

The Pithy Provocations of Jason Hoelscher

By Eileen G'Sell

Before 1960, the average shot length in a Hollywood film ranged between eight and eleven seconds. Today the average shot hovers around five, with those of action films and thrillers like *Transformers* and *Inception* a snappy “3-2-1”.

It can be argued that during the same decades that American waistbands expanded, our attention spans shrank. While no small number of teachers, parents, and public intellectuals have bemoaned the latter, what might be more productive—and certainly less futile—would be a reassessment of the means by which we benefit from visual stimulation in the first place.

It might then be argued that no individual is better equipped to tackle this challenge than the contemporary artist. Who else, by definition, can creatively recalibrate how we see and respond to this shifting world?

Enter Jason Hoelscher, a painter whose self-acknowledged “far out” outlook would initially seem to flout the staid traditions of brush and canvas. With *Iconographic Overdrive*, Hoelscher’s meticulous practice of thinking and making, making and thinking, is on full display in his latest crop of what he calls “short attention span paintings for short attention span culture.” Consciously playing with space and form to satiate both a cursory glance and sustained contemplation, competing planes merge and collide in vibrant limes and sailor blues. Like splintered blueprints carefully dipped in Ecto-cooler solution, geometric forms achieve a lively, if uncanny, visual familiarity—skeuomorphs for a future glimpsed in trippy lucid dreams.

“The idea of a visitor pondering for 45 minutes is not how we really look at things anymore,” says Hoelscher. “If people are in and out the door in seven minutes feeling like they got something out of [my work], then it has succeeded. Let’s make work that rewards that seven-to-eight second level of attention, a balance between shortened attention span and faster intake of information.”

Part of how his paintings lasso attention so quickly is in their resemblance to common logos and commercial iconography—such immediacy complicated by an approach that hybridizes Renaissance-style depth with a slick Modernist flatness. “Geometrically, I put into the paintings things that seem to be perspectival, but are complexified by color scheme,” Hoelscher explains. With a palette and detached aesthetic recalling the “cool” midcentury California paintings of John McLaughlin, Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and Helen Lundeborg, Hoelscher channels a high formal rigor into the mercurial zeitgeist of today. Converting Pantone values to Benjamin Moore acrylic, he applies everyday materials to a calculated process of layering and distributing paint. With an ethos of “maximum impact with minimal input,” Hoelscher aims to create something “in-your-face, direct, and yet with as few elements as possible.”

In a time where the visual field is glutted more than ever, the pithy nature of his practice feels at once fresh and relevant. But equally present is an eye for nuance that accrues the longer one considers the work (“*Iconographic Overdrive*” itself puns on a psychedelic Pink Floyd song from 1966). In matte mauve and the palest blue, *Antinomic Overcode* at first seems entirely abstract, then starts to appear a laptop key turned superhero, launching towards the sky.

In *My Greenest Adventure* what initially resembles a half-opened door seems to carve out a white path of escape from a topsy-turvy domus. When juxtaposed to *Greenest Adventure*, *Tautologic Resonator* suddenly appears to be a reflection of a corridor. Across the gallery, *Planar Propositions* starts to look like a pile of doors spinning through the air (imagine the planet’s calmest tornado). *Quarkitetural Resonator* reminds one of Richard Serra’s spiral *Joe* in the courtyard of the Pulitzer Arts Foundation—the sculpture’s ruddy steel replaced by stately teal and mismatched cyan. *Sci-Fi Rothko* might be the most figurative, or easily anthropomorphized; at first I saw

an anchor or some type of shipbuilding material. But from across the room, the shape looks like a cartoonish profile of a man in a striped collar. Part of the fun in engaging in the paintings is how many interpretations feel equally viable.

In addition to closely monitoring the number of layers of paint, Hoelscher alternates the orientation of the brushwork—not in an expressive way, but in a fashion that throws some shapes into relief more than others; different textures come to life upon scrutiny. Some forms appear almost decal-like—as though you can simply peel them off. And on all of the 50 x 36” vertical canvasses, white space itself becomes an activated form—at times the subtle border, or frame of a work, as in *Syllepticonic Signal Surger*, is made of lighter (or heavier) layers of paint than at first perceptible. Referencing syllepsis—a figure of speech in which a word is applied to two others in different senses—the visual and tactile intersect as though to arouse pupils and fingertips alike.

“There’s a phenomenological aspect to making a painting that is pretty important. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty terms,” Hoelscher explains, alluding to the French theorist, “there is a non-conceptual component of putting a painting in a gallery space—a bodily relationship we have with a painting.” In other words, when one crafts the body of a painting, that painting also affects the artist’s body, and a similar exchange happens between viewer and object when paintings are gazed upon. Central to Hoelscher’s dissertation on art theory and aesthetics is the related, and oft-overlooked, notion of “instauration,” challenging Cartesian logic that things are just the way things are. As Hoelscher puts it, “A paintbrush is something that one uses to paint on a canvas with, but after a while the paintbrush gets more useful the more times the user uses it; instauration commingles subject and object, drawing things together.”

Dispensing brainy axioms at whim, Hoelscher is that rare artist equally invested in the philosophical implications of art as in the creative instinct required to make it. “If someone wants to see my show in two minutes, that’s fine with me,” he says. “But when they come back, after having read a statement or having thought of it, that kicks off some kind of instaurative project where the painting unfolds differently for them even though it’s the same object.” Painting survives in part because—however quickly we adapt to the breakneck pace of visual culture—we long for the sheer pleasure of something worth looking at, then looking at again, with the assumption, and gratification, that the magic of looking, and making, can never be the same thing twice.

Eileen G’Sell’s poetry and cultural criticism are regularly featured in Salon, Arte Fuse New York, DIAGRAM, the Boston Review, and Conduit, among others. She is Film & Media editor at the Rumpus and teaches writing, film, and poetry at Washington University in St. Louis.

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