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Ground and Consequence: C. Michael Norton and The Colors of Noise

At 8.30am on Friday, February 5 of this year, as C. Michael Norton was starting his day in his downtown New York home, a massive, 15-story crane toppled into nearby Worth Street, killing a man and injuring several others. The explosive thud and ensuing screech of sirens unnerved Tribeca residents like Norton for whom the events of September 11, 2001 are etched in memory. On that fateful day, Norton and his wife, the artist Ruth Hardinger, had also been at home and were able to watch the towers fall from their street. He describes the visceral impact of his witness to Christopher Joy and Zachary Keeting (of the videography project *Gorky's Granddaughter*) in their interview with Norton*. "When the first tower collapsed all my auditory shit just shut down," he recalls, his features betraying momentary wonderment and pain as the image of a cascading tower comes back to mind. "I watched that thing peel away, it was all visual." People started rushing past them, but it was like a movie without the sound. Then he began to hear Ruth talking to him, although everything else was still edited out.

Norton didn't bring this up to explain in any way his iconography or methods but instead to illustrate his instinctual understanding of the separateness and specificity of the senses in the complex ontology of his aesthetic process. "I'm not hearing..." and we see him struggle to define what he means by hearing. Backing up, he owns that he does, in fact, listen to music while he paints but that is not the level at which he means that he is not hearing. Intimating the paintings behind him he suggests that what he is trying to say is that he doesn't *hear* (a priori) his own forms. "I'm not hearing, I'm reacting." It is as if there are rules of discourse between the painter and what he paints, a mode of communication that reverses the logic of action and command, an eloquence that emerges amidst voices of silence.

Silence, however, is the last virtue that springs to mind when looking at his paintings. You almost need earplugs in front of them; color and gesture are so raucous, explosive, thunderous and shrill. Anything but decorous, these boisterous images heave with noisy effects. Rife with the raw energy of heavy metal, perhaps, or complex free jazz, or even opera at its most, well, operatic, they are a euphoric fusion of virtuosity and excess.

What I'm calling the visual noise is, nonetheless, a contained phenomenon within these paintings. There is almost an embarrassment of riches in the range and tone of colors, sensations, and moods. But if the sound is understood to be the liquid element in his paintings – that gooey interlacing of molten color (he is a supreme master blender) that imparts an unnerving sensation of being poured onto the retina as it is beheld – then this audible fluid is, as it were, isolated in septic tanks amidst the clean, neat environment that is the totality of the painting. He somehow manages to maintain, with almost disconcerting restraint, areas of

pristine canvas on which the chromatic and painterly mess can bubble. The visible support is like a servant with a dry towel waiting at the edge of the pool. Stephen Westfall has noted an affinity with the paintings of Francis Bacon that makes perfect sense of this dramatic interplay of figure and ground, thinking of the way Bacon situates painterly ejaculations of flesh against virgin expanses of raw canvas or modulated brushwork. But the swimming pool simile shouldn't be allowed to give the impression of strict architecture: the relationship of wet to dry is more anarchic in Norton. Dynamics of figure and ground are complicated by his abstraction and his teasing intimations of depth and projection, of receding pockets of space and protruding surface incident.

Besides the wet-dry dichotomy in Norton, which can be characterized as an opposition of clean canvas and melding medium, there is an equally stark contrast within the painted portions of the canvases themselves, a polarity of geometric fixity and organic flow. Neat, regulated, graphically achieved elements offset brushy, gestural, coagulating smears. The contrasting forms almost dramatize their mode of conception, as if the hardedge elements are a product of deliberation, the fluid gestures of chance—cautious planning and reckless abandon. As if to underscore implications of neatness, forms in the linear mode cling to areas of clean canvas. Associations these structures give rise to are varied: in *Celestial Carve*, for instance, slats in a boat come to mind, if viewed aerially, or treads of a bowed staircase if read as receding in space. The green grid in *Chewing Glass* is akin to a lattice—or perhaps the frets on a guitar. In *Magpie* an area to the right of the image of stopped-out planks of blank canvas against black and pink infill reads schematically like a city map, while in *Rutabaga* the arc of curved golden yellow slats at the top of the image are like the glass canopy of a railway shed or covered market. None of these associations are forceful enough to police the viewer into a literal reading of the image, but the variety is as phenomenological as it is associational, conditioning the sense of composition and pace in images of contrasting feeling.

