

1 Collapse, implosion, possibility—film at eleven

Painterly practice, in the most creative sense of the term—and this is something on which I would insist—is an experimentation of the theory of painting, a way of testing it against the verification of the tenability or untenability of specifically invoked conditions that are understood to make the making of paintings possible. The possible thus becomes the very reality of the work.

Louis Marinⁱ

In looking closely at the most recent paintings by Craig Easton, I'm initially captivated both by their lush visual intensity and their multiple layers of contradiction. Some examples: seemingly spare, monochrome fields, yet characterized by richly evocative motifs emerging from their centers, as clusters of tangled forms swim to the surface. Or Easton's considered use of such linear elements recalling nets or webs, tendrils, maybe wires, rope, or even the actual tape that plays a decisive role in their construction. These utterly compelling pictures are highly accessible, yet repel exact definition.

The artist has described these works by using the word *collapse*, which is a strikingly unambiguous term, given that these images depict a complex, shifting, and often disorienting play of ambiguous forms. While painting as a general historical category remains continually elusive in almost every respect, I would argue that Easton's abstractions gain their interest in large part as individual paintings actively engaged with their dramatic and forceful particularities.

Easton's approach might, in anachronistic fashion, be regarded as symptomatic of a renewed interest in formalism. However, an artist can be deeply invested in form without succumbing altogether to formalism's excesses. Easton's works are evidence of his commitment to the continued investigation of the painted surface, via both its illusionary and physical properties. These paintings can almost be read as implosions of much that is germane to the act of painting, whether Modernist or of the current moment. Easton's paintings are not immune to the pressures of today's art-life surroundings, but bear up to this challenge by multiple forms of visual resistance. To some degree, the artist's resistance is voiced through a perpetual "undoing" and "remaking" of his own practice

2 Something about flatness

It could stand, that flatness, as an analogue of the "popular"—something therefore conceived as plain, workmanlike, and emphatic. Or it could signify "modernity," with flatness meant to conjure up the mere two dimensions of posters, labels, fashion prints, and photographs. Equally, unbrokenness of surface could be seen—by Cézanne for example—as standing for the truth of seeing, the actual form of our knowledge of things.

T.J. Clarkⁱⁱ

I do get bored, I get bored/In the flat field/I get bored, I do get bored/In the flat field

“In the Flat Field”, Bauhausⁱⁱⁱ

Easton's works which recall the monochrome adventures of Rodchenko, Klein, Reinhardt and Stella also summon other references: the black-on-black cover of the Velvet Underground's second LP *White Light White Heat*, which if one turns obliquely offers up a skull tattoo, the shimmering surfaces of a leather jacket or a vinyl LP itself, a darkened cinema, or the wardrobe of the late Johnny Cash. This associative game might appear unduly digressive but painting is/was/will be a popular cultural form, with many attributes in common with other artifacts of popular culture. With all the talk of immersive and interactive environments of the 21st Century, painting remains a spectacular and seductive setting for multiple sensory triggers.

The very flatness of Easton's paintings creates a gameboard for an utterly sophisticated, frequently shifting set of painterly moves. This is also demanding, as David Cross has noted in an insightful analysis of Easton's approach: “Too much literal representation and that slippery border of ambiguity disappears into obviousness. Too little and we have retro hard edge painting with nostalgia stamped all over it.”^{iv}

Easton follows along specific edges, the multiple densities of his compositional fields, his gravitation toward forms which recall but do not represent real world phenomena, meanwhile transformed into sleek, abstracted painterly gestures. All of this is precisely and elegantly worried over, but also with some degree of much-needed abandon, as the artist enters into a joyful and attentive dialogue with history of the medium. Easton has, rather perversely, mentioned a ‘Gothic Minimalism’ and this is an evocative phase given the contradictory and productive tensions which characterize his images. I also am imagining an undead Donald Judd applying his fingernail polish right now.

This utterly ludicrous image might be used to return to the notion of collapse, that is, the collapse of internal coherence when speaking of movements, ideologies, or other tendentious claims of modern and contemporary art. Yes, Easton's pictures are rooted in the rootlessness of Postmodernism, the Bauhaus of Peter Murphy rather than Walter Gropius but aren't we over that too? Wasn't that just *soooo* Twentieth Century? With what content exactly do we replace the ironic acknowledgement of the absurdity and preposterousness that was as much at the core of Modernism as its high ideals and seriousness? Perhaps a very significant starting point could be a renewed interest in delving into form minus formalism, ideation without ideological overkill, the willful ambition to continue making beautiful things in an age of collapse. Certainly there's never a shortage of parties in dark times.

3 In praise of the floating rectangle

The ascent to the peaks of the objectless art is arduous, painful ... And yet it brings happiness. The familiar retreats little by little ... the contours of the world of objects fade

more with every moment; and the same thing continues in the world of figurative notions—everything that we loved and all from which we lived becomes invisible.

Kazimir Malevich^v

Craig Easton's paintings simultaneously reconfigure and interrupt existing lineages of abstraction. In particular, one might say that Easton seeks coordinates through a darkened and unclear space, not unlike the realm Russian Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich termed "the non-objective world." Part of the intrigue in Easton's work involves his act of proceeding onward, though it remains difficult to predict some of the questions that will emerge in so doing. The act of painting in the early 21st century signals an intentional slowing down from our gruelingly accelerating patterns of everyday existence, allowing a breaking away and focussing of our attentions even for a brief moment. In these instants we might be said as viewers to hover, float, stopped in our tracks.

Why is it that so many abstract painters have lavished such attention upon their undifferentiated field of color, within which—most likely—other aspects emerge, such as the taped lines or "zips" of Barnett Newman, the flying geometric shrapnel of Malevich, or the floating rectangular units of Rothko and Reinhardt. To isolate and concretise contingent realities as (not so) formal arrangements is a history with which Easton is well versed, and interested in overtly messing with, revising, collapsing.

Easton achieves much by articulating subtle visual differences and shadings to then be parceled out—almost as if secret information—with the viewer. We see outlines, silhouettes, tracings, the quotidian world coded into a refined painterly lexicon. Although Easton's imagery has on occasion, spilled out into "real space" from its framing, the current works instead summon architectonic elements but keep them contained within their pictorial organization. Easton has remarked that his current work could be viewed as "A kind of collapsing of my own orders of making. Pushing the limits of difference in the works. Working against the programmatic of much abstraction (including some of my own)."

I would say that in this sophisticated process both a collapse and conflation of historical moments ensues, such that while many have rushed (all too soon) to offer up their postmortems on the medium of painting, Easton has meanwhile been contending very productively with many of the spectres still haunting his own contemporary studio. Painting has not disappeared and Easton's works capably contend with redefining an enduring, living medium. If collapse is in order, it is collapse solely as fuel for Easton's ongoing, self-critical, and vibrant painterly practice.

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ⁱ Giancarlo Politi, ed. *Art and Philosophy* (Milan: Flash Art Books, 1991) 92.

ⁱⁱ T.J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Philosophy of Art," in Howard Risatti, ed. *Postmodern Perspectives: Issues in Contemporary Art* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998) 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bauhaus, *In the Flat Field* LP (London: 4AD Records, 1980).

^{iv} *Questions of Minimal Importance* (Melbourne: West Space, 1998) unpaginated.

^v Cited by Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Malevich, Painting, and Writing" in Matthew Drutt, *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (N.Y.: Guggenheim Museum, 2003) 38.

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