

The Work of David Klamen
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The work of art that says something confronts us itself...it expresses something in such a way that what is said is like a discovery, a disclosure of something previously concealed. Everything familiar is eclipsed.

To understand what the work of art says to us is therefore a self-encounter.

HANS-GEORG GADAMER¹

David Klamen's new body of work invites the viewer to join him in his ongoing investigation of the question "What is a sound and meaningful way to understand the world?"² The rich tonalities and vibrant surfaces offer a discovery of the very processes of looking, of apprehending, and of knowing. In glimmering landscapes, still lifes, and images of architectural interiors, Klamen presents a metaphorical field in which to contemplate how our surroundings and possessions effect how we see.

An approach to one of Klamen's vast glimmering canvasses may initially remain casual. Many layers of glistening varnish easily seduce the viewer into lingering on the painting's surface; its glossy reflection captivates the eye which can flit across its expanse as if over a glimmering seascape. Creeping through the varnish are fragments of representation in a seemingly knowable academic realist style, continuing to massage a pleasing aesthetic experience.

As the encounter lengthens in time, however, the paintings become more aggressive. Their shiny surfaces frustrate attempts at further understanding, obstinately refusing to relinquish what lays under their protective sheath. As we try to gather the details into a coherent whole – so as to objectively comprehend one painting in order to move on to the next – more images, spaces, and symbols become apparent. Associations, past experiences, cultural codes, and even our own reflection begin to be confused with the areas of color, light and dark. Klamen explains, "by varnishing my paintings I slow down the disclosure of the image, encouraging the viewer to become a participant in the discovery of the painting rather than a passive spectator."

It is the tension between subjective experience and objective knowledge that Klamen wishes to explore. He has mastered the technique and vocabulary of traditional academic realism in order to investigate the processes through which we gain – or hope to gain – an understanding of what we experience. What was at first

an appreciation of talent, of an expert hand, has shifted to deeper, more fundamental questions. How do we look? How do we see? How do we know? How do we make meaning?

To approach these questions, Klamen first offers something that we already know. The rich, dark, varnished surfaces immediately recall Old Master paintings. Early in his career, he chose to paint images of animals in this revered style - reindeer, moose, swans, snakes- not to gain from their "wildness," but because they have been preserved in the traditional, recreated tableaux in natural history museums, subsumed into cultural "fact." His landscapes also participate in a time-honored tradition- the genre of landscape painting-while exploring how we understand the natural world. Later he became interested in specific architectural interiors – foyers, common spaces, and staircases of university buildings which he used to "refer to the heritage of the institutions in which 'knowledge' has been developed and defended. "He explains, "When I paint from life, it is not because I'm interested in describing the subject, but because I want to explore certain characteristics of the act of observation."

An image of a swan's wing or a reindeer's antler are easily observed and understood. A Chinese vase or baroque interior sit comfortably within contemporary knowledge of history and culture. These disparate images are connected by their appeal to an already known traditional authority: the long history of painting, the dioramas of animals of the world at the Field Museum of Natural History, the value of Oriental antiquities, the gravity of European heritage. After generously offering these familiar signs, Klamen reveals to the viewer the complexity of that familiarity, while he obscures the image itself.

As with many of his generation coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s, Klamen is attracted to the time-honored traditions of art-making, but wishes to pursue them from a new, self-conscious position. He unhinges the normal operations of painting - in order to reveal them more clearly.

Klamen mentioned that two artists he admires are Frederick Church, the painter of grand landscapes that romanticized the nineteenth-century American experience of Nature, and Walter de Maria, whose Broken Kilometer describes an abstracted, logical distance with sections of bronze rods, presenting the kilometer in a very experiential, physical way. In Klamen's work there is always an oscillating relationship between the romantic and the logical. He presents a unified monochrome field for rational consumption, but the complex representations of space beneath that field offer a specific subjective experience within which to cast the imagination into reference.

On some surfaces he upsets both a monochrome field and representational depth by adding small brilliant

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1976), p. 101-102.

