"Talking Monochrome Blues", *The Painted Word*, June 2012.

TALKING MONOCHROME BLUES

"You know exactly what I think of photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable."
-Marcel Duchamp, in a letter to Alfred Stieglitz

In a recent piece for Interview magazine on the artist Joshua Smith, Adam O'Reilly poses the query, "Can someone look at a single color on a 16-by-20-inch canvas and have an emotional response?" The question is predicated by a statement Smith made in regard to his monochrome paintings, and particularly, those on view this past May at Shoot the Lobster, the new project space at Martos Gallery. "I had a conversation with a friend a few years ago and I asked them if it would be possible for anyone to make a flat monochrome painting now as a serious gesture," Smith tells O'Reilly. Such a question has two implicit parts: one, whether an artist still stands to gain something "sincere," i.e. fulfilling, from making a monochrome, and two, whether the art-viewing public has not become too cynical and/or short of attention to appreciate a contemporary monochrome as acceptable contemporary art, let alone venerable.

Joshua Smith, Shoot the Lobster, installation view.

O'Reilly, for his part, answers both questions in the affirmative when he claims that Smith's monochromes "create new experiences" and "[provoke] self-awareness." It sounds convincing. There's undeniably something to be said about the exceptional experience one has in front of a small, inert, primary-colored canvas within our otherwise unrelenting flow of visual stimulation. Smith, for his part, identifies this experience as one, specifically, of transcendence, claiming "that these chromatic fields could bring a viewer to something like a transcendent state." In this press release-sanctioned view, Smith fulfills the role inhabited by Yves Klein, the post-war French artist who pushed the commercial potential of the monochrome to its extreme. Certainly the monochrome's most august proponent, Klein positioned himself as a go-between, creating his works for the viewer as access points to something beyond the visual. Klein specifically developed his eponymous pigment, International Klein Blue, for its optical brilliance. With it, he hoped to use material to reveal the immaterial: "that immeasurable 'void' in which lives the permanent and absolute spirit freed of all dimensions."

Yves Klein, IKB 79, 1959. Paint on canvas on wood.
47 x 55 in.

Joshua Smith, Untitled, 2012. Acrylic on canvas.
16 x 20 in.

Then again, given all this grandiosity, maybe Smith was one of the "a few too many young artists" who another Smith—NY Times chief critic Roberta Smith—was thinking of in her review of Frank Stella's recent show at L&M Arts. Discussing the timeliness of the show of Stella's early Minimalist paintings, Smith admonishes this group of younger upstarts for "acting as if they have invented the wheel, especially where brushy or severely simplified monochromes are concerned." For her, Joshua Smith would be just one of the many young artists who, in the past two or three years, have found critical and especially commercial success making paintings that hover on the border of true monochromacity. Most notable is perhaps Jacob Kassay, whose sold-out show of iridescent silver canvases at Eleven Rivington rocketed him to art-darling status in 2009. The artist made his nearly identical paintings by building up layers of silver paint on their surfaces, then having them put through an industrial mirror plating process, which made the painted areas even more lustrous and the unpainted areas even more drab. Similar artists include Thomas Kratz, Dan Rees, and Julia Rommel, whose practices consist at least somewhat, if not entirely, of sparse, monochrome paintings. But these young artists take more from Rauschenberg than they do from Malevich, in that their paintings are more about surface and material than they are about color. For example, Rommel's recent show at Bureau in the Lower East Side contained five small, mostly monochrome paintings on linen. In these works, her stretching and re-stretching the canvas combines with her thick applications of oil paint to create a range of different surface effects with evocative personal associations. *Onesie* is a swatch from the matte paint job of a childhood car, *Luke's Novel* a worn buckram book cover, and *Broken Record* a dusty LP rescued from a packed box of vinyl at the Salvation Army.

Julia Rommel, Luke's Novel, 2012.
Image courtesy Bureau.

Julia Rommel, Onesie, 2012.
Image courtesy Bureau.

Jacob Kassay, Untitled, 2010.
Acrylic and silver deposit on canvas.

