

GLADSTONE GALLERY

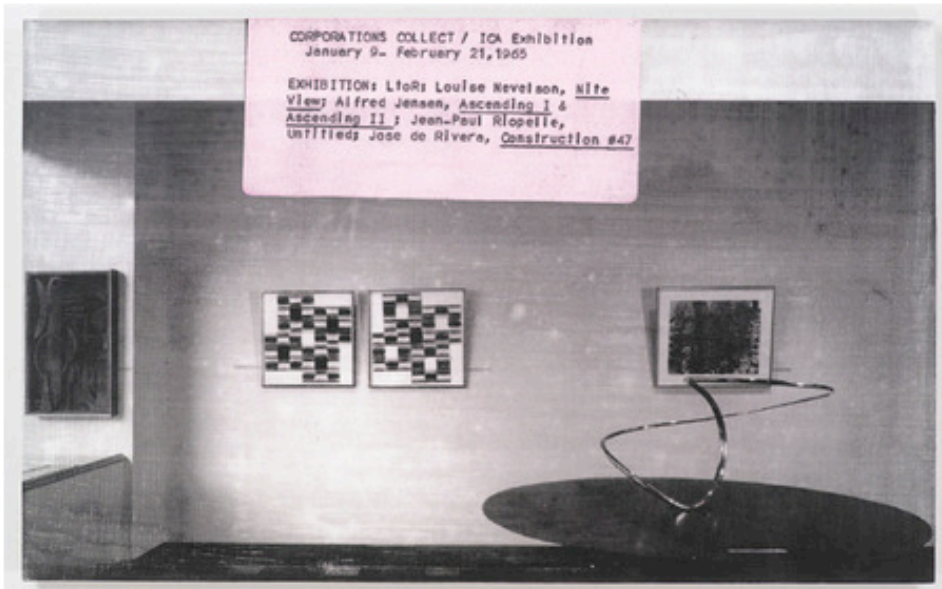
Paul Galvez, "R.H. Quaytman: ICA Boston," *Artforum*, May 2010,
<http://cn.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201005&id=25452>.

MAY 2010

R. H. Quaytman

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART, BOSTON

Paul Galvez



R. H. Quaytman,
Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15 (ICA archive 5, Art for Corporations), 2009, silk screen, gesso on wood, 32 3/8 x 20".

TWO SILK-SCREEN PAINTINGS, which recently hung together in a corner at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, could stand as an emblem for the painting practice of New York-based artist R. H. Quaytman. Both show the same archival photograph of a 1966 ICA exhibition, "Art for U.S. Embassies." Across the upper half of each, another photograph is overlaid, of a white wall on whose left side hangs an Op-art chevron painting, Terri Priest's *Organic Interaction #107*, 1965, which was on view in the original exhibition. So an image of an abstract painting sits on a monochromatic picture plane that sits on a photograph that sits on a panel. This cross section of layers already yields much: a nod to the optical but also mechanical nature of abstract painting; archival traces of the ICA's history; and the déjà vu of seeing one's experience of the gallery folded into the work itself.

But the two corner panels are not exactly identical. One is the mirror image of the other. As such, they are the same *and* different. Or, better, we are made aware of the slightest differences because the two are almost, but not quite, the same. So one cannot really say that this single work or any other allegorizes the whole. I think that Quaytman, the former director of Orchard gallery in New York, aims to defeat such moments of tidy summary, the better to prevent any master term or template, just as a mirror reflection inverts an original reality or splits it into two.

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Quaytman has for years been creating installations of painted panels that she terms "chapters." The mirror-image works at the ICA were part of her fifteenth such installation—"Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15"—which also happened to be the fifteenth exhibition in the ICA's Momentum series. It *also* happened to overlap with Quaytman's sixteenth installation, "Distracting Distance, Chapter 16," at the Whitney Biennial in New York. I saw Chapter 16 before Chapter 15. But reading out of order is largely beside the point. Quaytman's chapters are really inflections of a single word, *painting*, and with great clarity she explores all its possible grammatical extensions and etymological roots, without adhering to any simple sequential progression. This takes her work into territory that is not necessarily pictorial, even though that is where it starts.

In Boston, the rules Quaytman followed were simple. Her paintings were oil or silk screen (or both) on gessoed wood panel. The panels came in six sizes, all based on the golden ratio. Each had prominently beveled edges on all sides. At times the panels appeared to float off the wall. As for subject matter, the range was also restricted. One category comprised abstract compositions of thin parallel lines; these were slightly offset or colored to create optical effects. The silk screens, many of which were abstractions, also came in two other types: photographs of other works or of the galleries they had occupied; and images related to the history of the museum.

But within these rules lay room for surprising variation. The ICA installation opened with a silk-screened reproduction of a 1948 manifesto announcing the conversion of the old Institute of Modern Art into one of "contemporary" art. Inside the main gallery were photo silk screens of corporate and ambassadorial collections curated by the ICA. A storage rack built into the side of the gallery entrance contained panels painted with views of a sculpture by David von Schlegell, Quaytman's stepfather, located a ten-minute walk away from the ICA's waterfront building.

The work's formal austerity and single-mindedness all but demanded a guiding principle or idea for viewers to make sense of it. Judging from audience reactions, however, many were flummoxed in their quest. The references in "Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15" to contexts past and present were no less enigmatic. They evoked institutional memory, but only obliquely. In fact, it is unlikely that visitors were aware that the precise pink color used in many of the paintings was taken from the Pantone shade of the ICA's Momentum series logo.

Very rarely did two panels in the same mode stand next to each other, and each panel gave rise to multiple modulations. An arrow painting at the entrance was at least three things simultaneously: a quasi-abstract form, a graphic directive to look at the adjacent panel, and source material for a painting in the next room. For every Op-art-like painting there was one of greasy or sandpaper-like textures or a photo-based one. The effect was to temper evanescent, visual play with things concrete and gritty.

Much work done in a conceptual vein—including so-called conceptual painting—aims at self-definition, at tautology. Yet Quaytman's chapters move in the opposite direction. They deny resolution. That is why they frustrate. But that is also the source of their affective power. What separates her work from the ad hoc quality of much recent art is its precise, unrelenting manner. No point is made, no argument delivered, without being deliberately deflected in a myriad of ways and all at once.

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Painting that thinks about its own discursive and institutional conditions is often called self-reflexive; it wants to look at itself in order to find "painting as such." Looking into Quaytman's mirror, however, we do not see *painting as such*. On the contrary, we see that words *such as painting* are not only reversed but already split: For Quaytman, *painting* is not simply an abstract designation but a noun indicating an object of visual scrutiny and a verb indicating an occasion to act. Her work thus reveals some of the possible inflections interior to all forms of self-reflection. It situates us within, not in front of, the mirror of our own multiple selves.

Paul Galvez is an art historian and critic based in Boston.