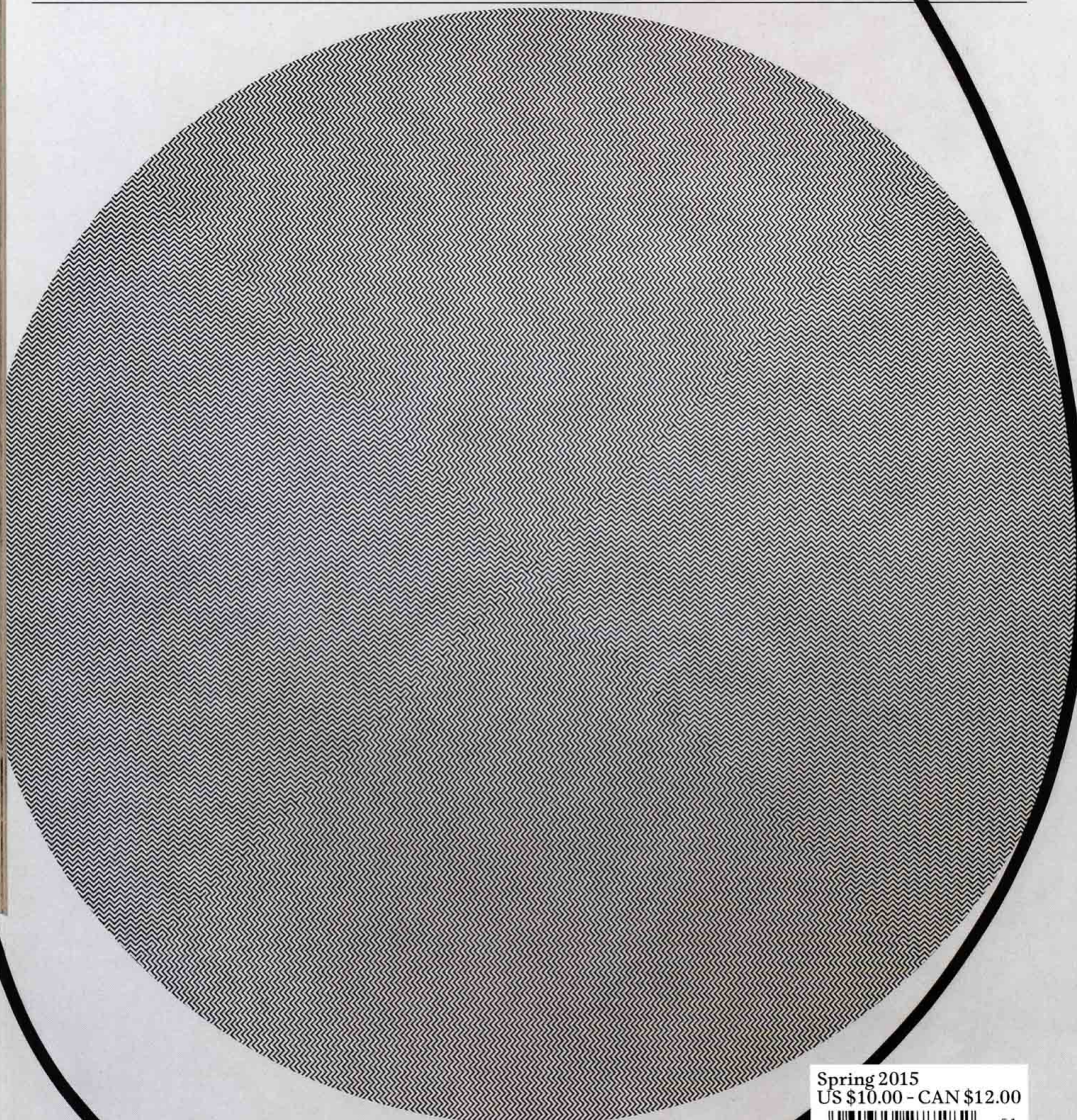


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Afterall

A Journal of Art,
Context and Enquiry

Sharon Hayes
James Richards
R.H. Quaytman
Solo Exhibitions



Spring 2015
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R.H. Quaytman,
O Tópico, Chapter 27,
2014, encaustic, oil,
gouache, urethane
foam, silkscreen
ink and gesso on two
panels, 31.4 × 31.4cm
and 82.6 × 82.6cm,
detail

