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Painting beyond Itself

The Medium in the Post-medium Condition

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Thread, Pixel, Grain

Matt Saunders

I'm going to start out by showing some porn—what I think of as porn: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fypi6dAJB8E>.

I mean this to be disposable. Something you can watch with one eye while you listen to me discuss medium specificity from the perspective of someone who makes things. That's more trouble than not, and I've puzzled over what should be said because from the vantage of today's studio the notion of medium specificity is indeed a strange one. My talk is divided into three parts. First a few thoughts on how we might get our hands around medium, then I'll show a bit of existing work that may elucidate what I mean. The third section reflects best what I want to say. I'll be showing some moving images I made for this conference: Screen tests of materials. Specific trials from a post-medium studio.

I. Medium

Let's glance back to this porn, which at first looks like paint; but of course it is not paint, it's ink being made. We're watching the production of four colors of printer's ink: the kind that gives body to words. Clumps of pigment are measured out and folded with a knife into glistening dollops of thick stand oil. Machines dump ponderous flows of viscous, pure color.

I was looking for something about the materiality of distributed language. Printing—we think of reading, *maybe* we think of a press ... but here's the sloppy goop. It is part of a production line that eventually delivers printed text, the supply train behind words on a page. I'm interested in questioning where we draw the line between materials and medium. Most of all, I'm

transfixed by this footage. If we dig deeply enough into any endeavor—into any medium—there’s often a gooey world lurking.

Back to the given topic: medium specificity. The phrase makes me tense; it’s overbearing. A concept we know all too well from the seminar room—or maybe not well enough. What does it mean to think about medium specificity in *practice*? Specific to what? To a lineage? To a mandate? All of that has been challenged—and rightly buried. Yet despite how proudly post-medium we are, when have dead ideas truly stayed in the ground? Painting may be beyond itself, whether it is networked or digital or post or neo, but it’s still standing in some of the same clothes. Probably half our heroes were specific to their means and forms. So what is wrong with considering the particular traits—perhaps the needs—of the medium?

For one, the concept is fraught with a jargoned history. It is a bad guest in the studio, awkwardly barging into the wrong places, persistently discomfoting. When considered a rule, or even a virtue, it becomes intrusive. Proscriptive. For my generation, medium specific also infantilizes us, dragging grown artists back to their school days. The concept is often defined with recourse to history, hurling us into the something-to-prove experience of being a student: getting the bends over the inevitable disconnect between the muddling, stupid work we do with our own minds and hands, and all the sexy things we read about that came before. Painting, in particular, has thrived on fretting, turning these worries of youth into the adult jitters of practice—practically a full-blown complex, loaded with notions like the “permission” required to make a painting and the dread that there is something insufficient in the attempt. I went back to Rosalind Krauss’s *A Voyage on the North Sea* before coming here. She writes, “Dumb as a painter ...” Hmmm.

Medium, following Krauss’s cue, means roughly: the *technology* of doing something and the *conventions* attached to it. In other words, *materials with baggage*. We tend to attach too much import to painting’s baggage in particular, and when I’m honest with myself about what the conventions of painting have been in my lifetime, it is chiefly the anxiety of painting that I remember. Defensiveness—a medium hemmed in, asked to justify itself—that’s the convention.¹ But what about unpacking the means? The other side of the coin.

I’d claim that painters today who are most relevant, most provocative, are those who balance the expectations of what being an artist entails in a post-post-post-studio world and the potentially pleasurable difficulties of the real problems of material and visual construction. Anxiety ends up being a goad for intensified invention and restlessness.

Let me return to Krauss—a quick glance back at the compass—and highlight two thoughts from *A Voyage on the North Sea*. First, her claim that a medium’s beginnings and archaic forms—its moment of technological growth and “openness”—can clarify its specific potential. Well, we’ve seen painting stripped down and built back up in a jumble: Are we also living through a technological change? Second, the idea of an “aggregate” medium (of which film is the excellent example, as its “medium” resides not solely in the celluloid support or the camera or the projection but rather in an “apparatus” of all). Between old new beginnings and aggregate categories, there’s an enticing idea

1 Of course, what’s acceptable is time-bound. When I was a student, Mel Bochner told the story of being a young artist and showing someone photographs in a studio visit. *Photos were unacceptable, but if he would only make them paintings, screen them onto canvas ...* Fast-forward to the late nineties when it might go more like this: *Make a painting, photograph it, throw away the painting.*

of breaking things down *and* putting them together. A scrolled-back, shifty, recombinatory, and flexible form that feels right. This leads me to two questions: How can a medium be productively polluted, not abandoned? How do we draw one medium into another to speak of one or both?

We *do* let materials stand in for medium more than we like to admit—and I think this is a thread worth grasping. Materials may be freer to wander. They can be moved, miscast, and misused. They don't simply exist but have functions, as images, as appropriations. There is always a fabric that holds them and qualities that bind them, yet off their own turf they fall into a different light. It seems to me that the future of medium is increasingly bound to mobility.

