Pilar Corrias

Surface and Time

Christina Quarles in conversation with Craig Burnett

Craig Burnett I want to start by asking you about the range of mark-making in your work. There are washes of translucent pigment, masking, sharp lines that create a kind of virtual space within the painting, or even a vanishing point. There are passages of shading that give fullness to your forms, rivulets of paint that drip down the canvas, and chunks of impasto. The surface of your paintings express a kind of polyphony – of different languages operating simultaneously. For an artist, I thought, *that must be fun*. There must be a certain pleasure in making all the different marks, but I wonder how much you want to convey that pleasure to the looker.

Christina Quarles The variety in how the figure takes shape is something that holds my interest while making the work, and I think it's pretty evident, even in just the body of work I've made over the last five years or so. There are a lot of elements that change from piece to piece – I mean, it's not like I want to make a show of all the same type of pattern in the background, for instance. I like to experiment and learn something new in each work I make. There are certain moments where I want to convey a sense of ease, or a sense of unease, then other moments where there's more tension. If you're sitting in an uncomfortable chair, maybe you're really aware of your knees, or what your feet are doing, but you aren't giving any thought to, like, what your shoulders are doing.

A lot of how I was formally taught about drawing the figure, that foundational education, is what I bring to the paintings as well. When you are drawing different parts of the body, when working with a live model, you try to really imagine the difficulty of holding a certain pose, the tension held in certain parts of the body, and the parts of the body that are being supported by other parts. I think that's also a big part of the work; how the looker, as you say, can start to process. With sustained looking information unfolds and changes. I find that's a way to bring movement to a static image, by playing with a lot of elements that we're preconditioned to see as stable. And I like working with the figure, and patterns, and elements of architecture – those are all things we want to see in any situation: we want to find order amid chaos.

CB So how does that work on a kind of micro level? A viewer can step away and absorb the overall image, or move closer to see a wash of pigment, or a section that's masked off hitting a long trickle of paint. These small collisions are exciting. They must be part of that sense of animation you're talking about, keeping things energised. I asked you about the surface and you started speaking about the figure – what's the relationship between the two?

CQ Something that's crucial to the works is that they're all made with acrylic paint. My work is often contextualised among other painters who use oil, and I think one of the key differences with acrylic is that it's such a rapidly drying medium, and a highly plastic material. Acrylic allows for this constant indexing of decision-making and choices that happen either right next to or on top of each other. My experience of making a painting starts with a lot of freedom. Then, it's sort of like I paint myself into a corner. And then, it's about trying to overcome that corner and come out on the other side. I start with movement, the expanse of my wingspan, for making these much larger, usually watery brushstrokes that get more and more neat as I try to figure it out, which is always an additive process. Even moments of editing happen when areas get masked off and painted over, so that's an additive process too.

Another major component of the works is that after the initial period of laying down these brushstrokes, and starting to figure out the figuration and the composition, I will photograph it and bring it into the computer. I think that also generates a very different sense of scalability. I'm working on a piece right now in the studio that's 114 inches wide. But then when I bring it into the computer it's only a few inches wide. It's a different understanding of composition when you're seeing something that zoomed out versus when you're seeing it at live scale.

CB It reminds me of the old painter's trick of looking at a painting in a mirror in the studio, to experience the image at a different size and inverted.

CQ I think there's something about having that distance, whether it's the analogue screen of a mirror, or the digital screen that creates this more objective way of looking, that creates a different pathway to whichever moves you're going to make next. I spend so much time when I'm making something just looking at it. Sometimes it's important for the work to have the looking be sustained, like, six inches away from the canvas. And other times, the looking happens when I spend an evening just studying the work on my phone, and trying to imagine how the composition will progress.

CB The paintings on paper have a different sense of space. On canvas, there might be changes of scale, or motion; there might be a section of sky, a sense of distance. But the works on paper have a jewel-like intensity.

CQ Yeah, and I think it's always interesting. When I've worked on paper in the past, with drawing, I find that the process is physically very different from painting, because you're usually more static with your own body. I always find that these kinds of shifts in process create profound experiences as an artist, and ultimately in the work. With these paintings on paper, I'm able to shift very quickly from working horizontally to vertically – I'll throw one on the floor and start working on it, and then I'll throw it back up on the wall and work on it again. The way the paint settles, and the way that drips occur, is very different. And it creates a different physical interaction when you work on something horizontally versus vertically. In the past, drawings have always been horizontal and paintings have been vertical – but this is the first time that something exists in both orientations.

CB I wonder if I could ask you about the spaces of your canvases – the figures appear as if on a stage, occupying a weirdly shallow space.

CQ Yeah, I'm always thinking about the depth of the spaces on the canvases, and I'm interested in this perspectival space that exists by tilting planes. Tilting the picture plane, even slightly, really emphasises that you're in a shallow space. In this show, I've become really interested in the shallow space

of the canvas. There's one piece, *Dream Of All Day Long*, that has a mesh pattern to create the implication that the canvas itself is tilting into the picture plane. More so in this show, than with others in the past, there are super shallow spaces, or the idea of a shallow space falling or collapsing in on itself. I've been thinking a lot about surface, edge and boundary; about the XY axes of the canvas, and even the Z that tilts into space.

CB In *Here We Come Again*, it's almost as if the sky is tilting into the canvas.

CQ In that painting I was particularly interested in this idea of having a sort of cross moment in the canvas, where everything in the upper left quadrant exists in one kind of logic, and everything in the lower right quadrant is tilted in a very different way. There's a busyness to the pattern that's not immediately clear, but I think that if you spend time looking at it, you can see that everything converges in this moment of high density, at the centre of the painting. There are these different moments of twisting and tilting perspective. More so than ever before, I was thinking about ways of having these tilts and shifts emphasise the shallowness of the space.

CB Trompe l'oeil often features in your paintings. *Now We're There (And We' Only Just Begun)* (2023), the installation at the Hamburger Bahnhof, has a trompe l'oeil piece of paper taped to the wall, and there were hints of illusionistic space amid the shallowness. I recently found out that the word illusion is related to the Latin word for play, *ludere*. I love the idea that illusions and trompe l'oeil could be associated with playfulness.

CQ It is a very playful thing, with so many contradictions built into it. On the one hand, trompe l'oeil feels real – like, the whole point is to be illusionistic and feel like you could reach out and pull something off the wall. But it's also the opposite of a photorealist painting. It's not realism. It's something else. It's a trick, a little ploy, a game. It reinforces the surface nature of painting, and the illusionistic nature of painting, because you're falling into the illusion and being brought back to the surface. The other thing I find really cool about trompe l'oeil is that it's scale dependent – it's so much about the one-to-one scale. There can be these much larger gestural brushstrokes on the canvas, but those have a speed to them because they're done freehand, in a more impulsive way. And so, it's always this kind of play between the fast and the slow.

CB I like the way our conversation has shifted into this relationship between space and time – or as you said, the play between fast and slow. I started by asking about the range of mark-making, but then we started talking about how this relates to time – broad strokes, drips, illusion, and how these surfaces convey different sensations, the way time is felt in different ways.

CQ Right, exactly, and trying to have that shift, throughout the canvas. The relationship between scale and time is so close. The experience of the total composition may have one sense – of the time of day, or of a narrative concluding – but as you physically move closer to the painting, or experience a longer, sustained period of looking, the sense of time can change. As a painter you're constantly contending with how to create movement, how to create an active space with a static image.

CB The painting as a perpetual motion machine.

CQ That's the hope.

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