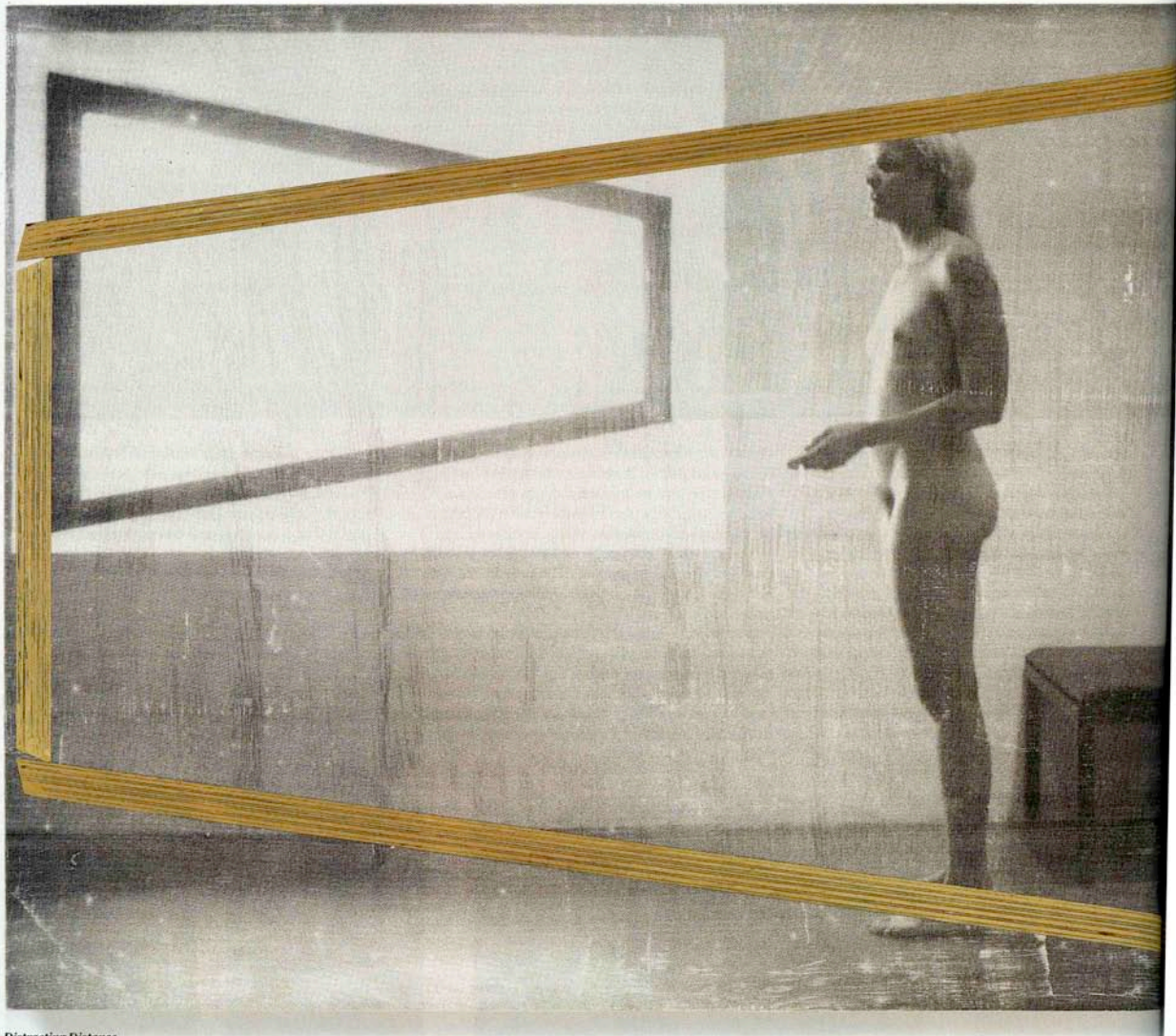


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Steven Stern, "Past Present," *Frieze*, Jun Jul Aug 2010: 132-135.