II. Work

Here are some examples of what I mean by mobilizing a medium through the misuse of its materials. One can draw a photograph simply by blocking the light to the paper, so these large silver gelatin prints are produced quite simply in the manner of photograms: forcing photography to register painting materials—up close and personal, rubbing against each other, without a lens—and misusing photographic supplies (it's just paper after all, and now that photochemical photography is dead one's allowed to rummage around). I wouldn't say they're entirely outside of painting or entirely in it. The viewer recognizes materials (the texture of oil, the pooling of ink ...) as well as qualities (liquidity, the direction of gravity ...) and functions (pouring, brushing, scraping down, shading in ...).

The function of one technique spills aggressively into the other. A print made directly from a drawing on plastic stays uncannily photographic and indexical to familiar materials, except there

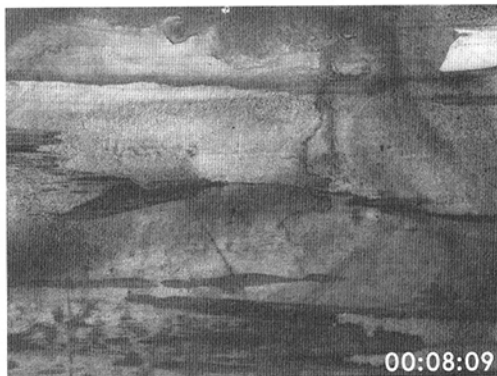
are brushstrokes and everything inverts: black puddles of ink or oil become bright pools of light. Forms distort. Contrast is heightened. A photo printed from a "negative" made on canvas will show every thread. Depth of field is so sensitive that even the thickness of the canvas radically shifts the focus.

The merging of these two languages reveals fissures and particularities in each. Perhaps this could be an aggregate medium in Krauss's sense, but I think of it more as a multivalent one: a turning weather vane directing attention to ever present but unexamined traits of these old workhouse-like media. Soon the process starts to acquire its own life, with specificities that enter only in the contact between the two.

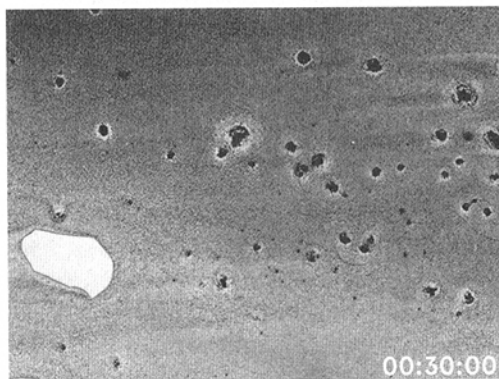
I'm performing a lapse but not an idle one, I hope, by so quickly equating materials with medium. If artists are less bound than ever to one discipline, and as networked and digital work makes transference and transformation more facile, the medium becomes more about its own image. Materials, however, remain quietly powerful. They are at once the nuts and bolts and a signifier of the broader endeavor (medium). What is at stake here is not just finding a vantage to talk about the medium, but finding a way to animate it—at times literally.

III. Screen Tests

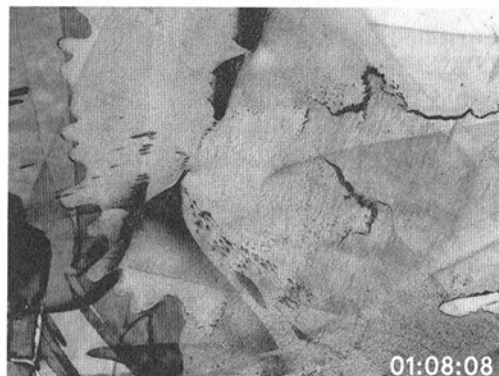
What might painting do beyond itself?
Here are screen tests of different materials.
Rehearsals.
Blind dates between material and film.



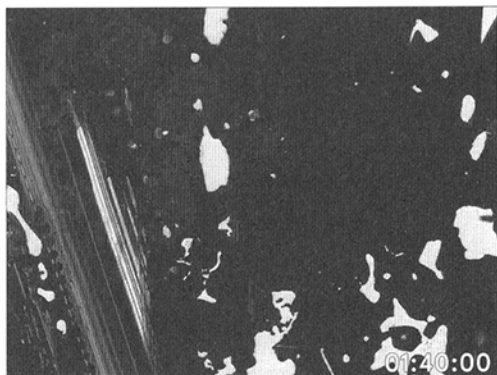
This is powdered graphite. It's granular and streaky. The brush drags, even in the thick portions. Occasionally little eruptions puff out and scatter, dusting into a debris field. When the powder is wet the moisture carves rivulets in the sediment. The surface becomes smoky, filled with a cloud-like atmosphere.



This is a toner from a laser print. Such deep black. The bigger gains are slippery. Suspended in acetone, they goo up ... start to melt ...glom together into islands—irregular and crude—like the globular grain in a magnified film negative.