² All quotes from David Klamen are from conversations with the author, September 1996.

white bar-shapes. Some are quizzical linguistic symbols, adding to the various elements of language which comprise any one painting, thus pointing out illusion within the painterly object. In others representing staid institutional interiors hovering beneath coats of varnish, Klamen paints white geometric configurations that describe from above, as in an architectural plan, the path of a body moving through space. Here is a precise manifestation of the artist's concerns: A stairway leading into a university hall, built at the turn of the last century in a neo-Medieval style to mimic the authority of European bastions of learning, is punctuated by glowing white lines which trace its continuously contemporaneous use. The tradition is understood through a physical traverse as well as by an ever renewable interpretation of that tradition. By presenting the bare architecture and abstracting its use, Klamen allows the viewer to consider the interaction between deductive objectivity and subjective experience.

The interest in the deconstruction and reconstruction of the painterly enterprise follows from Klamen's interest in hermeneutics, the art of interpretation which goes back to the Greek god Hermes, who "is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp... The Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing – the tools which human understanding employs to grasp meaning and to convey it to others."³ Klamen uses language of pictorial representation to conceal and reveal visual data to be held up for interpretation: "Hermeneutics is the art of clarifying and mediating by our own effort of interpretation what is said by persons we encounter in tradition."⁴

Most of what we see in these paintings seems imminently intelligible and consumable from our world experience. However, to counter his own obfuscation beneath layers of varnish, Klamen opts to leave portions of his representations free from cover, apparently spotlight. In one example, a blue and white Chinese vase sitting atop a pedestal glows brilliantly, as if illuminated by a ray of optical clarity. His painterly encounters are similar to those of his contemporaries working in photography. Like Barbara Ess's pinhole photographs in which a focused central object looms menacingly from a blurry void, or Jeff Wall's highly contrived tableaux of historically charged imagery, Klamen's paintings wrangle with the interpretability of representation. The lusciousness with which he reproduces a Chinese vase points to the tangible quality of the vase itself. This image then becomes symbolic of the lusciousness of

colonial power, of Western imperialism, and then of the entanglements of a cultural elite to garner prestige through appropriation of ancient Chinese culture. An interpretive clarity seems impossible, or as the artist explains: "we can only see the world as illuminated by the headlights of our own ability to reason."

In a further attempt to accomplish clarity of meaning, Klamen has tried another means: that of accumulation. Referring back to late-19th-century salon-style hangings, he has arranged many small canvasses on a gallery wall in order to illuminate his various concerns. While some pictures are from recognizable series of landscapes or interior spaces, others are studies of a different operation: images painted, then physically obliterated, sanded off to become beautiful monochromes. These are bits and pieces, allowing the viewer to negotiate more intimately his painterly decisions. This large installation appeals to the desire to classify and accumulate. Klamen explains that "it combines multiple canvasses painted over the last ten years, and looks to taxonomy and collecting as methods for understanding."

In still further exploration, Klamen has covered Daimoku/Constellation, a depiction of three trees, obscured by an overlay of small white dots, applied with a discipline inspired by the Buddhist notion of repetitive chanting to achieve enlightenment. The dots appear in another canvas, hovering above a table, but here they reference the pattern of stars in the North sky. Both inner-directed meditation and contemplation of the vast space of the universe mix with the empirical revelations offered by experience of the paintings.

In other recent work, Klamen has been inspired by individual words or symbols to create small canvasses that incorporate language. The loaded word "testosterone" is fragmented into a layered grid in order to invest the much-maligned male hormone with formal purpose and a possibility of beauty. In another painting, Klamen floats "Mies" beneath a curvaceous abstract shape to comment on the Modernist van der Rohe's utopian wish to merge geometry with a gracious style of living. Again, the viewer is invited to enter into the ambiguities offered up by the canvasses, to participate in their experiential discussion. Similarly, Klamen's recent canvas depicting an empty plate on a vacant table encourages the viewer to fill in an interpretation, to heap meaning upon the plate, to be seduced by the craft of illusion.

It has been noted that an axiomatic pre-condition for realism is the separation of the subject from the object, to remove the subjective experience of interpretation from an objective "true" knowledge. Klamen's layerings and spotlights, his coverings and revelations, his vessels and his voids, his spare words and his abundant accumulations, refuse this separation. Within the freedom that language offers, his paintings conspire to plumb the depth of interpretative possibility.

³ Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1969), p. 13.

⁴ Gadamer, p. 98.

