

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

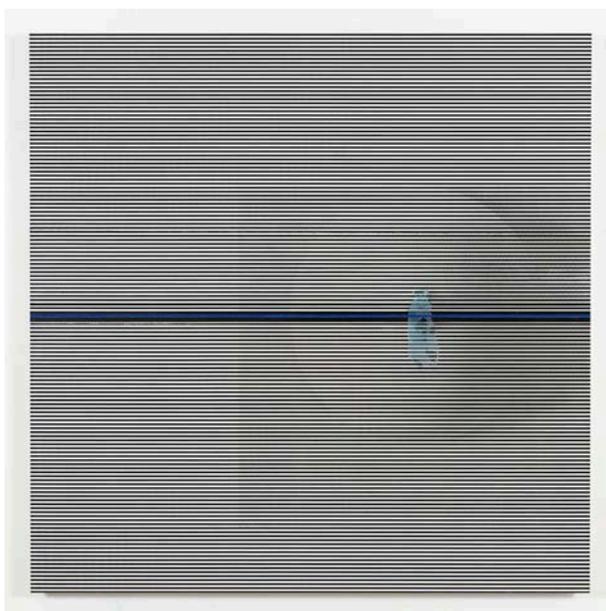
Daniel Muzyczuk, "Everything Is There: R.H. Quaytman," *Mousse Magazine*, November 2019

## Mousse Magazine

CONVERSATIONS

# Everything Is There: R. H. Quaytman

R. H. Quaytman interviewed by Daniel Muzyczuk



R. H. Quaytman, *The Sun Does Not Move, Chapter 35*, 2019

How to reinvent painting in the context of the overwhelming power of photography? By adding tensions between narrative and abstraction, surface and depth, painterly and sculptural, unique and multiple, R. H. Quaytman has created a compelling and complex body of painterly work in the last two decades. This conversation took place before the opening of *Chapter 35* of her ever-growing “book” at Muzeum Sztuki in

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Łódź, Poland. It occupies the same space where she first encountered the work of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, whose theories became important reference points for the rules governing her work.

DANIEL MUZYCZUK: Since 2001 you've been working on a book where chapters take the form of exhibitions composed of paintings. These are constructed in a few sizes and based usually on photographs silkscreen-printed on gessoed plywood panels. The system is composed of strict rules and retrospectively feels very coherent. How did this system evolve? And since the writing of the book takes so long, do you see a possibility that the first chapters will eventually need corrections or editing to fit the overall narrative?

R. H. QUAYTMAN: It's not so much that they'll require corrective edits, but that they encourage (re)interpretation. I know they could never be put together again in their entirety. They have been, thankfully, scattered all over the globe. Individual paintings can be borrowed back for exhibitions based on the goodwill of collectors and their willingness to work with the interpretations of curators. Every chapter proposes an interpretation because one grows from the last or has the next one in mind. Of course I'm not really making a book—the paintings are not pages and can't be read. But calling it a book helped extricate me from some bad painting habits. It was a way to shift my own viewpoint, not the viewer's. It also enabled me to incorporate the reading and research that I so like to do. When I began in the late 1980s, remember, painting was considered dead, even by myself.

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There are only two rules. The first has to do with the paintings' dimensions, which I got directly from the ideas of Katarzyna Kobro. Namely, there used to be ten sizes, but beginning with this group there will be only eight. These delimited dimensions guide the installation and enable me to fill quite large spaces with relatively small paintings. After studying Kobro, the architect Anne Tyng, and Tony Smith, I became interested in the generative logic of the golden section. I started from one dimension, 20 inches, roughly the height of Kobro's *Spatial Composition II* (1928), then I multiplied that by 1.618 and got my first size: 20 × 32.36 inches. From this—bigger or smaller, square or rectangle—all sizes have overall coherence.

The other rule is that all the paintings are on plywood panels with a beveled edge. I don't like painting on a bouncy canvas, and I don't like stretcher bars. The plywood also adds a sculptural quality that emphasizes the materiality of the picture.

DM: Were you experimenting a lot with plywood before you reached your set of solutions?

RHQ: I'd been working on wood for ten years before *The Sun, Chapter 1* (2001) was shown in 2001. Over the previous two decades I built the foundation of the book structure based on studies in art history, architecture, perspective, and photography. The question of how to counter photography became an ongoing pursuit. The original problem was how to make an abstract painting at all. At that time, in the early 1990s, I tried to bring perspective back into abstraction, with grids in a perspective arrangement whose vanishing point was the edge of the panel. A bit like Sarah Morris's

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paintings. I then wanted to see how the painting itself looked in perspective, and in order to do that I needed to build a model of an empty space. So I put a very small painting in a foam-core box and photographed it with a black-and-white Polaroid camera. I needed a camera to figure out a point of view, and the best way to get those photographs onto the panel was silkscreen. Photographs are obviously powerful, and I almost couldn't bear it on the painting, they just dominate legibility. So I began using Kobra's work as a way to think through these problems within painting. I chose her most minimal sculpture to build myself a prop. I wanted to use a three-dimensional sculpture to underscore photography's flatness—to show its inadequacy.

DM: There are multiple movements in your work. The painting invites you to see it from the front; the bevel promises more from an angle. Then there is the movement you plot while grouping a set of works into a chapter. The connections are forming a sequence that is presumed while seeing works in space.

RHQ: It is a simple thing that every artist does anyway, but maybe I do emphasize the hieroglyphic reading.

DM: There is yet another movement that is introduced by the act of superimposing images. The dialectical images are mediated by the spatial and temporal distance between them.

