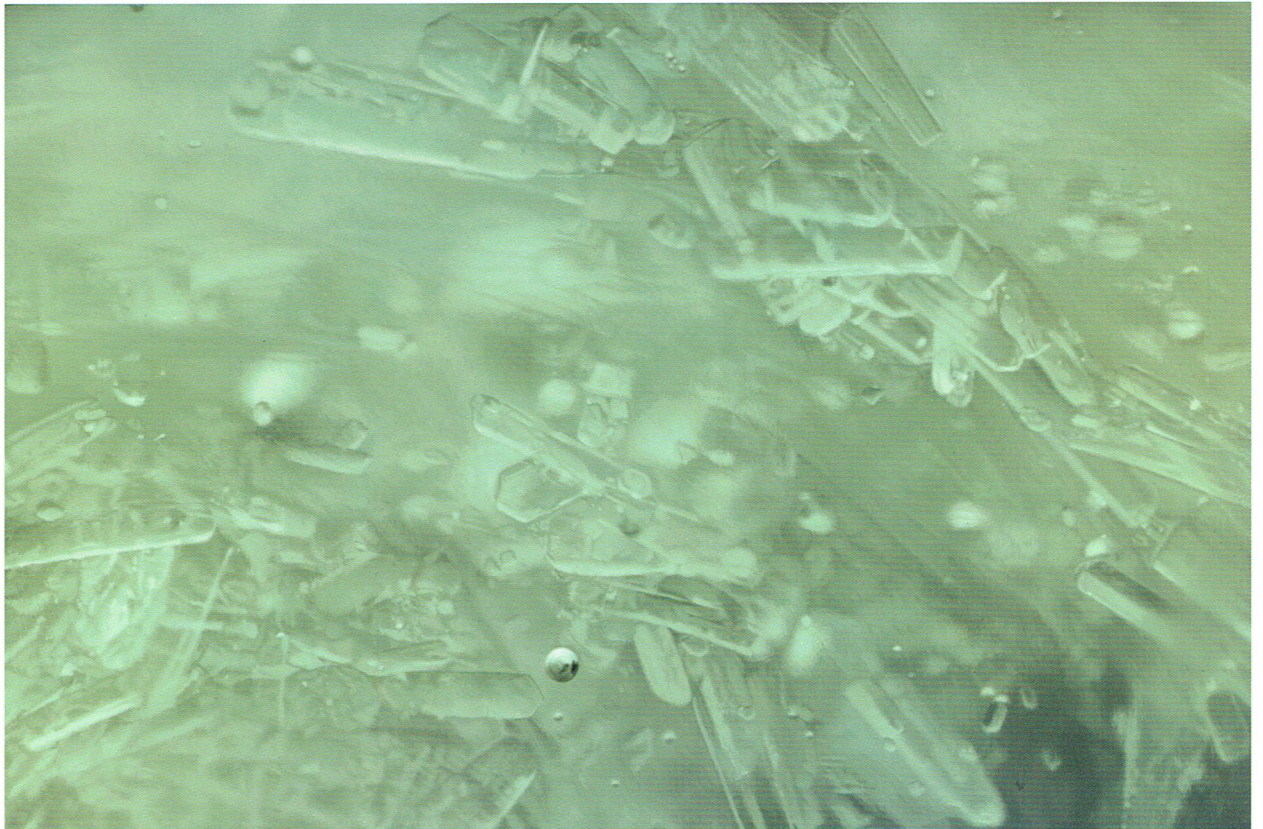


September 3 – October 16, 2011 | eGallery, Tarble Arts Center | Eastern Illinois University

BEN WEINER: Paintings and Video

Peculiar Operations



C6H1206, NaC5H8NO4, C6H8O7, 2011, oil on linen, 28 x 42 inches

Ben Weiner's paintings are about painting, or maybe more accurately, about paint. As the artist himself is the first to admit, his work belongs within a conversation about medium specificity: about Modernism as an inherently self-conscious, self-critical endeavor. In his landmark 1960 essay "Modernist Painting," Clement Greenberg lobbied for "that which was unique and irreducible not only in art in general, but also in each particular art. Each art had to determine," he wrote, "through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself."¹

For Greenberg, this intrinsic quality specific to painting was flatness, as embodied in the Color Field painters' depthless staining, or in the degree zero of the monochrome. And though Weiner's work is explicitly self-referential vis à vis its medium, it does not gesture toward this limit of painting. Rather, his project opens up the possibilities of paint, and of painting. The five canvases and four videos on view in this exhibition, like most of the artist's work, reveal in the stuff's raw properties and its capacity for conjuring illusion simultaneously. The work thematizes not only the materiality, but also the potentiality of paint.