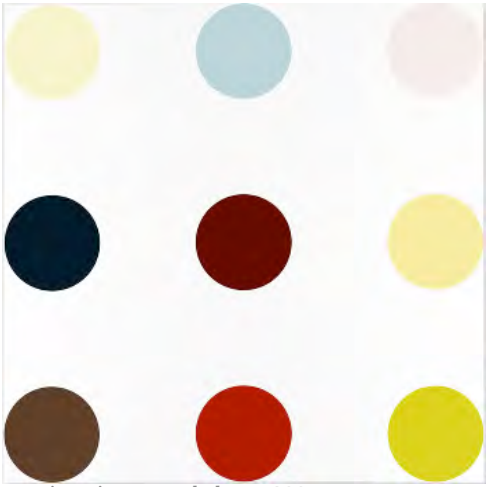
Thomas Kratz, Artemis, 2010.

Moreover, this group of artists demonstrates an interest in Klein's use of texture and form as much as in his use of color. Some, like Kassay and Kratz, transform the thick, viscosity of many of the older artist's IKB paintings into flat yet volatile surfaces that resonate more strongly in a screen-based culture. Rees, Rommel, and Smith, meanwhile, revive the objectness of Klein's paintings and sculptures by making paintings that are unassuming in appearance yet unshakable in presence. It's not surprising that the large, brightly-colored canvases of one Henry Codax are, or at least were, supposedly the products of a collaboration between Kassay and the Swiss conceptual artist Olivier Mosset. An artist of an older, yet still post-Klein generation, Mosset endeavored, along with Daniel Buren, to assert his paintings as objects, distinct from any mythical, historical, and authorial allusions. Codax's paintings fall precisely between these two poles of surface and object. Their bright and even friendly colors create visual interest that, although less extreme than Kassay's silver works, is enough to temper the conceptual headiness of Mosset's solo practice.

Henry Codax at NADA NYC, Installation view.
Image courtesy Shoot the Lobster.

In fact, Codax made an appearance at May's NADA NYC fair in Martos Gallery's booth, which contained a wallfilling suite of the mysterious artist's Easter-hued canvases. The display allows a productive comparison to Smith's exhibition, with the associations running in opposite directions. Codax's whole-booth installation was a garish Rothko Chapel that lends weight to Smith's privileging of supposedly transcendental "experience of looking at painted color." Smith's exhibition, then, was a pared-down version, almost an inset, from one of Damien Hirst's numerous Spot Painting retrospectives that, conversely, casts doubt on the sincerity of the artist's claims. Try reading Smith's press release and replacing every mention of his name with "Hirst" while looking at some photos. The results are eerily informative.

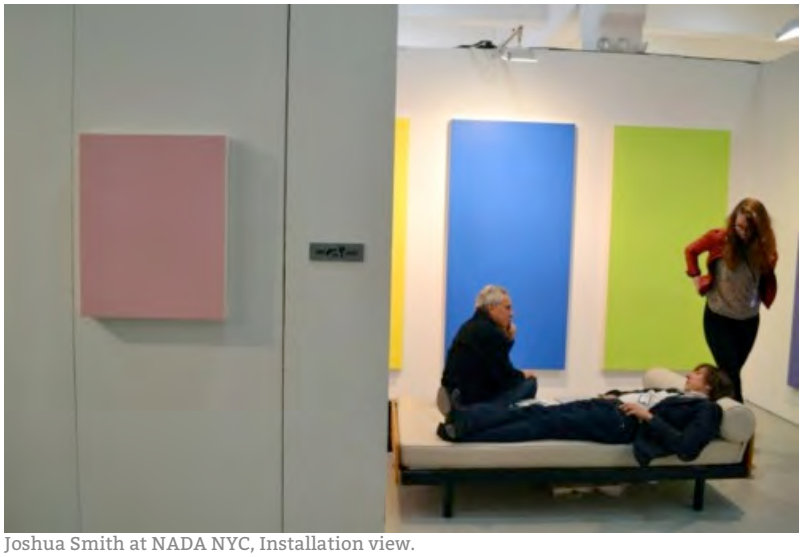
Smith's monochrome paintings, as shown on Martos Gallery's website.



Damien Hirst, N-Methylurea, 2005.

Further down this path of inquiry, Smith's project might turn out to be an instructive commentary on the institutional recycling, and consequential elevation, of artistic self-interpretation; in fact, his recent comments in Zing Magazine lend support to such travels. But I should step back and refocus. After all, at least for the sake of this article, I'm more interested in the initial questions posed at the outset, as they serve to illuminate a range of contemporary practices against the backdrop of their predecessors. Can anyone make a flat monochrome painting as a serious gesture in today's context? Can someone today look at a single color on a 16-by-20-inch canvas and have an emotional response?