Past Present

From American Modernism to museum archives and the legacy of her artistic family, **R.H. Quaytman** telescopes time and place
by Steven Stern



*Distracting Distance,
Chapter 16 (A Woman
in the Sun - with Edges)*
2010
Oil, silkscreen and
gesso on wood
63x102 cm

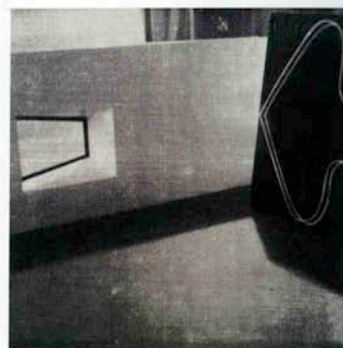
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*Distracting
Distance, Chapter 16
[arrow in model]*
2010
Silkscreen and gesso
on wood
51x51 cm



Noël Coward supposedly once complained that reading footnotes was like 'having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love.' It's a good line, capturing that frustrating, unromantic moment when one is torn away from all-absorbing transports, when the public world intrudes on private pleasure.

As it happens, I don't agree with the sentiment. I enjoy footnotes. I often read them before the main text, sometimes instead of the main text. My eyes drift down the page, away from the subject at hand, hoping to find tasty lost bits lodged at the bottom, like raisins sifted down a box of cereal. Distraction has its own pleasures. But perhaps it is not simply distraction at work, but some kind of protest against the supposedly seamless authority of the text. There is something humanizing about footnotes. They are records of the author's past and perhaps they are premonitions of the reader's future. They send you elsewhere - to the next book, the next research project, the next obsession. They move you along, into a network of connections, into further footnotes.

Maybe the reason footnotes have a bad reputation is the intimations of obscurity they embody. No-one - at least, no-one with any ambition - wants to 'become a footnote'. That would mean your life's work is all but forgotten, only worth acknowledging as a pendant to someone else's accomplishments. Footnotes are where the people who didn't make it into the main story get stuck, in a kind of limbo at the bottom of the page. But, in the long run, I suspect we are all destined to become footnotes.

It's pretty clear that R.H. Quayman is in the pro-footnote camp. She has spoken of the drifting, distracted search that serves as preparation for her work. Her personal canon of artistic influences are, for the most part, figures she has come across in this way, people who have almost slipped through the cracks: Polish Modernist sculptor Katarzyna Kobro, architect Anne Tyng and Swedish mystic painter Hilma af Klint. More than that, though, there is the way her work exemplifies and reproduces the mechanics of the footnote: the eye drifting from single-minded attention to a singular object, towards another, more multivalent place. In Quayman's work, all glances are sidelong.

Quayman is a painter, though she might be considered to be working against painting - or, more accurately, against a certain age-

old mythos of painting as the iconic image of raptured ahistorical contemplation. (Painting as a kind of love-making, perhaps?) 'What mechanisms are at work in painting,' she has asked, 'that assume an audience of one male monogamous Cyclops who will never leave?'

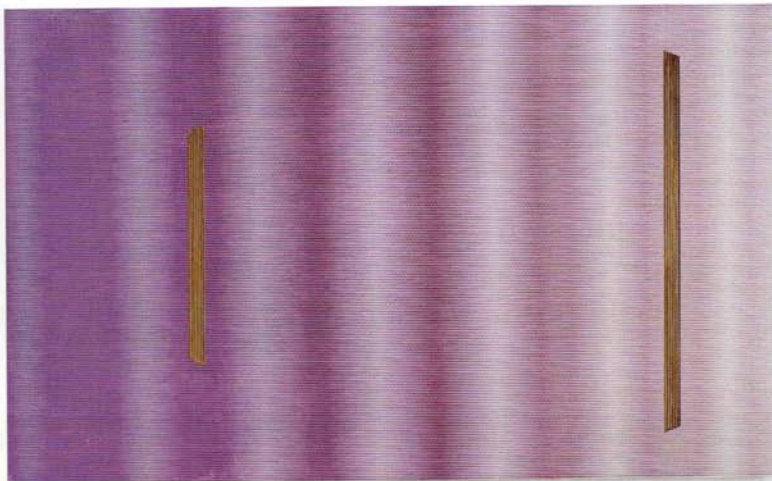
To counter what she calls this 'ego' of painting, Quayman has, since 2001, structured her work in numbered 'chapters': each exhibition is presented as the latest installment of 'an ongoing book.' The viewer is encouraged to think of the exhibition as a thematic unit, with the meaning of each piece dependent on those adjoining it. The paintings hew to a rule-bound format, all of them done on wooden panels with beveled edges, their sizes usually determined by permutations of the Golden Ratio. Some are photo-based silkscreens, based on archival material or Polaroids the artist takes herself. Some are vertiginous Op-inspired patterns. Some are spare, hand-painted, diagrammatic abstractions. Together these forms are intended to work as a kind of 'grammar of painting.' Each chapter serves as a particular response to the site where it is shown: its history, the architecture of the room. Even when the show is over, the paintings, sold or not, continue to encode and memorialize the space they once occupied.