Previous spread:
R.H. Quaytman,
O Tópico, Chapter 27,
2014, encaustic,
oil, gouache,
silkscreen ink
and gesso on panel,
62.9 × 101.6cm.
Both images courtesy
the artist and
Gladstone Gallery,
New York and
Brussels

R.H. Quaytman: Archive to Ark, the Subjects of Painting

— Sarah Ganz Blythe

*Onward! enough speculation
keep on copying
the page must be filled.
Everything is equal, the good and the evil,
the fruitful and the typical,
they all become an exaltation of the
statistical.
There is nothing but facts — and phenomena
Final Bliss*

— Gustave Flaubert via Hanne Darboven
via Douglas Crimp (via R.H. Quaytman)¹

‘Did early abstraction inadvertently indoctrinate us into modes of thinking and perceiving that now prevent the revolutionary experience they first provided?’, R.H. Quaytman asks.² To address this question, she devises an ‘artist’s art history’ that follows a learning-by-doing model through which she inserts herself into the material presence of this history.

Her work in response to Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* (1920) is a case in point. Klee first exhibited the transfer drawing with watercolour — a wide-eyed angel

Klee’s angel became the ‘angel of history’ whose ‘face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees only single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. [...] What we call progress is *this* storm.’⁴ Shortly after writing this in 1940 as part of his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin is believed to have left the drawing in the care of Georges Bataille, who then passed it on to Theodor W. Adorno, who gave it to Scholem, who donated it to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Quaytman knew this life history when she visited the drawing there in 2014. She was struck by the figure’s ambiguity — angel or animal, male or female, self-portrait or alter ego? For one work in the series *O Tópico, Chapter 27* (2014), she meticulously copied the image onto a wood panel, replicating Klee’s transfer technique, hoping to learn more through the making of the thing.⁵ In Quaytman’s rendering, a molten polyurethane splatter now comes between the angel and the past he suspiciously contemplates from a modest hole. A wide border of a geometric pattern derived from a Brazilian basket weave cleanly frames the black cloud; it is at once evocative of medieval icons and Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist compositions. Besides the afterglow of fluorescent paint applied to the top edge of the panel, there is no heavenly benevolence or ethereal escape here. It is not the past that Quaytman’s angel surveys, but us, the viewers.

Such conscious positioning of viewership lies at the core of Quaytman’s work: ‘My pictures often reflect the space in front of the picture and the space the viewer is in, historically, optically or

Sarah Ganz Blythe describes how R.H. Quaytman’s engagement with painting is perched between history and site, transparency and opacity.

hovering with wings outstretched, gaping mouth, locks of hair and feathers fluttering — in 1920 at Galerie Goltz in Munich. It inspired Gershon Scholem to pen a poem, ‘Greetings from Angelus’ (1921), to Walter Benjamin, who had purchased the drawing from the show.³ In Benjamin’s hands,

1 R.H. Quaytman, *Chapter 24*, Mönchengladbach: Museum Abteiberg, 2012.

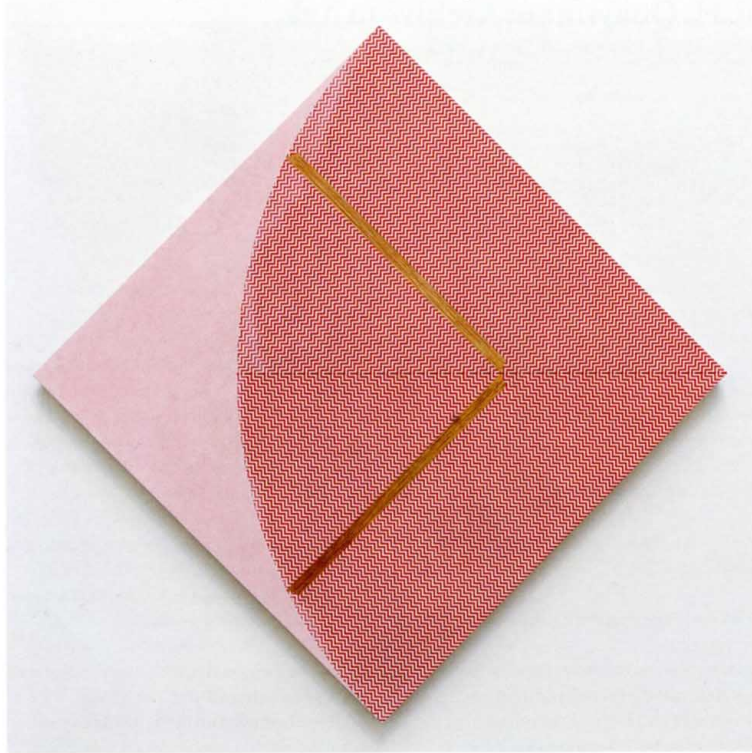
2 R.H. Quaytman, ‘R.H. Quaytman’, *October*, vol. 143, Winter 2013, p. 49.