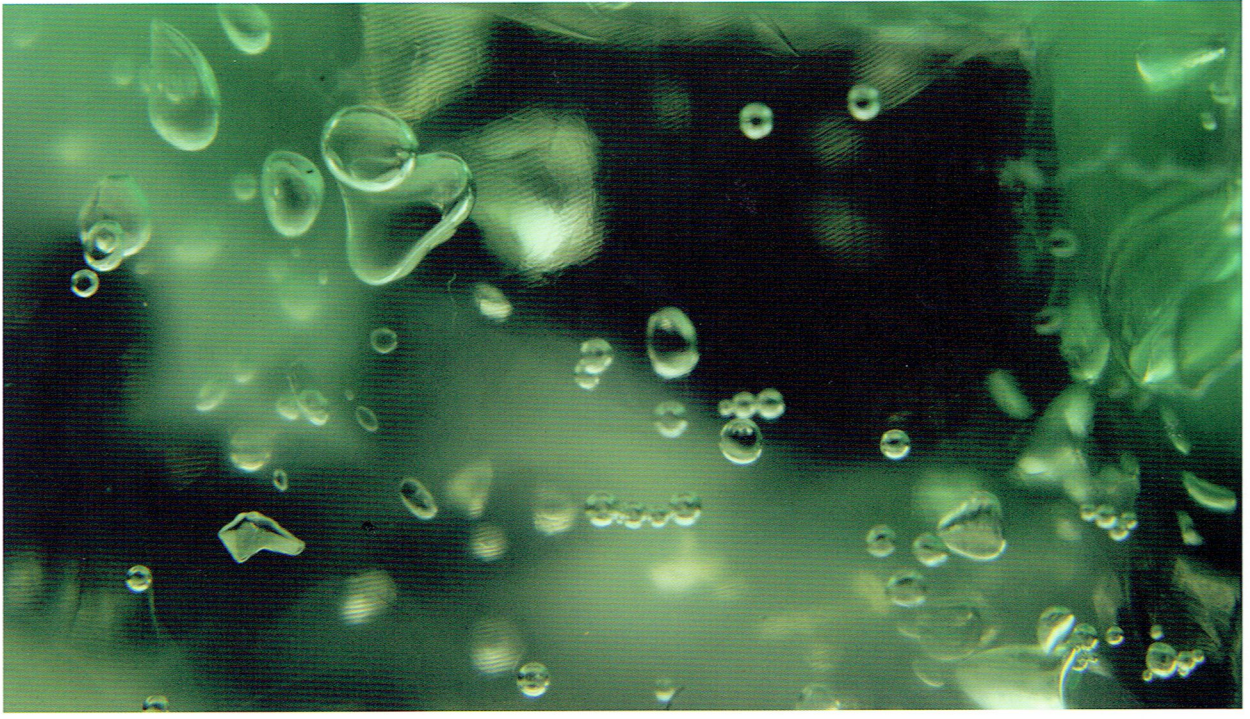
This is because Weiner's work is not only painting about paint, it is also, quite literally, painting of paint. Painting is subject matter as much as medium here, a move that allows Weiner to have his cake and eat it too. Like a good Modernist, he references his chosen medium, yet he does so without giving up the opportunity to render subject matter with the illusionism that was painting's primary goal for centuries before its mid-twentieth century dead end.

