

New Models, Strange Tools

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As I sit down to begin this essay I am recalling details from my studio visits to the four artists in this show. At a certain point in Lydia Dona's studio—a clean, quiet space in an anonymous commercial building in midtown Manhattan to which Dona recently moved after many decades in a much grittier downtown studio—the artist dimmed the lights so that different aspects of the paintings could emerge. It was startling to me that as the studio turned dark, certain lines and areas of the canvases began to glow and pulsate, as if the paintings had suddenly become not objects against a wall, but animate, mutating beings. During my visit to Fabian Marcaccio's studio, only a few blocks away from Dona's but very different in style (more like the headquarters of some quirky start-up) I noticed how, as we sat looking at his recent work, a 3-D printer across the studio ran ceaselessly, producing an element that would probably find its way into one of the artist's materially unruly paintings. As Marcaccio explained to me the importance of weaving and knotting the ropes that are the main supports of his paintings, his computer-driven machine obediently pursued its task, suggesting another level of interweaving: the machinemade and the handmade.

At Franklin Evans's studio, in a funky building on the Lower East Side that has seen its share of recent art history (John Currin and Sean Landers worked there early in their careers), I found myself having to take off my shoes so that I could, with the artist's permission, walk over the canvases-in-progress lying on the floor. More paintings covered the walls from floor to ceiling, each of them packed with dozens or maybe hundreds of individual images; my visual receptors were momentarily overwhelmed, not knowing where to start, but then a single small detail, an image I knew from Matisse but had never dreamt of encountering like this, solicited my attention and gave me an entry point into Evans's multifarious array. To arrive at Pedro Barbeito's Brooklyn studio involved a walk from the nearest subway through a bleak mixed-use neighborhood no doubt soon to be snatched up by real estate developers. In the studio, a big aluminum structure, which at first I took for some temporary architectural fixture, nearly blocked off access to one end of the space; it was, I learned, part of the work that Barbeito was making for "Dynamic Pictorial Models." As the artist spoke to me about his work and process, about his interest in particle physics and cosmology, about developing new methods of making paintings, he dropped a reference to something called "strange tools," a concept he'd found in the writings of American philosopher Alva Noë. The phrase stayed with me and I think it might be helpful in approaching not only Barbeito's work but the exhibition as a whole. Technology is one of Noë's central concerns. Defining it very broadly (the book opens with an account of how breast-feeding can be considered as a technology), Noë describes any "organized activity" as a technology, including such basic functions as speaking, dancing, singing and thinking. At a higher level, he argues, these activities are "put on display," which then allows them to "loop back" and "reorganize" the primary activity. Thus, choreography reorganizes dancing, visual art reorganizes picture making, philosophy reorganizes thinking and so forth. It is these practices, identified in the book as artistic practices, that Noë calls "strange tools." As he explains: "Art is interested in removing tools (in my extended sense) from their settings and thus in making them strange and, in making them strange, bringing out the ways and textures of the embedding that has been taken for granted. A work of art is a strange tool, an alien implement. We make strange tools to investigate ourselves."

In Barbeito's work there is a great deal of removing things from their original contexts, especially from the realm of science. The large circular element in *Collision Chamber RT* (2015-2016) was inspired by

the satellite dishes used in radio astronomy; it can also be seen, the artist explains, as a cross section of a particle collider such as the Hadron collider at CERN in Switzerland, which is also the source for the black sculptural element, created with a 3-D printer, visible through the apertures in the white disk, which is, in fact, canvas stretched on a circular wood support. Arrayed across the surface of this shaped painting are relief images of from these and other Big Science marvels, both ancient and modern. Many of the finely detailed motifs visible in Barbeito's work are created with an unusual "pen" invented by the artist (speaking of strange tools) that he uses to extrude paint in precisely controlled lines.

It isn't only science that inspires Barbeito: his work also grapples with the legacy of radical postwar art, including Lucio Fontana's revelation that the space between the surface of the painting and the wall it hangs must also be the territory of painting, and Robert Rauschenberg's vision of the artist as a sci-fi fantasist and cosmic cartographer. By inserting an openwork, and subtly crystalline, aluminum structure between the canvas and the wall (it is inspired by the kinds of scaffolding and support structures found in science labs, radio telescopes and airports), Barbeito dramatically expands the interstitial zone pioneered by Fontana. As we engage with Barbeito's work our attention has to constantly toggle between binary pairings: the micro and the macro, subatomic particles and distant stars, painting and sculpture, the visible and the invisible. Then, at a certain point, all these oppositions are subsumed into his, and our own, larger project: the visual embodiment of knowledge.