This second question, with its mention of size, is a good place to begin answering these questions. For as much as Smith touts the transcendental potential of his paintings, they are not Klein's large, vibrant, almost vibrating canvases. In their size and bombast, Klein's monochromes were destined for galleries and museums from their very inception. In comparison, Smith's small paintings appear almost domestic. This impression was less readily apparent in his Shoot the Lobster exhibition than it is in the space's showing at NADA: a single, unassuming, Smith monochrome hung on the wall outside of Codax's color cacophony. The latter expansive paintings continue in the tendency towards grandiose scale that has often accompanied the monochrome mode and that puts an emphasis on the viewer's optical experience of the work. Meanwhile, at 16-by-20 inches, Smith's painting doesn't overwhelm the viewer. Unlike Mosset's enormous paintings orKlein's vibrant IKB works, it confronts her on an intimate scale. By inviting the viewer to behold it, it forces her to reckon with it as a physical—that is, non-virtual—object that exists resolutely outside of her jurisdiction.



Joshua Smith at NADA NYC, Installation view.
Photo courtesy Gallerist NY.

Furthermore, it exists outside her usability. The single-colored canvas offers no image with immediate content, nor does it function as the usable screens, ubiquitous in our lives, that it resembles. Unable to use or interpret the painting in these ways, the viewer is thrown back on herself and her individual encounter with the small canvas in front of her. The object refuses to overtake the viewer, content to simply hang in a manner, both in scale and height, rather similar the average bathroom vanity mirror. In this context, NADA becomes an IKEA-style showroom example of a potential placement for one of Smith's small canvases. Smith's exhibition at Shoot the Lobster, then, starts to resemble a corresponding shop or warehouse. One should note that Smith is co-founder of the Apartment Show, a roving, one-day-per-venue group exhibition active in 2008-2009 that often included his own work.

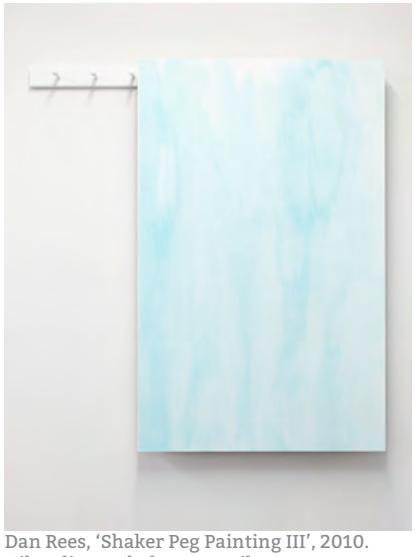
Thomas Kratz, installation view.
view.
Image courtesy the artist.

Jacob Kassay at the Armory Fair 2012, installation

Image courtesy ARTINFO.

This domestic understanding of Smith's paintings has resonance with many of the other young artists mentioned here as well. Like Smith, Rommel, Levine, and Baumeister often work on a small scale. So does Kratz, who often exhibits both his smaller and larger paintings in similarly-hued series which, together, suggest interior paint swatches. In another mode, Rees's hooks and peg wall racks assume the design and, therefore, theoretical placement of household deco, taking their cues from the austere furnishing designs of the Shakers. Even Kassay's works at the 2012 Armory Show, a number of rectangular and otherwise-shaped supports covered in burlap, were of more domestic dimensions. Thus, unlike much historical monochrome painting, which has engaged questions of scale, institutional context, or both, these contemporary works propose that they function best in the home.

Dan Rees, 'Shaker Peg Painting V', 2010.
Oil on linen, metal hook.
19.75 x 19.75 x 2.75 in.
Image courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery.



Dan Rees, 'Shaker Peg Painting III', 2010.
Oil on linen, shaker peg rail.
35.75 x 54 x 4.5 in.
Image courtesy Tanya Leighton Gallery.