3 See Gershon Gerhard Scholem, ‘Greetings from Angelus’, *The Fullness of Time* (ed. and intro. by Steven M. Wasserstrom, trans. Richard Sieburth), Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2003.

4 Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations* (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 249.

5 I saw portions of *O Tópico, Chapter 27* laid out in Quaytman’s studio in September 2014, and in November visited its full installation at Gladstone Gallery in New York, which was organised as a prelude for its ultimate destination in Inhotim, Brazil in a pavilion designed by Solveig Fernlund.

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R.H. Quaytman,
O Tópico, Chapter 27,
2014, oil, silkscreen
ink and gesso on
panel, 82.2 × 82.2cm.
Courtesy the artist
and Gladstone
Gallery, New York
and Brussels

architecturally.⁶ She achieves this through a working method that takes the conceptual form of an inconclusive book, in which each new exhibition of predominantly photography-based silkscreened images equates to a chapter that is developed in response to the location where they will be shown. 'The ambition of this ongoing serialised system', Quaytman writes, 'is to develop a living, usable painting model, that corresponds with how – not only what – we see.'⁷ For example, the use of Klee's *Angelus Novus* points towards her forthcoming body of work, *Chapter 28*, which will be presented in June of this year at the Israel Museum, while the border of the Atantowoto basket-weave pattern refers to Brazil, the eventual site of *O Tópico, Chapter 27*. The latter will be Quaytman's first permanent installation, housed in a garden pavilion at the Centro de Arte Contemporânea Inhotim, near Belo Horizonte. The building will take the form of the golden spiral, with interior walls positioned according to the Fibonacci

sequence. The spiral's curve is also registered in the gesso of several panels of the series, which themselves are proportioned according to the eight component parts of the golden ratio, a format the artist has adhered to since her first chapter, in 2001, and which she intends to pursue for the remainder of her career. While this conceptual framework connects the logic of the panels to that of the framing exhibition space, the panels' surfaces register their surroundings via images of historical artworks, artists or events associated with the gallery, institution or location of display. The result of archival and field research, Quaytman's 'subjects', as the Portuguese title *O Tópico* ('The Topic') suggests, are specific and wide-ranging, among them: a seed the artist found on the ground while visiting Brazil; a teenager posing in front of an old VW Bug, referring to an artwork by the Brazilian artist Jarbas Lopes; and the artist Dawn Kasper, shown working on a drawing that says 'chaos is a ...'. The panels

⁶ R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011, p.247.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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Installation view, 'R.H. Quaytman: *O Tópico, Chapter 27*', Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2014. Pictured, back to front: *O Tópico, Chapter 27*, 2014, silkscreen ink and gesso on wood, 94 × 152.4cm; *O Tópico, Chapter 27 (Repair)*, 2014, varnish, silkscreen ink and gesso on wood, 62.9 × 101.6cm; and *O Tópico, Chapter 27*, 2014, gesso on wood, 31.4 × 31.4cm. Photograph: David Regen. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

bring external referents into the gallery 'in the hope that', as Quaytman says, '...attention, whether from a gaze or a glance, can be contained, reflected and distracted'.⁸

In this sense, painting is made to work against some of its most traditional formulations. Rather than offering a window-like view onto other worlds, the panels press into the gallery space and are formulated so that each is to be read in relation to its neighbour or another piece in the chapter. Occasional plinths protruding from the panels of Quaytman's paintings, or, elsewhere, shelves accommodating a selection of them, disrupt the suspension of disbelief that representational images can produce while affirming the paintings' status as objects that will be stored away. Rather than invoking a hermetic processional encounter, in which visitors would stop reverentially in front of each work, Quaytman's paintings are positioned 'as objects that you passed by — as things that you saw not just head-on and isolated, but from the side, with your peripheral vision, and in the context of other paintings'.⁹ Working against what she has called the