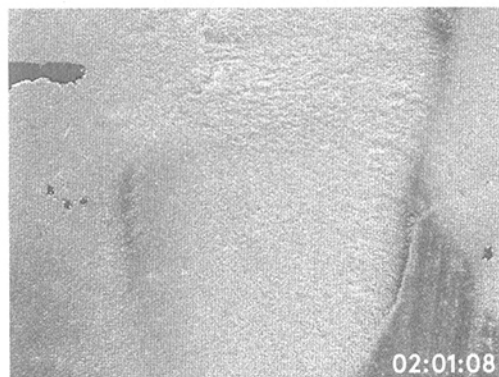
This is toner soaked longer in solvent. It really dissolves. Runny yet stiff, it is more apt to squeegee than flow. Blooming into a strange violet color that leeches out into the clear acetone. The toner doesn't want to stay in solution. There is continuous tone, but also great runs of precipitate and dragged gooey zags and squibs.



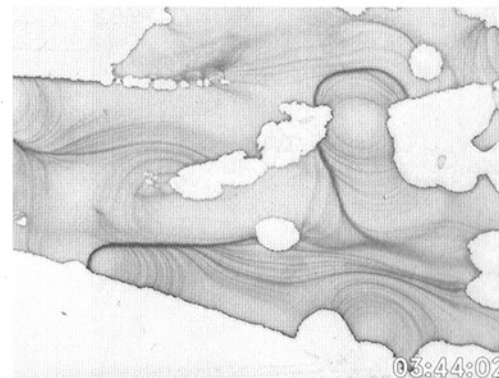
This is India ink. Proper ink. Deep black, but see the slicks and shifts in the darkness. You can almost see the stickiness—it's not meant to dry on plastic. It scuffs off so easily. Streaks, flecks, gaps, scratches, and the occasional pat of paper towel.



This is colored ink with black. The black always colors. Shades of mud. Scratches dart across the current.



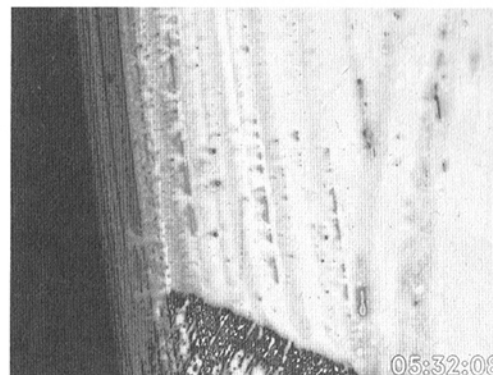
This is silver ink. Calligraphy ink. The pigment is so heavy that it dries up and scabs off in big chunks. Granular and grainy, the scanned material reads like continuous static. Sparkles against glass become snow.



This is colored dye on plastic. Like oil and water. Color so watery, so vibrant, pulling back on itself in drops. Pastel and electric. The edges surprisingly jagged. Then on a different surface: prepared polyester. Fewer droplets; it holds more body. Pale, not high-key.



This is casein on polyester. It is more opaque, but also more fragile. The scratches are main events. And even more so on the slick plastic. The scratching scatters and skips across heavy particles of pigment, and settles in sluices of color.



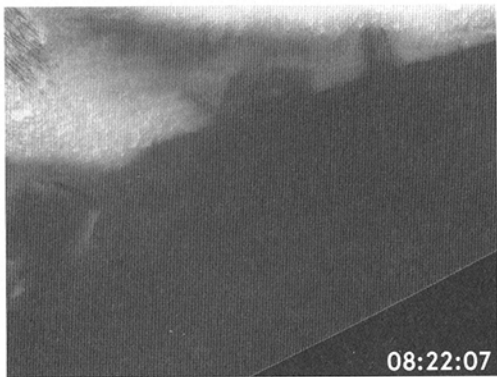
This is an inversion of black ink on plastic. The digital is material and has its own easy functions. Change positive to negative, and it's no longer slick and tar-like. Instead: milky and opaque. Flecks of damage. And now also casein inverted. A strange and luminous palette. Then alternating positive and negative in every frame. The extreme lights and darks flash back and forth, while the center values remain more stable, shifting the way we see the image, refocusing what emerges.



This is digital color: running the scanned pictures through different color channels. Getting into the fabric of the digital, black-and-white originals can open up layers of smooth, seamless, transparent tint.



And now this is oil paint. It is an image we know, with familiar kinds of marks—the paint must be pushed and cajoled; it doesn't flow with the fluid and geological logic of the other materials. We understand the scale of the marks and how the video blows them up, and the sense of surface is suddenly more palpable—oil flattened and pressed against the glass. It's a material we're used to seeing, and perhaps we see more its mistreatment.



Finally, just a short example of how this kind of thing might look with drawing. Mapping image and motion onto the materials, but letting them still move on their own—maintain identity.

I made these tests to see what would happen, and I think I see vital signs.

Traditional media is increasingly detached from means (paint doesn't always make a painting and for a painting one doesn't need paint.) But medium haunts us. We hold to these categories. I'd propose that there are mute and experimental ways to engage with them, precisely by disregarding their borders *and* mucking deeply into their component parts, paying attention to what we're really seeing.

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