

Lucas Jardin's School Paintings

by Alex Bacon

Lucas Jardin's works operate in the space between revelation and concealment. Using solvents to manipulate found materials, the gestures he makes are painterly in effect, but are in fact the result of a reductive process, eating into and degrading the surfaces he works over. This is opposed to the additive nature of the gestural paint marks they reference. Yet Jardin inverts Robert Rauschenberg's well-known *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953), in which Rauschenberg used the eraser as a means to undermine the authority of Willem De Kooning's inimical gesture.

Jardin has found that, contrary to the authorial logic Rauschenberg's work deconstructs, his "erasures" can have a weight and power of their own, operating as they do in our contemporary context of an expanded arena of gestures. These can be seen to encompass everything from what happens when we manipulate a pen, or motion to a friend, to manipulating the touchscreen on our iPhone. Seemingly "reductive" marks are not only negative and reactionary.

Thus, the act of deskilling implied in Jardin's reduction of the painterly gesture to something akin to the cleaner's mopping of a floor (or, equally, to a series of swipes on an iPad), is revealed to in fact be a *reskilling* of sorts, and precisely because of this connection of his marks to those everyday ones they reference as much as they do those of high art. This is a connection that also reveals Jardin's relationship to labor, which is baldly made evident when we examine his marks closely. This lends the work an

additional valence—since the labor of their production is writ large on their surfaces, and is as evocative of menial tasks as it is of the “high” gestures of Abstract Expressionism.

This exploration of the significance of gesture in our time is not only formal, for Jardin has long been interested in using pedagogical materials as the support for his painterly, yet conceptual, investigation of the contemporary conditions of mark-making. He is drawn to those systems that are imbedded and emphasized from a young age via a complex interface of language and image. Thus, it is no surprise that he produced a particular subset of this body of work while at a residency in New York City at the end of 2014. Jardin’s attention was drawn to the differences between the Belgian educational posters he had been using when working from his home in Brussels, and those he discovered in America. He could thereby trace the cultural similarities and differences, which were partially both obscured and revealed by the fact that, for him, English is a second language.

These works, collectively titled the “School Paintings,” make use of children’s educational posters that Jardin sourced from a supply store in Brooklyn. These posters cover a wide range of subjects: from mathematics to etiquette, animals to history. Jardin acts on these posters in a performative way. He lays them flat on the floor, applying solvent, which he then moves around with a squeegee. The solvent acts fast and what it removes is gone permanently, so Jardin has to work quickly and make decisions intuitively, and in an instant. The result is a transformation of the poster, both aesthetically and conceptually: what was once shiny and plastic, becomes soft and matte, almost like gouache or watercolor. When he is done with this blur of activity, the finished

piece is placed on the wall for him to judge and assess. This introduces a slower aspect of contemplation to a performative act that is otherwise quick and of the moment. The final step is to mount the piece to aluminum, so that it can be placed on the wall and enter the frame of painting, and the kind of rigorous conversation that the medium enables. In this way Jardin connects to a range of art historical predecessors.

Of these, primary, in my mind, is a line that extends from the Affichistes, those artists—including Raymond Hains, Jacques Villeglé, and Mimmo Rotella, among others—who were active in Paris in the 1950s and 1960s, tearing down posters from around the city and presenting them in the gallery in the frame of painting. The posters they found had often been decimated through time, weather, and use to the point where language and image approach a negative limit of legibility.

The way in their works that, often, only a sliver of a face, or fragment of text, remains is a quality also found in Jardin's paintings. But he is essentially approaching the field of institutional language and image at the level of a system, whereas the Affichistes were taking it on in the public realm of its use. That is to say, as it had already circulated in the world. Jardin reduces the legibility of his subject matter so as to highlight its structural nature, drawing our attention to the way that it is in a constant state of formation and deformation, yet always consists of a set vocabulary of forms that are conditioned by culture and society and repeated, and thus reinforced, throughout a person's lifetime.

From the Affichistes this line establishes a specifically French tradition of formal intervention into the system of language. One that has philosophical and theoretical

parallels in structuralism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. This was born out in work of the late 1960s and 1970s by the artists of BMPT (Daniel Buren, Olivier Mosset, Michel Parmentier, and Niele Toroni), and then by the artists of Supports/Surfaces. Of the first Jardin feels the strongest affinity to Toroni, and of the latter Claude Viallat. In both artists he sees a connection between their approach to painting, not as a revered medium, but rather as the site of a deskilled, artisanal practice: the regular application of the brush or sponge mark over a surface to fill it out in a direct, workmanlike fashion.

This is also how Jardin approaches his work, and how he envisions his marks, despite their overtly gestural nature. In a way we can see how gesture has, since the heyday of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, been steadily, drained of the existential weight it carried at that time. Yet, more recently, after a long period of signifiatory emptiness, which artists as diverse as Christopher Wool, Gerhard Richter, and Michael Krebber exploited, it has become reanimated in a digital age.

Think of the swipes, taps, and pinches we regularly execute on the surfaces of our touchscreen devices, and we can easily imagine a new resonance for the systematized mark and gesture. It is this language that Jardin brings into his work, rather than the intuitive, impassioned flurry we attribute with de Kooning or Pollock. His use of the squeegee, with which he drags the solvent around, has none of the careful calculation that Richter imbues in his. Yet, this is painting for our moment, born out of a new language around labor, and specifically that surrounding service. For these people, the swipes and taps on their iPhones and iPads are an integral part of the currency they trade, just as they

underwrite the meanings—both revelatory and banal—of the marks in Jardin’s “School Paintings.”