Take for example, the painting *TIO2, C34H22Cl2N4O2, C18H32O2, C10H16, C20H30O2, AgX*, which shows several thick daubs of oil paint. As in all of the works in this series, the title faithfully reports the chemical compounds which make up the subject depicted. In this case, the first five elements listed constitute a traditional artists' mixture: the pigments Titanium Dioxide and Permanent Violet, along with linseed oil, the solvent turpentine, and varnish for gloss. It's the paint recipe Weiner uses.

The title's fifth ingredient, however, is silver halide, found not in the painter's arsenal, but in the light sensitive coating of photographic paper. Sure enough, on the right side of the painting's composition, a pink band of emulsion becomes obvious, and it's no longer as simple as a painting of paint. We now realize we're dealing with a painting of a painting of paint. This layering of medium becomes more apparent as we recognize other photographic tendencies within the composition. There is a focus issue: the dab in the painting's foreground has sharp, white highlights, while the background stroke is blurry, its reflections softer.

Weiner's mode of representation, then, is as intimately wrapped up with photography's mimetic properties as it is with painting's illusionistic ones. His style can most obviously be understood to be that of photorealistic painting, which too often asks to be admired for its sheer skill. By all means, admire – the technical mastery on display here is the kind that makes you thankful Weiner has not forsaken representation. Only don't stop there, because his is as much a conceptually rigorous project as a visually pleasing one.

If the introduction of photography to Weiner's methods complicates the idea that his chosen medium is painting alone, then his more recent turn to video would seem to muddy the issue even more. Each several minute video is comprised of thousands of still photographs, which Weiner takes of the experiments he conducts with various materials, and edits together. The scientific



[H2O(l)] @ H2O(g)], (C6H9NO)n, C3H8O2, C28H20N2Na2O8S2, 2010, video on loop (still), displayed on 26.5 x 40.5 x 4.5 inch screen

overtone of the word *experiments* (the one the artist uses) is well-founded: the small plastic vials in which he subjects substances like hair gel (*[H2O(l)] @ H2O(g)]*, *(C6H9NO)n*, *C3H8O2*, *C28H20N2Na2O8S2*, with its colloidal consistency) and *MSG (Na(aq) + C5H8NO(aq) ---> NaC5H8NO4(s)*, with its crystalline structure) to the effects of time evoke chemistry class beakers. And the artist's attention to his materials' elemental natures – both in his slow observation of their changes, and his foregrounding of this information in the works' titles – is legitimately lab-like.

Yet even as these science experiments, these peculiar operations, become undeniably sculptural, even as they're captured in photographs and edited and looped into videos, they remain somehow always about paint. Each of the materials highlighted shares not only paint's physical sensuality, but its inherent character as a purveyor of artifice. From the unnatural substances that we apply to our bodies (gel, deodorant), to those we ingest (high fructose corn syrup, *MSG*, sports drinks), otherwise eventually incorporate (formaldehyde), or wish to dissolve into (the pixels of a computer screen), Weiner meditates on how we embrace the ersatz in an attempt to resist mortality.

It is also no accident that Weiner shows his videos on flat monitors that share almost the same dimensions as his paintings. By setting up an equivalency between his screens and his canvases, he reveals a preoccupation with the tension between an image and an object (the same tension, incidentally, that defined the split between Greenberg's Modernist painters and the Minimalist object makers in the late 1950s and early 60s).

Weiner's videos even allude to painting's traditional genres. If the aforementioned painting of paint is a take on the still life, then the effect of magnifying microscopic worlds is to produce unlikely landscapes. With its cool aqua tones and drifting bubbles, the sequence of hair gel evaporating can be seen as an oceanscape, akin to one of Jean Painlevé's mesmerizing undersea films. And the video *C18H32O2, C20H30O2, C10H16, C22H20O13*, a protracted, enlarged view of paint being mixed (in a combination similar to the one described above, only this time with red pigment), becomes a primordial terrain, an oozing flow of lava bubbling up from the deep. In the video's last moments before relinking, the color spreads across the field – in this case a screen – dissolving these associations into the even ground of a color field painting.

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Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," First published in *Forum Lectures (Voice of America)*, Washington, D.C., 1960. Reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds. *Art in Theory: 1900-2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 774.