Baroque, entropic, riddled with images of violence and eroticism, throbbing with high-key, artificial color—at first glance the work of Fabian Marcaccio seems impossibly distant from Barbeito's architectonic, neatly executed, perfectly calibrated, white-on-white constructions. What these two artists share, however, is significant. Like Barbeito, Marcaccio has over the decades ceaselessly incorporated new technology into his work, inventing his own set of strange tools and diverting existing devices to his equally strange ends. I would also argue that both artists have a strong relationship to Fontana, evident, chez Marcaccio, in the constant breaking-up of the support and the resulting activation of the real space behind it. On the subject of postwar Italian art, Marcaccio is, it seems to me, one of the contemporary artists who has engaged most directly and most radically with the legacy not only of Fontana but also of Alberto Burri. In Marcaccio's paintings—these tense, gnarly webs of ropes and bungee cords bristling with glistening globs of paint and 3-D printed pseudo artifacts—it's as if Burri's burlap bags have been subjected to a regime of steroids and human growth hormone. But, importantly, Marcaccio does not stop at abstract materiality: his paintings are thoroughly (and literally) enmeshed in the realm of images, especially images that the mainstream media finds hard to tolerate. Sometimes explicitly foregrounded, sometimes slow to emerge, bodies and figures, nearly always charged with socio-political content, are ever-present in his work. In *Scientologists*, for instance, we see the spectacle of actor and Scientology follower Tom Cruise receiving a medal from one of his co-religionists (both figures rendered as disintegrating waxwork effigies); in *Zombie*, the horrors of war are emblemized in a grimacing head (as rattling as any of Francis Bacon's screams) that dissolves into a chaotic plethora of weird stuff the closer we get. More than any other contemporary painter, Marcaccio relies on paradox, a cascade of conceptual reversals and physical contradictions. Simultaneously pre-digital and post-digital, Marcaccio's "paintants" imply that the medium has undergone a major genetic mutation, as indeed it has.

Confronted with one of Franklin Evans's wall-floor-ceiling installations, or with a single painting such as the recent *artamodel* (2015), even casual viewers will notice how the artist has seeded his work with references to other artists. For the last couple of years Evans has been largely focused on works by Matisse (especially *The Romanian Blouse*, 1939-1940), though additional escapees from art history are beginning to infiltrate his work (he seems to be scrambling the rhythmic grids of Mondrian's New York City paintings). Defying those who believe that self-referential, critique-driven art should remain at a safe remove from any

kind of visual hedonism, Evans offers explosive fields of color, line and shape at the same time as he engages in deep conceptual conversations. In recent works, which continue to employ proliferating grids that reside somewhere between the vernacular tradition of quilting and a computer screen taken over by a virus that keeps opening an infinity of new windows, Evans engages canonical texts by Barbara Rose, Thomas Lawson, Yve-Alain Bois and others (including the present author) by painting into his own work images of paintings referenced by those critics. An equal-opportunity appropriator, Evans frequently cannibalizes his own work, reusing parts of previous installations (which here includes painting onto recycled fragments of his 2013 installation at Ameringer McEnergy Yohe Gallery). Recontextualizing the hetero-erotic stance of Matisse with an array of boldly homoerotic images, Evans, for all his evident love of art history, does not respect the authority of the masterpiece. When, in 2013, New York's Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibition titled "Inventing Abstraction: 1910-1925," many observers accused the museum of arrogance and ethnocentrism for its apparent disregard of widespread nonwestern traditions of abstract art that flourished for many millennia before 1910. One of the strongest critiques came from poet Charles Bernstein in an essay titled "Disfiguring Abstraction." Rereading Bernstein's text the other day, I was struck by a passage that seems to perfectly crystallize the mood of liberty and permission pervading Evans's work: "No one owns art history: not the artist, not viewers, not scholars, not critics, not museums. Not even art."

A deep engagement with art history has long been central to the work of Lydia Dona, yet she is also an artist who is keenly alert to the actual world around her, especially to the volatile nexus of technology, biology and politics. Since the early 1990s Dona has been crucial to the development of a philosophically-grounded project (she was one of the first painters to draw on the writings of Gilles Deleuze) to redefine painting as a medium of open discourse rather than as, say, formalist exercise, nostalgic recuperation or conceptual illustration. But while her paintings deploy tropes and techniques lifted from specific historical moments (the soaked/stained ground of Color Field painting, the drip of Abstract Expressionism, the strict geometry of Constructivism and Minimalism, the Bachelor Machines of Duchamp), she never falls into stylistic eclecticism, or superficial quotation. Clearly, her painterly abilities help protect her from indulging in artistic clichés, but of equal, or perhaps greater, importance is the fact that her art seeks to confront the conflict-riven contemporary world that all of us inhabit. The linear shapes that drift across her canvases are not simply signs of "the hand," or exercises in biomorphic drawing, but precise images torn from the technical schematics that determine so much of our existence, often invisibly. This is stuff from the real world of factories, laboratories, hospitals and urban infrastructures, the world where the membrane between human and machine is becoming everyday more porous. In the context of this show, Dona is the only of the four artists who has chosen to work within the conventions the stretched canvas, but her work is hardly retrospective. In a painting such as *Bodies of Multiple Dwellings* (2016), the polyphonic spatial and retinal effects force the viewer to conceive new ways of looking at abstraction. The artist's distinctive combination of paint types (oil, acrylic, sign paint and a variety of powdered pigments) contributes to the sense of the unforeseen, as does the delicate violence with which she builds up her surfaces and images. The results are paintings where systems seem to be simultaneously collapsing and emerging, a condition that is true of all the work in this exhibition.

It was 30 years ago that Yve-Alain Bois published his influential essay "Painting as Model" in which he points out that "abstract models" do not precede the artwork but that "the work produces them by itself for anyone who takes the trouble to notice." This is very much the situation we find with Pedro Barbeito, Lydia Dona, Franklin Evans and Fabian Marcaccio, whose art offers four distinct and deeply interrelated models for thinking, and also supplies us with brilliantly fashioned tools to help turn the direction of that thinking, in all its pictorial dynamics, toward ourselves—which is where it was always heading in the first place.