'aloneness and self-sufficiency' of paintings that 'behave like film in dark rooms', the flatness achieved through silkscreen on gesso allows the panels to 'reverberate with other paintings around'.¹⁰ A large vocabulary of artistic languages and references shapes this effect: abstraction and figuration, silkscreened photographs on gesso and polyurethane splats, absorbing Op art patterns and glimmering diamond-dust lines, hand-ground pigments and encaustic paint, printed text and striped lines that reference the panels' plywood edges while evoking Barnett Newman's zips.¹¹ Quaytman speaks of creating sustained attention through a visual syntax that inculcates first, second, even third readings in which the paintings open up many possible meanings, much like words in a poem.¹² For example, a sequence of silkscreened allusions to the paintings' place of exhibition may be interrupted by an Op art pattern that also indexes the site, while a 'caption' in the form of an arrow suggests punctuation. This variety is held together by a grammar in the form of rules that govern Quaytman's practice. Not unlike Richard Serra's text piece *Verb*

8 *Ibid.*, text printed on the cover.

9 Steel Stillman, 'In the Studio: R.H. Quaytman,' *Art in America*, June/July 2010, p.88.

10 R.H. Quaytman in conversation with David Joselit, 'I Modi', *Mousse*, issue 29, June—August 2011, p.136.

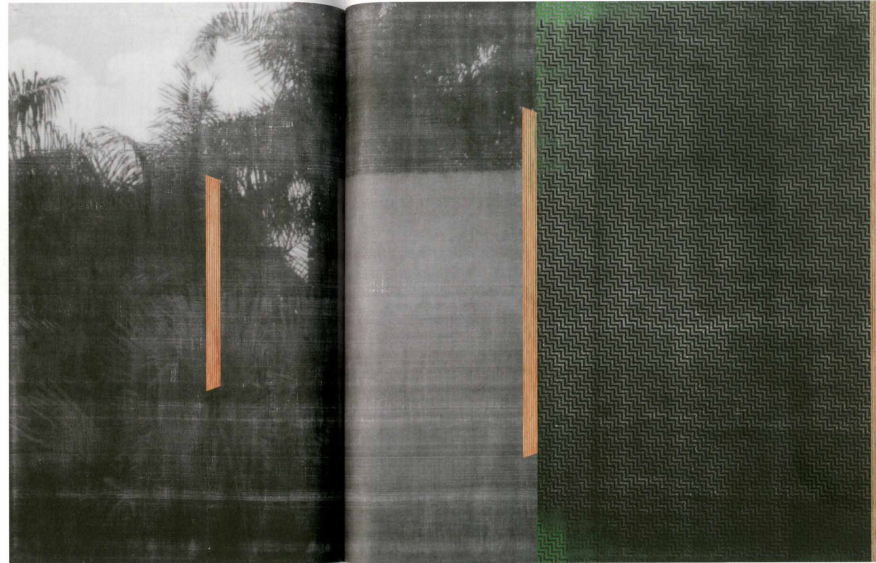
11 'The diamond-dust paintings attract focus, as opposed to repelling it the way the Op patterns tend to do. They pull you in while the others push you out.' R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, op. cit., p.157.

12 Conversation with the artist, 21 September 2014.

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List (1967–68), which offers a series of focused 'actions' that generate new forms, Quaytman's strict adherence to format (chapters, size [golden ratio] and support [gessoed plywood with beveled edges]) provides the structure through which materials and subjects may vary while remaining interconnected. Rather than closing down meaning and invention through an imposing single vision, the open structure of associative relations invoked by the panels allows distinct media, materials and subjects to remain themselves while also animating one another. Much like Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel, in which many voices, styles and references coexist within the author's construction, Quaytman's system permits a plurality of independent voices that are each allowed their own space within the gallery context.¹³ In one work from *O Topico*, Chapter 27, for example, a gestural blue-brown pool in wavy encaustic lies against the geometrical rigour of the golden spiral in egg-yolk yellow. Mondrian lozenges hung within viewing distance quietly reiterate a segment of the spiral's arc while perpendicular *trompe l'oeil* stripes evoke the plywood stripes that hover above the basket-weave pattern. Distinct pieces, like words, exist in and of themselves while also animating one another in contribution to their group as a whole.

