



## GALERIA JOAN PRATS

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Debris, debris and more debris, all of it relentlessly encroaching on the center, a place where serene and orderly dreams may have once thrived, a field of lost tranquility. Now all that remains of this formerly uncluttered utopia are fragments, jagged patches of glowing color glimpsed through the encroaching tide of detritus, these piles of cast-off machine parts, inextricably tangled up with each other, marked by free-floating rust spots, random oil stains and countless spills of chemical colors that colonize their surroundings like rampant mould or some parasitical vine. What is the origin of this chaotic scene? Is it the result of a process of random accumulation, a junk heap of obsolete products? Or is something more sinister at work? Is this the aftermath of some destructive event, a tightly framed unit of some larger catastrophe, a disaster scene that has yet to be cleared away?

The subject here is Lydia Dona's painting *The Engulfments of Change* (2006) but these words could equally well be applied to any of her recent canvases, which feature layered diagrammatic images of machine parts (probably unidentifiable to anyone except a professional mechanic) that are intertwined with poured, dripped and stained paint, all of which is set against fields (largely obscured) of bright color. There are other elements as well to these densely constructed paintings, perhaps Dona's most complex and richly detailed pictures to date. As has been true of the artist's work for some time, sets of parallel lines run along the edges of the paintings, providing a boundary for the turmoil within, while also suggesting transparent planes whose shifts and angles add a subtle but important degree of visual disorientation. The machine parts, which Dona

borrowed from car repair manuals (during a recent studio visit I noticed on her worktable a paint-splattered 1984 Ford Bronco repair and tune-up guide), are drawn in many different colors. In one work, *Urban Legends*, I counted as many as ten distinct colors used for the automotive diagrams. It's astonishing how completely Dona has assimilated these technical diagrams, remaking them into a distinctive personal calligraphy. Machine imagery isn't a new aspect of Dona's work but in these paintings it is more dominant than ever before. For the first time, the artist is filling in some of the machine parts with vibrant color. This contributes to the density of the paintings, giving them an almost mosaic effect. As the car-part drawings are filled in, they tend to pop out from the surrounding confusion and begin to suggest much more than elements of fuel or transmission systems. There's a cartoony quality to them, a sense of tragic-comic animation. At times, the impacted, boldly outlined shapes—as seen, for instance, with *In The Glow of Urban Shadows*—can make you think of Mayan hieroglyphs. (In recent years, Dona has been exhibiting frequently in Latin America and perhaps some Mesoamerican imagery has entered her work by osmosis, but these glyphs also remind one that Dona studied alongside Keith Haring at New York's School of Visual Art and was influenced by the graffiti explosion of the early 1980s, even though her work took a very different direction.) It's clearer than ever that the machine drawings are surrogates for figures. But it isn't the bodies we encounter, so much as the body's organs, floating like undersea creatures in a liquid environment. Tubes and conduits suggest digestive tracts, shafts and cylinders the mechanics of

sexual intercourse, bolts appear to function like eyes. It's as if we were looking at an X ray of the dismantled inner body of a robot or cyborg.

Dona uses machine imagery with a clear awareness of its artistic pedigree, referring back, first of all, to the Dadaists, but also encompassing later artists such as Eva Hesse, whose work of the mid-1960s depicted psychologically charged machine parts. In 1915, Francis Picabia, living in New York, created works such as *Portrait d'une jeune fille americaine dans l'etat de nudité* (a precise drawing of an automobile spark plug) and *L'enfant Carburateur* (a mixed-medium painting of machine parts on plywood). At the same time, also in New York, Marcel Duchamp was working on his *Large Glass* (1915-1923). If Picabia's mecanomorphic paintings, and other Dada machine-inspired works, were in part a modernist response to the new industrial society of the 20th century, and imbued with a satirical eroticism, they also reflected dismay about the mechanized slaughter of the First World War. Dona engages all these aspects of machine imagery, but with a degree of willful chaos that is far removed from the neat, stable designs of the Dadaists (and with a feminist subversion of Duchamp's and Picabia's voyeuristic scenarios). Throughout the 20th century, many artists were attracted to machines and images of machines. As the West moved increasingly toward a post-industrial society, and also began to appreciate the ecological devastation caused by industrialization, public attitudes toward machines changed. The idea of the machine also became increasingly internalized in human psychology. In the 1970s, philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduced the notion of the "desiring machi-

ne" as a key term in their radical mixture of psychoanalysis and politics. One of the most perceptive readers of these influential writers, Dona has explored their concepts such as "bodies without organs" and "deterritorialization" with great verve, proving that theory and visually nuanced art can indeed go together.

An important thing, perhaps the most important thing, to understand about Dona's work is that her paintings define the canvas as a zone of conflict. These rectangles and squares become arenas where different "languages" encounter one another. By contrast, most other American abstract painters of her generation seem to have a fear of confrontation; as a result, their paintings tend to be homogenous, placid, suburban. (One of the very few New York painters to share Dona's interest in the canvas as a zone of conflict is Fabian Marcaccio; it's no surprise that these two artists share an ongoing dialogue.) In her work, the hard industrial imagery of Picabia and Duchamp encounters the liquid abstraction of Pollock and the ragged color shards of Clyfford Still in juxtaposition to the flat planes of Color Field painting, that false utopia alluded to in the first paragraph. There are also echoes of Pop (the artificial colors, the cartoony robotic figures), and Minimalism (the rectilinear framing lines). If these are conscious references that Dona makes, there are also some surprising, less intentional affinities of structure and palette with certain paintings by Georges Braque and Graham Sutherland, and with Rauschenberg's provisional-looking assemblies of found images. As they meet on the stage of Dona's canvases, these various painterly languages are changed by their encounter. They become not quotations, but parts of Dona's own instantly recognizable visual syntax.

One wonders how she is able to accommodate so many diverse elements, so many historical threads, so many different modes of abstraction into a single composition. What ultimately holds them together is the light that pervades and emanates from the paintings. It's a distinctly artificial illumination, somewhere between a Flaminesque fluorescence and the radioactive glow given off by medical and scientific devices. Contributing to this luminosity is Dona's distinctive mixture of different types of paint, from the ultra-reflective enamel of the drips and pours, to the light-absorbing acrylic ground and the slightly shiny lines of oil paint that delineate the machinery.

But the content of these paintings involves much more than art history. As the titles of many works indicate, Dona is preoccupied with the urban environment. These are paintings created with a keen sense of the invisible infrastructure that keeps a city running and, even more, of the constant breakdowns of urban systems. In their very diversity of sources, their multiplicity of overlapping languages, their crowded cohabitations, I see Dona's paintings as reflections of the place where they are made: New York City, this dynamic site of "borderline entanglements," to borrow the title of one of Dona's paintings. It's also clear, in looking at the paintings Dona has made since 2001, that her work has been deeply affected by 9/11. Her studio is just a few blocks from Ground Zero and the twisted, smoking, piled-up ruins of the World Trade Center seem to haunt her recent work. We live in the shadow of war and chaos, her paintings constantly remind us, yet within this situation the artist has the opportunity to discover what Yeats called a "terrible beauty." Like Max

Ernst's painting *Europe After the Rain*, like Paul Celan's poems, like W.G. Sebald's narratives, Dona's historically informed, pictorially nuanced, stylistically distinctive paintings understand the necessity of drawing art from the void of apocalypse and ruin.

Raphael Rubinstein