RHQ: I was interested in how to make a painting site specific, like all the interesting art of the time. So when I was invited to make some paintings for the 2000 show *The Earth Is a Flower, Construction in Process* in Bydgoszcz,

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Poland, I had this problem: How do I make site-specific paintings without a site? Łódź was where my grandfather Marcus Quaytman was born, and he was Jewish and it was Poland and, you know, one's thoughts inevitably go one way. I didn't want to go that way, though. I wanted to go through art history, and that's what led me straight to Kobra, and then later Władysław Strzemiński. My idea was to flip their theories regarding medium. Small conceptual twists can make paintings work the way other mediums do. If this was *Game of Thrones*, maybe painting is the only medium capable of defeating the victorious walking dead: photography.

DM: What qualities of Strzemiński's paintings are interesting for you? It is obvious that you take the notion of afterimage really seriously, as your work is full of solarizing memory processes. His Unistic works utilized effects predating Op art. Moreover, he was stressing the materiality of the painting itself.

RHQ: Exactly. This materiality includes its own status as a painting—hanging, or laying on a table, or placed on a shelf. I only thought of that through Kobra's ideas. I also worked on the reverse by putting a flat photo of her sculpture into a one-point perspective whose vanishing point was the edge of the panel.

DM: When you are using optical illusion, patterns, you force people to move away. Their bodies increase the distance in order to lose sight of the details and see the image that the pattern is obscuring.

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RHQ: Yes, those paintings can repel and push the gaze onward to the next painting, to seek relief. Like little motors to propel movement through the exhibition. Of course you can look at them closely, but it burns. You need to go to the next painting for relief, but the afterimage burns through in the focus of the next. Like the computer screen.

DM: Burning is an ideal expression, as they cause afterimages. Your retina will superimpose that briefly seen pattern on the next image. *Chapter 17* at Silberkuppe, Berlin, in 2010 touched on this. But one might ask if the afterimage isn't also the simplest memory device. It certainly was for the half-blind Strzemiński.

RHQ: I recently began painting on the photographically based silkscreened images much more than I used to. To "paint" like a painter with a brush and a palette in a big studio on a big painting, with a cigarette. With an arm and hand.

Two works prepared for the show in Łódź are close-ups of Strzemiński paintings. I silkscreened onto panels close-ups of the paint and brushstrokes from his "optical" paintings. Through this focusing and reproduction I claim them. Their digital origin is underscored in the low resolution of the process itself. Some of them looked like those 3D patterns with embedded hidden images, which is how I went about approaching the paintings. I allowed that strong urge to look at them in a way that another image jumps out, and was surprised to find where it led. Maybe it's a trick to claim my innocence.

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DM: You use language as a kind of keystone that fills the abstraction with meaning. This figurative function of language adds an element to the abstract. It is visible in the titles of individual chapters.

RHQ: Everything is abstract now, and so this process of seeing things in things is easier. It has disintegrated into digits. So we have to figure out what and how we are seeing, and know when we see what we're supposed to see. I guess I do follow language reluctantly. I find it helpful to think of paintings with things like nouns and verbs and even declension. When I'm happiest with a painting, it feels like I've made an aphorism.

DM: This reminds me the painting *Pengő* (1966) by Victor Vasarely, which is composed of yellow circles. The name refers to a Hungarian currency used in the first half of the twentieth century. This simple gesture transforms the abstract into the figurative.

RHQ: Yes, it's ironically poetic. I get many ideas through poetics. Every word resonates in multiple directions. Try reading a poem as if you were looking at a painting: it always seems simpler that way. Gershom Scholem wrote somewhere that "the image escapes in every direction." Images are radically free and dangerously malleable. I'm interested in seeing that escape, in order to lead the painting reluctantly but gracefully outside itself. Perhaps this is aphoristic. Anyway it is from this perspective that began twenty years ago with a trip to Poland that I got the idea to use that word "book." *The Sun Does Not Move, Chapter 35* is also a retrospective look back. The method, with its removed logic, led me to reflect on the sci-fi quality of the present. Or

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maybe it works like a seventeenth-century landscape by Jacob van Ruisdael. I'm not sure.

DM: Your practice is also rooted in institutional critique, which probably overlaps with your capacity as a curator. You speak about the condition of painting, reproduction, authorship, and the conditions of making an exhibition. This is why it needs to be strongly localized or contextual.

RHQ: I learned a little about curating and site specificity while working at PS1 in the late 1980s. That job taught me more than any MFA could have.

Curating can be quite brutal because certain works have to be given more or less emphasis than others. It is not fair and it is not democratic. That early experience also was a lesson in the power of art history to shape and distort, and that I'd better make my own. As Kobro wrote, "I like to have fun by correcting what was not finished in any former artistic movement."

DM: This leads to the question of obsolescence. I am curious what you would say about the relation between that territory versus nostalgia.

RHQ: I think the notion of nostalgia is changing. For example, the distance between Strzemiński and myself feels shorter now than when I began. In some ways, this a-chronological nature is the most anti-perspectival thing I've ever made.

DM: A work placed in a group show shares time and space with other pieces that come from different places and moments.

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RHQ: That is the reason the title of *Chapter 35 is The Sun Does Not Move*. It's a return to *Chapter 1, The Sun*. I love the idea that the artist can build a chain or genealogy that visibly links with other art. This is different from the usual sense of appropriation, which was more about delinking the art object from the male artist.

DM: The feminist issues have become explicit recently in your work. Was your decision to work through painting also a consciously feminist decision?

RHQ: My feminism arose initially from mining art history for lesser-known artists. Rather than use Warhol or Marcel Duchamp like Sturtevant or Sherrie Levine, I found it productive to research and base my practice on artists who were not so famous, whose ideas were not so exposed, like Kobra and Hilma af Klint I also got quite a lot from Andrea Fraser's piece *May I Help You* (1991). And naturally politics begins with one's identity. There is unavoidably biography in the paintings. It is my firm belief that all art includes biography, consciously or not.