

**IN A PAINTER'S WORLD: AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANDREW HOLMQUIST**

July 2, 2014

By Kevin Blake

Painting is alive and well. Thriving even. The number of young artists working with the medium continues to grow, and there is seemingly no apex in a market that places a premium on painting. Today, younger artists are finding ways to assert themselves within their communities at the onset of their artistic careers, and are maneuvering to situate themselves in a global art discourse. Andrew Holmquist, a recent graduate of the MFA program at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago, has hit the ground running. While he continues to develop his painting vocabulary through a plethora of mediums, the same old painting questions remain the thrust of his explorations. This is a good thing for painting—these questions could still use answers....or maybe there are no answers.

Kevin Blake: *The figure plays a prominent role in almost every work, whether it be a painting, a performance, or a sculpture. Sometimes the figure is presented representationally and other times the figure is merely alluded to through a title of a more abstract image. Can you talk about your interest in the figure and how your multiple formats allow you to address this interest?*

Andrew Holmquist: The figure can be a structure—an organization device that helps dictate where things poke out and hang from. I tend to get lost or bored or maybe uncertain about making a pure abstract image. Having the body in mind guides the decisions while still allowing for limitless variations.

Like you said, sometimes this results in a clearer depiction of a body and other times the body is implied more through a title than a limb. In those cases I still want the attitude and gesture of a figure, such as gasping, twisting, or strutting to be in mind. It's more a personality than a person that is represented. Again, this is useful to guide the piece to a point where I can say it's done.

The figure can ground the events of the composition and locate that action in relation to my body and in turn, the viewers. This should feel tactile—like you can feel it in your shoulders and toes. The events on the canvas start to glom onto your body and you can

feel these slithering gestures touch and envelop your limbs. I want there to be a tension between the body of the viewer and the painting.

There is this powerful physical relationship with painting, however in painting, much of the event takes place in the viewer's head. You animate it with your imagination. Sculpture activates the viewer in a different way in that it makes them participate in the experience by moving their bodies around in relation to its structure. In performance it's no longer proxies for the body but the real thing. The trick for me is suspending this reality enough so that it's not a specific person but another compositional element.

All of this sounds pretty formal, however, the body is not a neutral territory and it can bring with it political or narrative content that I am more or less interested in depending on the piece.

Also, sexy bodies motivate a lot of my thoughts and they help motivate my art too.

KB: *When you mention getting bored with making a “pure abstract image,” what do you mean exactly? Do you see abstraction as an antonym for representation and thus, find yourself working in the “gap?” What constitutes pure abstraction in your opinion?*

AH: I would have to think about it longer to give you an etched in stone definition of what constitutes pure abstraction, but what I meant is basically: as much as I love Sol Lewitt's work I don't think variations on the grid is going to be enough for me as motivation to make my own work. I would say something like pure abstraction comes from a system of formal rules where the resulting work points back at these rules rather than out to the world. Maybe there is another word that is more appropriate. When I think about “abstraction” it seems to imply the reduction or extrapolation of something else, something of the world into some otherworldly, plastic form. I think my interest in abstraction from representation comes from the slippage I feel between my bodily experience of the world and my mind or spirit experience, and how they muddy each other's waters.

That being said, as much as I am interested in the figure I am also interested in playing with space, form, weight, balance, line and color – all of these things that in and of themselves are much closer to the “pure abstraction” territory.



Figure Study Yellow 2014 oil on canvas 60in x 50in

KB: *If Minimalism—or the products of those artists motivated by the parameters of formalist structures and the eradication of the author—most accurately resemble your definition of pure abstraction, do you think the insertion of the figure both literally and metaphorically creates an alternative category for what you are doing? Is there an emergent thematic movement happening in painting today that is yet uncovered or unnamed that you feel akin to? In your work I see the likes of Charline Von Heyl and Amy Sillman as locutors of a specific methodology for dealing with figurative abstraction. Do you feel an affinity to this type of work?*

AH: I think for there to be an emergent thematic movement there would need to be some clear “father” that we were all trying to kill, and I don’t think that really exists anymore. There are so many influences and lineages at our disposal these days, and yes I am certainly influenced by the work of Charlene Von Heyl and Amy Sillman, as I am sure many people are these days, but the spectrum is too far-flung to ever get a clear through line. So because the figure mixes with abstraction in my work may or may not be the reason the figure mixes with abstraction in the work of other artists. I think it would be a losing battle and an unnecessary one to rally for a movement.

KB: *I would agree that rallying for a movement is an unnecessary effort and I’m skeptical that any effort toward such an endeavor would be fruitful. I think movements are identified by those who write the history of time, and when there are artists working with similar trajectories in the present, it is simply conditional. What are the conditions of contemporary painting for you and how do you situate your work within those discursive parameters? Or is painting so pluralistic that there are no clear conditions?*

AH: I am tempted to say there are no universal conditions for contemporary painting, but that might be its own kind of condition. The choice to make paintings doesn't have much pushback right now, which allows for so many people to do it without defensive energy wasted. I think what results instead is the need to differentiate your work from the rest, which is maybe another type of defensive position. How do I do it that you don't?

