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A Fleeting Moment on the J Train: Robert Janitz on his recent work

by Noah Dillon

Robert Janitz's first solo exhibition at Team Gallery, titled "Stick Shift Heaven," included 13 new works and displayed all three strands of the artist's recent output: broad, gestural abstractions thickened with cold wax and flour; brushy portraits of the backs of people's heads; and plant sculptures made of sheet metal and Coroplast.

Born in Germany in 1962, Janitz moved to New York in 2009 after more than a decade living and showing in Paris. He is a true cosmopolitan with a love of dance, poetry, language, fashion, and food. I met up with him at his Bushwick studio to discuss his career thus far, his approach to work, and the difference between Europe and the US.



Robert Janitz: Stick Shift Heaven at Team Gallery, 2014. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Team (gallery, inc.)

NOAH DILLON I'm curious about the work you did in Europe and whether you think being in New York has affected what you're doing now.

ROBERT JANITZ I was starting to get a sense of New York in 2004, when I was at a Cooper Union summer residency and had been coming to New York on-and-off. But I only felt I was really connecting to anything in 2009, when I moved here.

What prompted your move?

You know, Paris is a very nice place but it's very claustrophobic and they hate painting. Not that I was considering myself a painter...

What does that mean?

Because I was working with paint on a canvas I was a painter. And because I was a painter I was outside the Duchampian dialogue. I was a foreigner in a side wing of the dominant French discourse. There was a glass ceiling. I thought that the time the culture would take to open itself to me is longer than the time I have at my disposal. So I had to leave. And I felt if you looked anywhere else there was much more interest in painting.

The other thing was I think the French deal very differently with their emotion. I don't want it to be reductive, but I felt a heart connection with New York, much more than just a cerebral connection. In France the culture was like a corset, allowing only certain behaviors. It was fun learning to fit in, but you begin to feel the shell doesn't allow movements that you want to do. And the scene here was more grungy, and in a way also dirtier, and less done. In Paris everything is so thought through and carved out and refined with very little room left over.

The first time I saw your work was the "To Follow" show at CLEARING Gallery, in 2011. The paintings were deeply textural, grungy, dirty—looked like they'd been buried for months.

Here I got a larger hand on the notion of putting paint on a surface, whereas I had been more confined by the medium before. I was dealing with negation; each painting's layers negated the layers below. I felt it was a psychological projection of what I was doing: I was refusing, but painting the refusal, which I hadn't really been able to do in France.

And I acquired more freedom in the way the brush and paint are at my disposal. I can venture out in things like the portraits, which I couldn't have done in Paris because I didn't feel entitled. The portraits approach deeper, classic issues that touch the drama of humankind in a more encompassing way.

And part of the work that they do, differently from your abstractions, is aiming at suggesting those issues or suggesting some *thing*: a personality, a person, a moment...

Yeah. They're very specific. And as I make them it's clear to me at some point, somehow, suddenly a certain person's there. I sometimes like to think of the correlation of those large, window-washing paintings and the portraits: the large ones would be a tune where you're playing scores, but with the portraits it's like a tune you improvise. Those are like literary studies, but as painting, and I need to channel some kind of character in them. So maybe those people are part of some kind of novel, but I don't know what they're saying or what they're doing.

Can you talk a little about the way you deal with paint as material?

I'm still tackling how to deal with paint. For some of the earlier works I was using a blowtorch to blister the paint layers or scraping layers off. It was an aging process that takes the work a little bit out of my hands or out of a painted universe. The ones I'm making now, their translucent waxiness starts becoming opaque during the first couple of days. The rest comes in very slow. That slow solidification is archaeological in a way.

Fifty-year-old paintings don't look the same as when they first came out of the studio; they settle into a state of patina and age that's a bit unpredictable, and it seems like you're helping your work into that development.

I look at them like that, certainly. At some point I thought why don't I put flour in it? I was into mayonnaise, and why not just get into pancake dough as a possible approach to paint? As if my paintings were coming out of the food universe. Maybe they'll come out of a different universe later on. I mean we were talking about that earlier, how you can unfold the work in a larger sense. Now it's still in the food process.

The marks function in a way that local colors interact and force themselves. It's all very toned down, but it comes to the forefront. Their thickness and texture appear like casts. They're archaeological things. It looks like they're carved out, rather than building from the inside out. In a way, that silly, stupid vertical gesture becomes ancient.

In the portraits you're employing a completely different, varied vocabulary of marks.

I use very workmanlike brushes. They're cheap and have a certain bristleness to them, so I can get relieved marks. That can go very well with hair. The way it's painted, it immediately becomes these other things. The abstractions don't become anything—they just stay painted.

One thing I think you said to me once is that the portraits absorb the viewer in some way.

I used to be obsessed with the idea that the paintings only show you their backside, as if the real painting's on the other side. And with the portraits, you only see the back because, sorry, the real painting is on the other side of the wall, you can't see it. So you're in this kind of disenfranchised room where everybody turns their back on you.

Sometimes you don't know what came first. When you do something for a while and you get this imprint in your mind and then you see it outside. Then you see it everywhere. I think at some point I recognized those back portraits in a fleeting moment on the bridge when the J train rushes by and everyone's sitting with their back to you. But before your camera is out the situation's gone, so you have it only in your mind.

Can you talk about the sculptures?

I had used an actual plant in a show in Brussels. In the back of my mind was the idea of adding a sculptural element that would relate to the paintings. So, planning my exhibition at Shoot the Lobster, I thought I'd include a plant. I made a model, but the model plant looked so good I decided I would just do that instead. I had been looking for a parallel practice to the painting, which would use a similar approach in a completely different medium. They were sketches of ideas.

In Paris I was interested in fountains. They were one of my few external inspirations. I would take slow walks at night to the pretty, public fountains and I got interested in that shape. Later on the idea of the plant showed up again. I'm basically only interested in plants that look like fountains: simple, tropical plants—like palm trees—that grow up from one stalk and then throw themselves into being without branching. I think also somehow those blades have something to do with the gesture of the painted lines.

I thought about calling these The Margiela Plants, like the fashion designer, Martin Margiela. It's a joke a little bit on their use of white as well as the craftiness with which it's made.

That's interesting. Can you talk about how the titles function with regard to making context for the viewer?

I used to use number sequences and kind of abstract titles. Now that I do title them, I've moved into giving the paintings a context—one that relates more to my interest in language and poetry. I look for titles that relate to the work without being narrative. I'm not trying to illustrate elements in the painting.

I use phrases out of books that I like. I spend quite some time trying to weigh the words; I want each word to be as far away from the others as possible. For the show I was thinking about an actual stick and shiftingness, and "Heaven" was meant to be far away from those. It's a kind of geometric process, the way the words occupy my mind, as shapes. Some of them are French. I like Raymond Roussel, who developed this strange method of *double entendres*, which he layered as a storytelling technique. I was also interested in a pornographic novel by Apollinaire, and I used the opening line of that for titling a piece. But now that titles are part of the work, the title and the painting come together as a whole.

Is it a jumping off point for you and not so much for the viewer?

If it feels good and I think it's good then I can put that out and the viewer can connect to it. But what that is I don't know, it's just an allusion to something.

Robert Janitz: *Stick Shift Heaven* was at Team, February 23 to March 23, 2014