But, what might this whole or subject be? Perhaps it is painting itself, summoned and pointed to without solely using the medium of painting, Quaytman writes: 'Despite my frequent use of photography, the digital and printmaking techniques, I use the name "painting" to describe what I do.'¹⁴ She seems to ask: can a painting be a painting while being something else? And, as if to test out her logic, she plays a game of substituting 'painting' as a noun for other words in a sentence. This grammar exercise plays out amid her notes that accompany each of the 61 plates in the artist's book *7, Chapter 24* (2012): 'Declension: the variants of the form of the noun, pronoun or adjective by which grammatical case, number and gender are identified.'¹⁵ Painting, like a part of speech, can be placed in different contexts and made to



act as the subject, predicate, verb or noun and then asked if it still retains its status as painting. 'Paintings, like words, lose their origin and become, over time, emblems.'¹⁶ Quaytman formally accomplishes this exercise by employing non-painting methods (photography, silkscreen, sculpture), but also through the use of historical paintings themselves. They make their appearance in almost every sequence, called up for their association with the

R.H. Quaytman, *O Topico, Chapter 27*, 2014, oil, silkscreen, ink and gesso on panel, 82.2 x 133cm. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

exhibition's context or to signal the next stop in Quaytman's itinerary. Her litany of iconic paintings by largely male modernist masters includes, in addition to the aforementioned examples El Lissitzky's *Protons*, Edward Hopper's *A Woman in the Sun* (1961), Lucio Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale (Spatial Concepts)*, Piero Manzoni's *Achromes* and Sigmar Polke's artificial resin paintings. She also draws on the photographs of such artists as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren and Andrea Fraser. This 'artist's art history' manifests itself through a range of replicative methods including the traditional academic mode of hand

copying (such as the Klee) and the relatively recent technique of silkscreening (typically to reproduce paintings or photographs of other artists). Consistently, historical references are deliberately disrupted through shifts in colour, stark overlaid lines, shallow plinths, additional panels or the application of bulbous polyurethane splashes. This at once calls up the figures of painting's past and interrupts, distorts and critically works against its utopic impulses and celebrated heroes.

Quaytman's tactical approach is both inventive and resourceful. It balances the sheer desire to participate in painting while soberly mitigating the pitfalls

¹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
¹⁴ R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, op. cit., text printed on the cover.
¹⁵ R.H. Quaytman, *7, Chapter 24*, op. cit.
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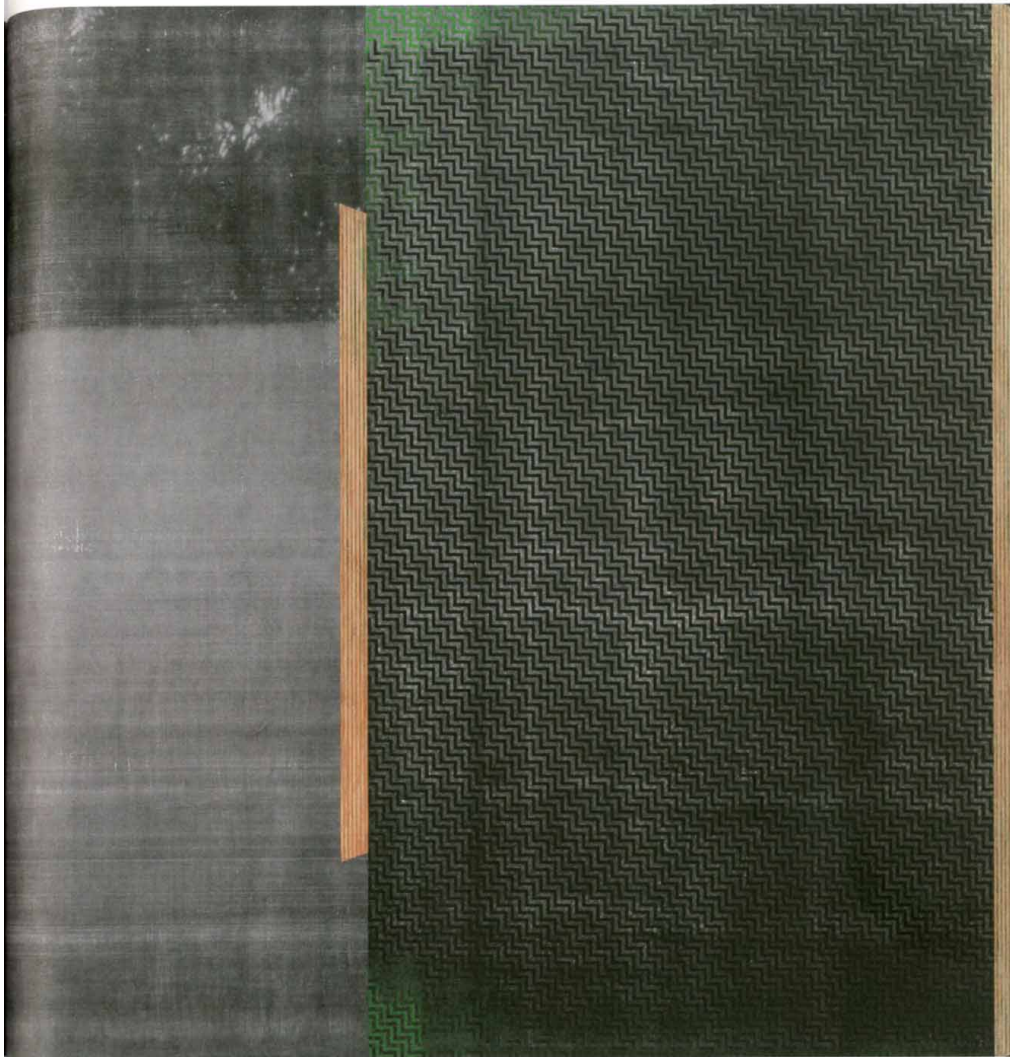
¹³ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