For four months last winter and spring, Quayman's 'Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15' occupied the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. The artist's first solo museum show, it could be considered a 'museum solo', as one might say 'drum solo'. Riffing on the museum's history and rifling through its archives, Quayman attempted to play the institution's own game, literally matching her methods to the museum's conventions. Just next to the white-on-pink introductory wall text, the artist placed a buzzing pink Op-ish gradient: the precise shade of pink the ICA uses for the signage, Pantone 237 U.

There was another bit of didactic text at the beginning of the show, an official statement from the ICA. It's dated 17 February 1948, and is something of a footnote itself: an odd crevice in the history of Modernism in America. Reproduced by Quayman in skewed, ghosted, hand-painted letters, "'Modern Art' and the American Public" was a document signed by James S. Plaut, then director of the Institution, and Nelson Aldrich, its president. It is a manifesto and an exercise in rebranding. Bemoaning the 'private, often secret language' that has

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Above:
Chapter 15 [vertical pink screen]
2009
Silkscreen and gesso
on wood
61x102 cm

Below:
Chapter 12: iamb
2008
Silkscreen and gesso
on wood
82x51 cm

become associated with the term 'modern art' the museum announces a name change, from the Institute of Modern Art to the Institute of Contemporary Art. Effectively purged of pernicious influences, the museum vows to pursue the 'effective integration of art with commerce and industry'.

The show, which Quaytman has said is about 'the ways in which the museum explains contemporary art to its public', functions on one level as institutional critique of the most basic sort, exposing skeletons hidden in closets and tweaking a certain popularist strain. But her trip into the archives also has an air of melancholy about it. Quaytman *takes on* the museum's



'What mechanisms are at work in painting,' Quaytman has asked, 'that assume an audience of one male monogamous Cyclops who will never leave?'

authority – both challenging it, and assuming that authority for herself – but she also takes on its ghosts.

The history of Modernism in America is not merely an academic concern for Quaytman. The artist's own biography – often referenced in her work – is at issue. As she has noted, she essentially grew up in the art world. Her father was the abstract painter Harvey Quaytman; her step-father, sculptor David von Schlegell. 'Minimalism with one foot stuck in Modernism,' Quaytman has written, was 'the religion of my family'.

At the ICA, the viewer walked past the first temporary exhibition wall to find a plywood rack lodged in the wall's centre. In it, a group of paintings were stored end-on, leaning against one another. Quaytman has used this conceit in earlier chapters: the storage unit meant to suggest the eventual 'fate' of paintings, their sidelong stance gesturing towards the future time when they will be taken down and stowed out of sight. The works hidden away here were all photo-based silkscreens, images of a 1971 public sculpture by Von Schlegell, which still stands in front of a waterfront apartment complex a few blocks from the ICA's current home. In her notes on the show, Quaytman recalls watching the sculpture's construction, when she was 11 years old. 'This sculpture is part of my DNA as an artist', she writes.

Quaytman relates the angled panels of Von Schlegell's steel sculpture to a particular

perspectival effect in her own practice. Often the images in her photo-based works – 'the picture in the painting', as she puts it – will be distorted relative to the picture plane, the entire image foreshortened, as if leaning away from the viewer. With another geometry imposed upon that of the source photograph, the paintings seem to alternately anticipate and challenge your position in relation to their surfaces. Another recurring visual motif in Quaytman's work – a *trompe l'oeil* strip, identical to the bevelled wooden edges of her panels – also works to thematize this sidelong orientation. It is as if, looking a painting head-on, you have already passed it by. Your relation to it is always oblique. In Quaytman's work, the image and the viewer are constantly moving away from each other, in space and in time. As we move into the future, paintings move into the past.

