

Robert Priseman

Interviews Teresita Dennis

RP: Central to your practice as an artist is making paintings using your fingers to apply the paint to the surface. You describe this as the haptic experience. Can you expand on this idea a little for us please?

TD: The word haptic is often discussed in relation to technology today, but hapticity also pertains to bodily experiences, perceptions, feelings, and the senses. Broadly, human haptics is the study of how we sense and manipulate our world through touch.

In earlier works I was interested in exploring touch, particularly related to the marks that remained on the surface of a computer screen, after scrolling and searching online. I was fascinated by the opening of the ‘windows’ that shone beneath the surface of the screen, whilst the greasy acts of the search remained – present, but barely noticed. By using my fingers to make marks on the surface of a work and using gestures common to those made by searching online, such as scrolling, double tapping, pinching and swiping, I found an unexpected correlation relating to the way we perceive the gestures and communications we experience in the systems of the body, each and every day.

This territory remains a broad aspect of my engagement with practice. With more recent works exploring how the systems of the body, such as the nervous and somatic systems, inform and communicate, pretty much all the time, before language kicks in, before we name what we feel. I’m interested in exploring a gap between the sensed and the said, and I’m exploring ways to make that space visible.

RP: The manner in which you paint directly with your hands reminds me in some small way of the *Cueva de las Manos* or *Cave of Hands* in Santa Cruz, Argentina. Perhaps you know it? It is a remarkable piece of cave art painted between 13,000 and 9,500 years ago. There, artists used bone pipes to spray paint the stenciled outlines of human hands onto the cave wall. It’s incredibly beautiful and speaks to a direct human experience, pretty much as your work does today.

There is a timelessness to art like this which appears to remain outside of the realm of politics. When I think of this I marvel at how art can speak to us over the course of millennia. In this context, I wonder, what do you feel your paintings communicate to their audience?

TD: Ha yes, they are amazing! My cave moment was *Les Grotte de Gargas* in the Pyrenees, France.

I went on a mammoth trajectory after discovering Marguerite Duras' video *Les Mains Negatives*, in relation to this. Duras' black and white video is a slow drive around Paris just after migrant workers have finished cleaning the alleyways and curb-sides of Paris in the early hours of the morning. We don't see the people working, just the slow, insistent disappearance of the detritus of the day as it turns into night. At a point in the journey, a turning of the car, a slight pause, and Duras calls out to les mains negative, the absent one. She is calling, calling, calling out, into the darkness while the camera rolls and the car laboriously moves onward, the workers are palpable in their absence, while we wait, with hope, for a response to the calling.

Apart from my immediate interest and engagement with this video I was moved so much by the absences that were communicated by the slow movement of the car and the calling out into a void – I had a sense of presences 'behind' and a presence 'ahead,' while being held in a moving gap, looking both ways. The figure of that dual trajectory is somehow deeply relevant to my practice as a whole, and I haven't finished with it yet.

In response to your question regarding how or what my work communicates to an audience, I would hope for them to feel a sense of the presence of someone having been there, in the work and be moved to look closer. Noticing rhythms, movements gestures and unexpected appearances that suggest something is happening or has happened. If a person felt inspired to look closely at the marks and gestures and wonder what they are and why they exist in that particular way I would love it, if they found a way to say or do something about it.

RP: Another artist I'm reminded of in the context of your work is Yves Klein. Most especially his *Anthropometry* series, where he employed naked female models covered in blue paint who were known as "living brushes." They were famously dragged or laid across canvases to make the image. I don't think we would see "living brushes" employed today. Yet there appears a tangible connection between Klein's work and your own. What are your thoughts on this?

TD: Yes, I can see the connections here, but I agree that politically this is quite a different, I think today most people would be offended by a clothed man dragging naked women across the floor!