¹⁴ R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, *op. cit.*, text printed on the cover.

¹⁵ R.H. Quaytman, *7, Chapter 24*, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ R.H. Quaytman, 'R.H. Quaytman', *op. cit.*, p.49.

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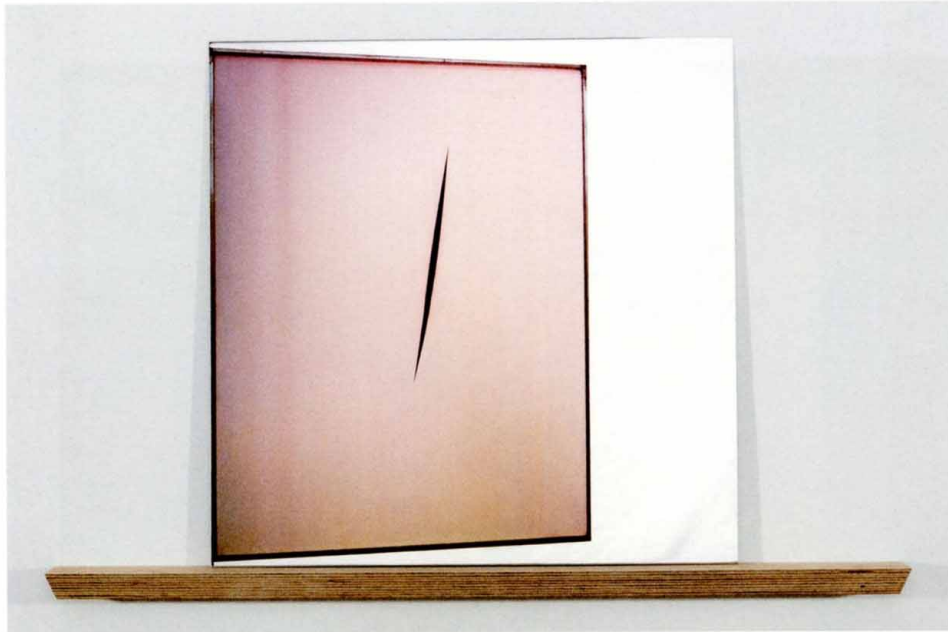
Artists: R.H. Quaytman | 81

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82 | Aherall

Artiste: R.H. Quaytman | 83



of involvement.¹⁷ This is accomplished, in part, by fashioning painting's narrative as the artist so chooses — calling up certain masters, alluding to particular radical moments. Quaytman takes what has come before as an opportunity to absorb and construct: 'My rules were also made as a protest in a sense, but as a protest in favour of a medium — specifically painting. Maybe it was more of an accommodation than a protest. The rules come out of accommodating contextual facts that seem so unavoidable or endemic that they are not even seen anymore.'¹⁸ So, like the angel of history, Quaytman persistently assesses history and finds herself at once fascinated and unmoored by it. But rather than gingerly backing away from the accumulation of ruins, she acts as an anthropologist, collecting and marking pieces of that history. As she describes, this approach started in 2001: 'The start of the new millennium, combined with the historical circumstances of 9/11 ... induced a sharp sense of flowing time and the instinct to mark it.'¹⁹ Such marking literally manifests itself in *O Tópico*,

Chapter 27 when her fingerprint overlays a pictogram of the Roman Empire taken from Emma Willard's *Universal History: In Perspective* (1845). A source used in previous chapters, Willard's textbook relates to other pedagogical references,