This sense of movement gets translated into visceral affect in Quaytman's 'Exhibition Guide': the purpose of a guide, after all, is not just to explain, but to move you along. But as you move forward, you are always looking back, not just to the previous paintings, but to the histories they evoke. The visual rhymes and resonances between the works in the show can be a bit unnerving, calling forth something akin to *déjà vu*. It is as if the distinction between the viewer's immediate past and the mid-20th-century past of the ICA are collapsed. Similarly, the gallery space you occupy, and the gallery space depicted in the archival images seem to melt together. A silkscreen piece shows an installation shot of a 1966 ICA show, 'Art for U.S. Embassies'. One of the paintings shown hanging on a temporary wall in the image appears to have escaped from 1966, and into Quaytman's exhibition. It makes a circuit around the room: its pattern, an arrow-like chevron of Op-ish horizontal lines, is echoed, almost subliminally, in several of Quaytman's works. It also reappears, superimposed over two other archival photo-based paintings: almost, but not quite mirror images of each other. At times it feels like the images are watching you, anticipating your movements. These are *knowing* paintings, in every sense.

At its most intense, this sort of telescoping of time and place can be almost literally unsettling – which is not necessarily a bad thing. 'On a very few occasions,' Quaytman has written, 'I have had the feeling of being another person in another place with a past and future entirely separate from my own. An inexplicable sensation – as if by accident I had slipped into someone else's life, a life defined by place rather than culture.'

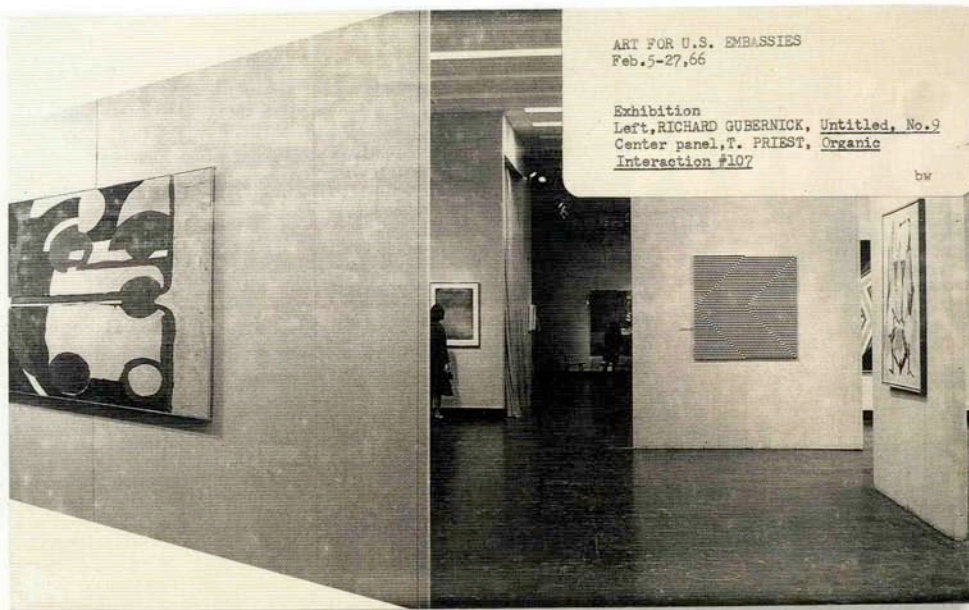
Quaytman's 'Distracting Distance, Chapter 16', shown as part of the latest Whitney Biennial, is, among other things, about this kind of uncanny slippage. It is also a fugue on the subject of space and light. This chapter consists of nine paintings – ten, if you count the window on the north wall of the gallery space. This window, a distinctive feature of Marcel Breuer's Whitney building, becomes, in this context, another bit of ambiguous geometry: like many of Quaytman's works, its angles are skewed, suggesting perspectival distortion. The window reappears in two silkscreen paintings, based on the same photo, hung on opposite walls. In them, a nude woman, looking self-assured, smoking a cigarette, stands

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Right:
Exhibition Guide,
Chapter 15 (ICA
Archive 4, *Art for
U.S. Embassies*)
2009
Silkscreen and gesso
on wood
51x81 cm

Below:
Chapter 10: *Ark*
(Christian Philipp
Müller's picture
of Andrea Fraser
performing 'May
I Help You?' at
Orchard in front
of Louise Lawler's
picture of an Andy
Warhol Painting
behind a Tony Smith
Sculpture)
2008
Silkscreen and
gesso on wood
51x51 cm



in front of that window, in the same space the viewer occupies. The image is, of course, based on the iconic Edward Hopper painting *A Woman in the Sun* (1961), a prize of the Whitney's permanent collection, and which as Quaytman notes, was painted in the year of her birth.