As varied as the moods and connotations of these hard-edged forms might be, the proliferation of Norton's organic painterly marks seems greater. This plethora of handling and effect is united by an expressive sense of purpose that defies a seeming free-for-all in their deployment. There can be impasto in one passage and sheerness in another. Colors can blend while retaining their distinctness, like ingredients marbling in the first rotation of a cake mix. Or there can be a staccato repulsion of one smear of color over another in an effect many commentators have compared to the squeegee spreads in Gerhard Richter. Norton acknowledges Richter as a mentor to contend with, alongside Frank Stella and Jasper Johns. The artist who comes to my mind, however, when thinking about the way Norton's clusters of painterly activity occupy free boundaries and yet sit isolated on a pristine ground is Linda Benglis. In the 1970s this artist – now internationally celebrated as a sculptor – pioneered a hybrid of painting, sculpture, installation and performance in a series of poured-from-the bucket carpets of liquid latex. (Norton has an opposite trajectory, beginning his career in

sculpture.) In concert with post-minimalist artists like Richard Serra and Eva Hesse, Benglis connected preoccupations of her generation (such as process and reduction) with the “energy made visible” action painting of the New York School, in particular Jackson Pollock. There is a similar historical reconciliation, I would argue, in Norton: in respect to friendships, sensibility, and intellectual priorities, he belongs with the generation of artists now grouped under the rubric of Conceptual Abstraction, for example David Reed, Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker and Norton’s essayist Stephen Westfall. But in a way that is more empathetic and less deconstructive than any of these peers, Norton directly channels the painterliness of abstract expressionists such as Hans Hofmann, Philip Guston and Joan Mitchell. There is a synthesis in Norton of the criticality of his peers and the expressivity of his forebears.

I bring up Benglis, however, for another reason, and that is the radical play of chance and containment implicit in her pouring strategy. There is extraordinary dexterity in allowing the colors to flow into exuberant puddles without muddying. The shape thus generated holds autonomy upon the floor: wayward within, it presents unity without. Norton achieves comparable sectioned-off anarchy, a playpen for errant behavior within an otherwise orderly field. Except that in Norton, neat divisions between figure and ground are frustrated. The clean canvas doesn’t so much indicate as symbolize where ground ends and consequence begins. The complex and noisy layering of effects and contrast of forms violates clear boundaries. And his is not chaos in quotes, like the stylized squiggles of Jonathan Lasker. The ability to retain silent ground amidst painterly noise would seem to imply calculation, which in turn precludes spontaneity. But that is not in tune with Norton’s artistic personality. Because of his severe dyslexia, he tells us, he thinks visually—and backwards. “If I tried to be formulaic, I’d forget the formula,” he jokes. It might be useful to think of Norton *performing* spontaneity the way cultural theorists now encourage us to believe we all perform gender.

His strategy entails means of generating isolated pockets of chance within a meticulously balanced, evolving order. Norton is able to draw on years of experience as a commercial house painter, as well of course as a fine artist. He starts a painting with a layer of transparent medium applied allover. The first intimation of a compositional structure is the chance pattern of brushstroke visible in the primed ground. Her refers to what commercial painters call “holidays,” the lesions or overlaps that prevent a brushless smooth surface. (In view of the noisy brood that a Norton composition will spawn it is worth recalling the words of Toru Takemitsu, that silence is the mother – or perhaps grandmother – of music.) As a non-volitional means of generating marks, canvases are often then laid on the floor where they accept studio droppings and stray flings of paint from other works in process. When he finds himself responding consciously to the emerging composition the canvas graduates to the wall. It is presumably at this stage that he becomes more acutely aware, and protective, of remaining clear ground. This ontology is significant as it reverses,

or at least complicates, a causal notion of raw ground supporting cultivated or tolerated accumulations. The complexity brings to mind random pockets on an ethnographic or linguistic map where it looks like a stray group has settled whereas they are the remnant of the group that was already there.

A key stage in the preservation of ground and the proliferation of effects is his use of masking tape and stencils, a demarcation tool both of drawing and what could be called preemptive erasure. This allows him to give full rein to expressive and exploratory painting while relatively safe in the knowledge, or at least, expectation, of hard-edged, reveal: a safe space for wild actions. This is not to imply, however, a simple duality between hardedge and painterly, or between austerity and overload. "Until I pull the tape off I don't really know what I have." Similarly, it is a mistake to think of the geometric and organic aspects of his painterly lexicon as mapping such creative dualities as masculine and feminine, logical and intuitive, Apollonian and Dionysian. For sure, there can be expressive tensions between them, but rather than polar opposites, as stated earlier, they should be thought of as an antimony: equally valid though distinct and, where overlapping, mutually exclusive procedures. As Norton says in the closing moments of his interview with Gorky's Granddaughter: "To make the work and to accept that it's happening are two separate things."

* All quotes from the artist: Gorky's Granddaughter: C. Michael Norton, March 2015. <http://www.gorkysgranddaughter.com/2015/03/c-michael-norton-march-2015.html>