To be honest, I am not interested as much in the printing of the body, or the figure as we see it in Kleins work. I'm more interested and engaged with an idea of being situated within systems. For me, it's an exploration regarding language, the systems of bodies and their parts, considering how these events could be perceived in other ways by considering alternative relations between them. This is a thought related to Giles Deleuze's 'Conceptual Persona' in his last work *What is Philosophy?* I've never forgotten it, here's a taster:

“People are constantly putting up an umbrella that shelters them in a firmament of conventions and opinions. But poets make a slit in the umbrella, they tear open the firmament itself, to let in a bit of free and windy chaos and to frame in a sudden light a vision that appears through the tear.”

This is how I see it in practice:

Engagement with ‘territory’ is in operation even before a painting begins, hovering somewhere in the future. To just consider this in practice, is an act of letting go, a quiet determined undoing of expected forms and established thoughts, just enough to feel unsure, uncertain, and yes, a little afraid.

The challenge is to be confronted with a surface that doesn’t presuppose anything specific— but instead effaces the familiar for a hint of ‘figurability: a presentation’ of intensities, velocities and phantoms. The task undertaken is an act of painting that ‘obscures’ with colour, whilst simultaneously activating the remains of the trace, as sensible. Using my fingers directly, touching pushing pinching stroking turning jabbing lifting dropping – in touch and being touched, the practice strives to map a territory that hovers against and within a body in perpetual affectation, the rumbles of material communications and the potential of futures yet to come.

RP: Thank you Teresita, that is really fascinating.

As well as making use of your physical being to produce your works, I notice that in many of your paintings you use both oil and acrylic paint. Would you be able to tell us about your choice of paints and why you select them?

TD: I use water colour, acrylic and oil paint for their varying properties. I use transparent paints mainly because I often feel that I’m actually working with light and not paint. I’m aware of how colour can be fugitive and alive, like a living entity – a tiny colour change in the mix can cause huge shifts in the potential of the work, so I make sure I have enough paint for what I need - but having said that, I do experiment with paint and colour a lot before I make anything because the sense of what I am waiting for is always a bit of a ghost at first. So I try to preserve that and hold back. It’s partly the colour choice that leads the way of the work and then I’m a slave to the fluctuations and gestures that are happening in front of my eyes and turning in my stomach. I often feel nervous and on edge. I have no idea why.

My favourite opaque paint is unbleached Titanium White. No matter what you mix with it, you never get what you expect, it is super sensitive and a bit rogue. I tend to use oils on top of acrylics if I am working into the surface – and for some works I like the surface to be

completely matt so there no reflection from the lights in the studio. And I use a dead matt medium.

RP: How long do you spend making a series of paintings and do you work on them sequentially or have many on the go at once?

TD: It depends, I have had two Series of works on the go for about eight years:

With *Series: Interrupted Gestures* for example, they have tended to take longer because I work back into these paintings to interrupt the ground. I never know how they will come out, and I usually search for a starting point. Generally, there's a figural appearance, and I will take it from there. They can take from a day to a couple of months to complete.

Whereas with *Series: Dissemblance*, I usually prepare everything ready to make a work in one long hit – its intense and there's no time for decisions so I am super alert to rhythm and flow, it feels like drumming, with an intention to cover the whole surface to the edges. These can take from three – twenty-four hours to complete depending on scale.

Alongside that, I experiment a lot and scrap what doesn't work. Currently I am working on a larger work that I began in 2019 that I couldn't get to grips with – that is taking shape, finally...

RP: Given that your philosophy is to work directly with your hands and body to make your paintings, do you find this dictates the scale you work at?

TD: Actually, I don't feel that using my hands or fingers dictates the scale of all the works – I have definitely expanded the scale when the work demands. For ideas related to touch/touching in *Series 1* they tend to be between 30cm x 30cm – 100cm x 90cm which makes sense for the work in that context.

In *Series 2* there is more conceptual focus on an all over material field, and these tend to be from 100cm x 90cms upwards with the largest one at 220cm x 200cms. The biggest impediment to scale is probably the size of the studio.

RP: This has been absolutely fascinating. Thank you so much for sharing some insights about your practice with us.

Interview completed on 25 July 2024

