

David Klamen “**Painting Paintings**”

By Lisa Wainwright

In David Klamen's most recent series, visits from the ghosts of paintings past arrange themselves at different angles, some darkened in thick veils of varnish, all with wall texts and many with stanchions and hanging wires replete within the picture field. Here, we witness the perfect destabilization of a canonical knowledge, for Klamen's beautifully rendered paintings within paintings both adulate and question the signification of this most revered medium. Klamen's virtuosic handling of paint, a hallmark of his oeuvre, becomes a worm-hole into a dialogue with the past. We register history, but the pictorial strategy at play confuses what is real and what is not, upsetting an already tenuous hold on the notion that art conveys 'absolute' truths -- a proposition that Post-Structuralism had also hoped to erode. But if history and truth have been once again upstaged by the play of the image, Klamen's lessons on the epistemology of painting are ultimately advanced by the aesthetics of form and the sheer sensuality of his technique.

Klamen began this series by copying abstract work, although copying is an inadequate term. For these paintings are not merely appropriations or coy imitations, but rather high art sources that serve as props in a kind of semiotic still life study and an exegesis around form, light, color, composition, and historical trope. Mondrian and Malevich first set the brief. Working from a classic Mondrian in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, Klamen turns it on an oblique angle, and includes a didactic label to its left. By setting a strut of diagonals across the painting, Klamen manipulates Mondrian's theosophic symbolism of absolute flat horizontal and vertical harmonies and imposes an “aggressive spatial element.”¹

If Mondrian's utopia comes crashing down, his language nonetheless prevails to serve Klamen's scintillating pictorial dance. And this is even more the case with the reinterpreted Malevich, whose beautiful play of multiple rectangles (the thin vertical strip of the frame and the shadow below to the white didactic label balanced so perfectly

¹ David Klamen in conversation with the author, September 2, 2009.

against the black and red Suprematist squares) subjects the Russian spirit of nonobjective painting to American trompe l'œil gaming.

That Klamen also chose a Magritte from the Art Institute of Chicago for this series is apt, given that the inclusion conjures up the Dada-Surrealist adage about taking a Rembrandt and using it as an ironing board.² Although the Klamen is a far cry from anti-art, and perhaps so were the works of Duchamp (the author of the line above), the possibility of high art as found object or image has informed artists since the first Dada incursion into this domain. Indeed, at Klamen's angle, the Magritte is more surreal than ever.

The Baroque and Renaissance "covers" (a music term Klamen enjoys with respect to this series) are particularly striking. Tiepolo, Velázquez, Guardi, Rembrandt, Zurbarán, and others are so carefully rendered, then obscured through layers of varnish, so as to deny their once notable illusion. The masterpieces flatten, becoming rich, inky black stains with just a shadow of their once-sacrosanct subjects intact. Only their gilded frames are left to demarcate a shape within the larger picture. Like Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, these are paintings unnaturally aged as a metaphor for some temporal and psychic disturbance, a ripple in the historical progress of acquired experience. It is not nihilism, however, that drives Klamen's erasures, nor his professed indifference to the choice of content in the appropriated work. Rather Klamen culls from the most common range of genres: battles scenes, abstractions, historical figures, and crucifixes, so as to usurp the entirety of the art historical machine in the service of a contemporary exploration of painting's value.

Klamen's pictures evolve in the process of their making as the artist reconstructs and re-contextualizes masterworks, taking decisive liberties with color, shadow, value range, and composition. The "covers" are important works of art, but off-duty, relaxing back into form. These are paintings subject to another vision, a new vantage point, allowing

² Marcel Duchamp, "Apropos of Readymades," Lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961.

viewers to see differently what they thought they knew so well. In the process, Klamen engages the aesthetic wonderment that great painting affords.