I have found that addressing painting concerns in other mediums can be an effective way to chart a position on painting. To be able to make sculpture flat and paintings dimensional, videos static and paintings animated – exchanging the expectations of mediums can enhance the awareness of those expectations. It can be an opportunity to get perspective and more clearly articulate what it is I am after in painting than when I am down in the mud. What comes along with this is a self-consciousness of the label of painting and how it is being applied.

Certainly right now a condition for any art is acknowledging the image quality versus the experiential quality of the work. So much art is seen through the computer screen, and it is the work, no matter what the medium, that translates into a potent graphic image that will get noticed. An artist like Wade Guyton makes work that looks great online, which is essentially the only way I have experienced it save for one piece, but it also has a physical presence due to its scale and position. It transforms from an image experience into a painting experience. I think a condition painters face today is finding an effective and meaningful relationship between the image quality of their painting that can be experienced by many, and the physical quality that will only be experienced by the few bodies that track it down in person. In what way do you make people tremble?

***KB:** The way you address painting questions through multimedia seems like a generative process that feeds one another. This necessity, or compulsion, for artists to be multiplicitous in their practices is becoming more and more common. Most painters today are also dabbling in other fields—from sculpture to animation and everything in-between. Maybe this is a condition of art which affects painting. Can you elaborate a bit about your studio practice and how you bounce around from one project to the next?*

AH: I like to have multiple projects in progress at the same time. I get going on one thing and notice that the grass looks greener on that other thing, and after a while the first thing starts looking green again. This started a while back with working on paper rather than canvas as a way to loosen up. Paper didn't have the same pressure and seemed more receptive of funky material choices. Grad school got me playing around with this material exploration off the wall entirely, working in installation at first, and then more discrete sculpture. This ended up turning into sets, props and costumes for videos that looked like my paintings. All the while I was also working on comic books and prints, which took the themes of my other artwork but presented them in a more direct way.

There may be different audiences for different mediums, which I think is a strong potential of working in this way, but I also feel that there really is unification between

these seemingly disparate forms. Seeing the same content take different shapes helps me and I think would help the viewer stay interested and surprised. I think the honest benefit of working in this way is that I get to leap into realms like video and performance that I have very little grasp on and force things to happen. I don't get to rely on elegant tricks that I've picked up in painting. What I'm excited about right now is bringing a little bit of that ham-fisted but excited quality back into my paintings.



Edge of the Pool 2014 oil and spray paint on canvas 44in x 77in

KB: *I'd like to hone in on the idea of painters having a bag of tricks or particular sets of learned painting behaviors. I too believe that it is important to eradicate those behaviors as soon as they become too familiar. It sounds like your leaps into other media help you to identify those repetitive decisions, but also to forge new modalities in painting. Where do you think this need to constantly challenge the familiar comes from? I think of Morandi as maybe the antithesis of this idea—an artist who saw the merit in a mastery of a singular vision.*

AH: One possibility is that it is the drama and excitement of discovering something new. Some of my most successful paintings had a “oh shit I just ruined this thing” moment to them, only to be salvaged miraculously by some unexpected move. What I love about this is the messed-up final product that has traces of what I had in mind but is so unlike that initial vision that it takes on a life of its own. Maybe the need to constantly challenge the familiar come out of the desire for this shock of what just came out of you. I'm sure Morandi felt this shock too, but his dynamic range is much more narrow and the surprises are more subtle.

I think a part of it is also the fear of being pigeon-holed. I have a repeating brushstroke that's larger than life and ribbon-like in many of my paintings. I like it because it suggests so many things at once—the gesture of my hand, illusion of speed, illusion of form and space, and can stand in for a myriad of things—but it might lose its interest for me. I would hate to feel pressure to keep making something that doesn't feel right anymore just because it's what people assign to my name.

I think this fear can be productive. In my case I am thinking about making work that is clearly mine that doesn't have that key ingredient, but I think it would be a mistake to get rid of something that I like just because it shows up often. Or maybe it would be better to eradicate it like you suggest for the sake of letting new leaves catch the light. For me right now it's easier to eradicate these comforts by leaping to other media where the familiar tools are no longer at my disposal.

***KB:** What's on the docket for your immediate future and where will your work pop up next?*

AH: This is probably the worst question to ask a recent grad student leaving art school. I say that with a laugh because I had very little empathy for friends in this situation in the past, but now that I'm living it I wish I could turn back time and slap my former self in the face any time I naively asked someone this question. And I don't mean to turn this on you at all, this is a great question for most anyone, just not someone who just graduated with their masters degree in fine art. That's mostly a joke, seriously though...

This is a transition period that is equally exciting and terrifying with very little grey in between. I do have some art projects on the horizon, which I'm looking forward to. My work is currently being featured in a new program called "Open Office," a biannual group exhibition at United States Artists new headquarters in Chicago that was facilitated by Gallerista. I will have copies of my new 24-page comic book "Connections" for sale at Bergen Street Comics in Brooklyn and on my website in the very near future. I am in talks with Carrie Secrist Gallery to put on a casual summer show featuring my video piece from the SAIC MFA Show as well as an artist talk, which will take place in July. I was just asked to be involved in a group show about abstraction from Chicago which will be at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln this October and has a killer lineup of artists that I'm honored to be listed among. I will also have work in the Carrie Secrist Gallery booth at EXPO Chicago this September and in Miami in December. Besides that I am looking forward to making work with fewer voices in my head that is as selfish and indulgent as I can imagine.