The other works in the room bounced the viewer's gaze around. One is covered with glittering diamond dust, reflecting the ambient light, changing from every angle. Two patterned works seem to vibrate, to extend beyond their edges; although apparently black and white, on closer inspection it is apparent they are constructed from the RGB palette, like television screens or computer monitors. A diagrammatic arrow points towards the (actual) window.

In her notes to the exhibition, Quaytman proposes the window as a model for a kind of politics: an emblem, in the words of scholar Thomas Keenan, of 'the possibility of permeability' between public and private, which has always been part of the artist's practice. As the wall text at the Whitney Biennial noted, the nude model in Quaytman's 2010 *Woman in the Sun* is artist K8 Hardy. Other artists and fellow travellers have appeared in her work: Thomas Eggerer, Andrea Fraser, Dan Graham. This repeated gesture is a tip of the hat to influences and affinities, but it is also a way of registering the social world of art-making in the work itself, another way to challenge the myth of the singular, self-sufficient, ostensibly self-created painting.

To a large extent, Quaytman has constructed her own art world, just as she has constructed her own art history. Between 2005 and 2008, she was part of the collective that ran Orchard, a for-profit (but not especially profitable) alternative gallery on New York's Lower East Side. Conceived as a reaction to the Bush era, and modelled on

Colin de Land's American Fine Arts, it was a refuge for a certain strain of politically engaged, brainy art – art that came with footnotes. At the height of the art market frenzy, Orchard presented shows on 'Polish Socialist Conceptualism of the 70s' and screened Michael Asher films. Fraser restaged her manic 1991 performance *May I Help You?*. Artists acted as curators, critics acted as artists; self-critique was part of the game plan.

When Orchard closed, Quaytman produced a multiple for the occasion, *Orchard Spreadsheets* (2008), which detailed the finances of the gallery. It looks, not incidentally, like a minimalist painting, an Agnes Martin grid turned into an accountant's tally of profits and (mostly) losses. As part of the final group show, she also mounted 'Chapter 10: Ark', its title suggesting (among other things) both a before-the-deluge packing-up and the brief arc of the gallery's career. There were photo-based paintings depicting the space and the people who came through it, including one of Fraser's performance. The title – *Chapter 10: Ark (Christian Philipp Müller's picture of Andrea Fraser performing 'May I Help You?' at Orchard in front of Louise Lawler's picture of an Andy Warhol Painting behind a Tony Smith Sculpture)* – is clearly meant, in part, to poke fun at the kind of footnote-friendly atmosphere that Orchard exemplified. It is a pocket history of a certain artistic lineage presenting as a setting of nesting dolls. It is also a complex and compelling image, instantly readable, less a series of footnotes than an essay unto itself. The title speaks of names; the image speaks of the strange nature of looking at images.

In her 2008 book, *Allegorical Decoys*, Quaytman quotes the text from Fraser's performance: 'Look... it's an illusion. It's the illusion that none of this was paid for and nothing will be bought and it hangs there as if just spread out before us voluntarily, of its

own volition. It has always been there and will always be there – for us.'

I wasn't there when Fraser re-presented the monologue at Orchard. I didn't attend the final show where Quaytman's painting was first displayed. I have never seen the painting in person and I don't know where it is: perhaps on a collector's wall or in a storage rack somewhere. Right now, I'm looking at a JPEG of that painting on my computer. You, presumably, are looking at the same image in a magazine, several months from now. We are thinking about painting, but neither of us is looking at a painting. We have become part of the social world of this image, made to occupy of the next level out in the *mise-en-abyme* it depicts. And both of us will move on, soon enough, and look at something else. Somehow, I think the painting knows all this.

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