Rather than offering a window-like view onto other worlds, Quaytman's paintings press into the gallery space.

including knitting patterns and instructions for making knots. Throughout, Quaytman's acts of transformation are in the spirit of Claude Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur, who intervenes and relocates signs and sources into new positions or contexts, disrupting their original context or narrative to constitute a new discourse.²⁰ The once-removed (silkscreened photographs of paintings) or even twice-removed (silkscreened X-rays of paintings) presence of historical materials testifies to her ambivalence about the meaning of the past, while also offering an actionable, often

R.H. Quaytman, *7 (Concetto Spaziale Attese)*, Chapter 24, 2012, lithographic print on stainless steel plate, 51.1 × 51.1cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne and Berlin

Opposite:
R.H. Quaytman, *O Tópico*, Chapter 27, 2014, copper powder, enamel, silkscreen ink and gesso on panel. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

17 Quaytman has said she lives by the Constructivist sculptor Katarzyna Kobro's statement: 'I like to have fun by correcting what was not finished in any former artistic movement.' Quoted in R.H. Quaytman, 'R.H. Quaytman', *op. cit.*, p.50.

18 R.H. Quaytman in conversation with D. Joselit, 'I Modi', *op. cit.*, p.131.

19 R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, *op. cit.*, text printed on the cover.

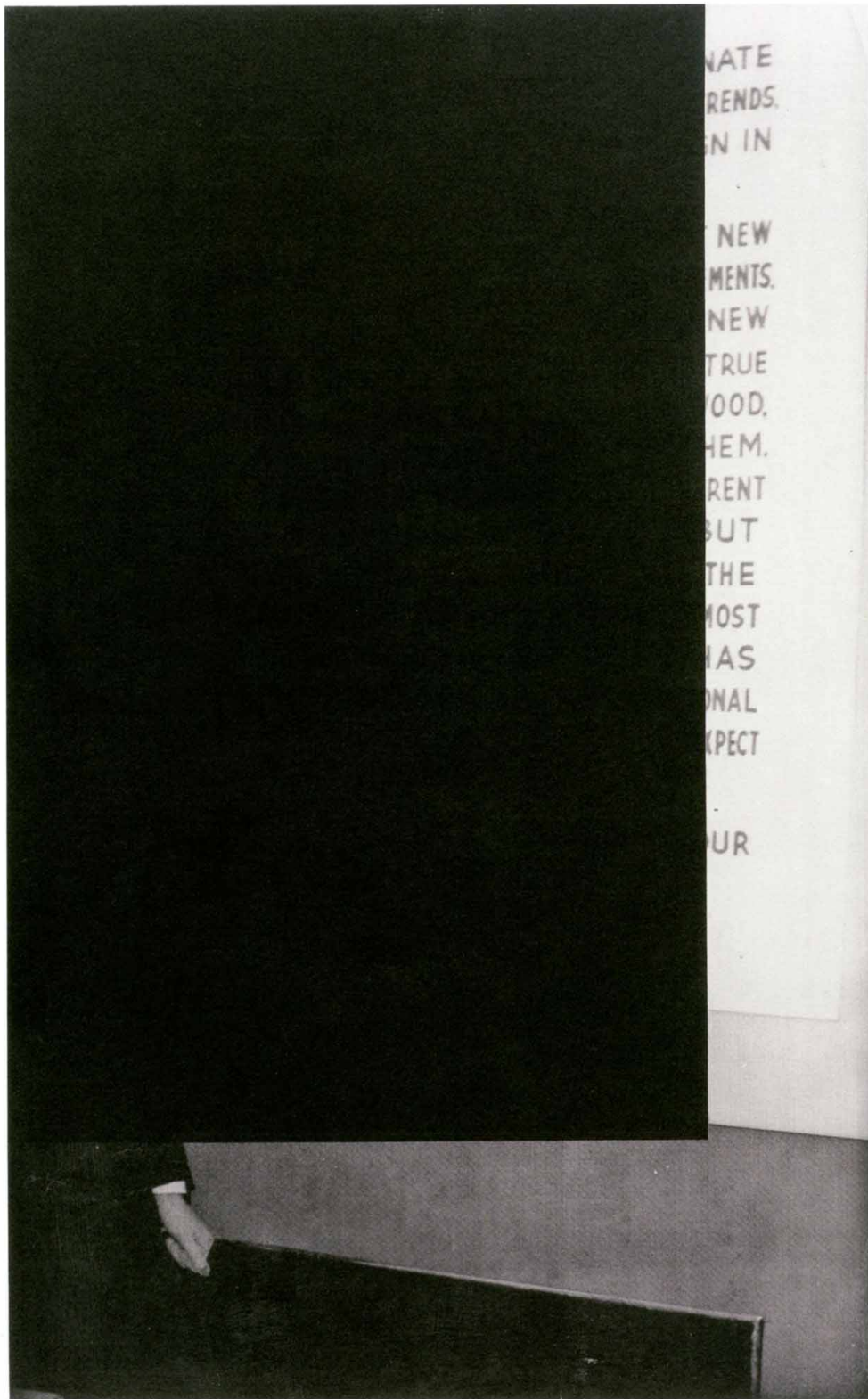
20 See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

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Artists: R.H. Quaytman | 85

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R.H. Quaytman,
Exhibition Guide,
Chapter 15, 2009,
silkscreen, gesso on
wood, 101.6 × 63cm.
Courtesy the artist
and Miguel Abreu
Gallery, New York

critical way to insert herself into a number of structures that surround it: the patriarchal nature of painting's past, the history of place, the systems of the art world.

Lest her purposes be misinterpreted, or not interpreted at all, this process of bricolage is always undertaken with logic and explanation. Perhaps as a function of her years spent occupying many positions — curator, writer, editor, gallery owner, artist's assistant — or in resistance to notions of the impulsive, expressive creator, Quaytman consistently explains her purpose using the art world's most viable formats: books akin to catalogues raisonnés (*Allegorical Decoys*, 2008; *Spine*, 2011; 7, 2012); statements issued with each chapter; and display instructions concerning how purchased works should be hung. Knowledge gained from lived experience has allowed her to smartly play with but also work against the pitfalls of the art world to assure that hers is not the forgotten, unstorable or unwritten-about work. She manages the 'circulation of the painting as it either folds into the archive of the book/studio or embarks into the world — archive to ark'.²¹ Indeed, Quaytman adopts the gallery as ark, all-containing and protective, as an inevitable construct. Unlike the negotiations between self and history apparent in her version of an 'artist's art history', the gallery remains unscathed, an aesthetic container of silent dominance much like what Brian O'Doherty described in the 1970s.²² However, Quaytman's system is devised to accommodate the reality that this well-ordered ark is but a temporary haven — its contents will soon be archive bound.

This focus on the past is tempered by Quaytman's interrogation of the manufactured narrative of art history: again, 'Did early abstraction inadvertently indoctrinate us into modes of thinking and perceiving that now prevent the revolutionary experience they first provided?'²³ Without answering this in the affirmative or negative, the question itself opens up a line of enquiry about painting's

efficacy then and now. Did early-twentieth-century avant-garde practices actually have the revolutionary impact we now pine for? Did its novel formulations incite revolutionary experiences we can no longer access? If so, can rehearsing its forms and stories ever provide such revolutionary experiences again?²⁴ For Quaytman, the subject of painting is the devoted commitment to continuously working through these questions, at once to 'maintain and simultaneously disrupt painting's absolute presence'.²⁵ As such, it is necessary to remain at a proper distance from which to observe, analyse and speculate, as the logic, material form and compositions of her paintings gesture back to history and location, left and right to elsewhere in the chapter or the next, and directly in front to us. Her work suggests, like the *Angelus Novus*, that our present is an ambiguous state of affairs, caught between the storm 'called progress' blowing from Paradise and a fascination with 'the wreckage of the past'.²⁶ In this suspended limbo, these pictures want something of us, as W.J.T. Mitchell would suggest.²⁷ They compel us to ask: Should we perpetuate the angel's fixation on the past, or turn around? How might the past be our constant companion along the way to Paradise? What might the subjects of painting be tomorrow?

21 R.H. Quaytman, *Spine*, *op. cit.*, text printed on the cover.

22 See Brian O'Doherty, 'The Gallery as Gesture', in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp.87–107.

23 R.H. Quaytman, 'R.H. Quaytman', *op. cit.*, p.49.

24 See Saint-Simon's definition of the avant-garde in Claude Henri de Saint-Simon and Léon Halévy's *L'Artiste, le Savant, et l'Industriel: Dialogue* (1825), reprinted in translation in *Art in Theory, 1815–1900* (ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood with Jason Gaiger), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998, pp.40–41.

25 R.H. Quaytman, *Allegorical Decoys*, Ghent: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2008.

26 W. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *op. cit.*

27 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.