This shift in setting accompanies a shift in culture. It's one that leaks through in Smith's press release when he couples "a transcendent state" with "a heightened feeling of one's own presence." This interpretation of transcendence goes against both traditional religious understandings and traditional

artistic understandings of the state as one in which physical existence is overcome. Smith, meanwhile, identifies the transcendent state to which his paintings allow access as a bodily one, and thus a physical one. Whether this misidentification is intentional or inadvertent, it points to the fact that our concept of self-consciousness has changed, at the very least, since Yves Klein's days. For Klein, the void was a metaphysical space where one could bypass representation and access reality. But in a contemporary culture where such an immaterial void, known familiarly as the Internet, is forever at our fingertips, the relationship between representation and reality is reversed. Klein sought with his paintings to provide the viewer a chance to escape his bodily existence into the void beyond; Smith and his fellow painters offer their works as moments to restore one's bodily consciousness, and to step back from our immaterial "reality" and ground oneself firmly in the physical, tangible world.

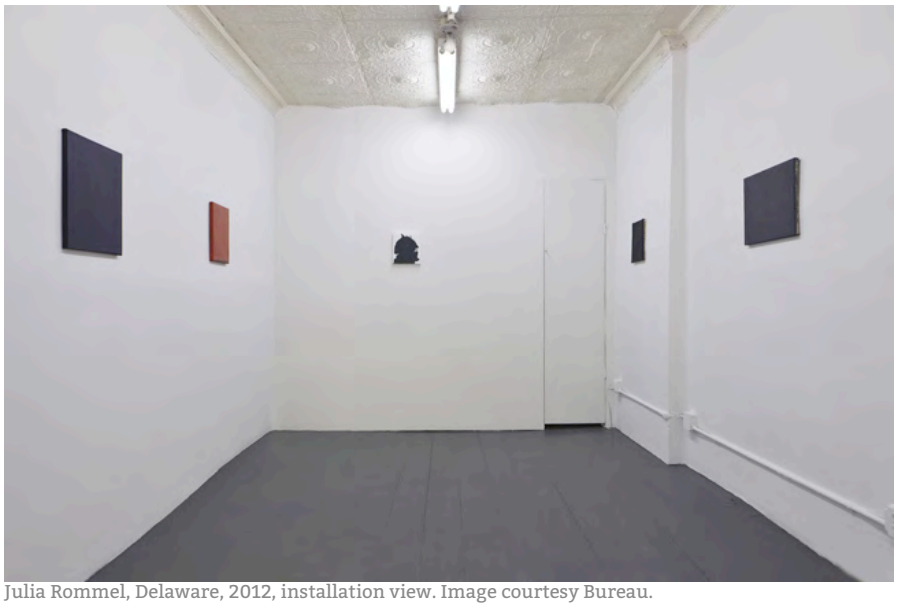
But in fact, this awareness of oneself is perhaps better understood not as a "bodily consciousness," as Smith suggests, but as an "embodied consciousness": a recognition of one's thoughts as occurring within the brain of an acting body. The union of mind and body I mean by this redesignation points to the major distinction between these paintings and Minimalism, which, in this analysis, these paintings might initially seem to resemble. After all, drew much inspiration from the Color Field painting that preceded it. Consequently, it points to the reasons why we can see these paintings as "sincere" and not, in Roberta Smith's assessment, as hubristic reinventions of the wheel. Turning from paintings to objects, Minimalist artists utilized simple, geometric forms that claimed their presence in the viewer's physical space instead of hanging benignly like paintings on the wall. In the process, the viewer also became aware of her own bodily presence in the space around her. Similarly, these monochrome paintings insist on their physical presence as a way of refusing to be assimilated into the digital world. If the Internet flattens images of all sizes, types, and materials onto an equal playing field, these paintings locate their realness in what an image can't capture. Like Klein did with his brilliant IKB pigment and the Minimalists did with their gestalt forms, Smith and company seem to demand that their works be experienced in the flesh.

Minimalism challenged to the predominance of painting in post-war American art by defying the flat medium's necessary opticality. Through their simple, geometric, and often industrially-produced objects, Minimalist artists aspired to an experience of pure perception in which art could be viewed as independent and even, perhaps unexpectedly, visceral form, removed from any externally-ascribed cultural or personal meaning. This new generation of artists, in contrast, aspires so what I termed above an "embodied consciousness," through which one's digital, mental experiences are reconnected to her ability to implement them through action and creation. Thus, while the Minimalists sought to disguise their artistic hands in order to discourage both emotional response and intellectual analysis, this contemporary crop of artists allow and even insist that their paintings betray the process of their making, if sometimes only ever so slightly. Typological hints of aesthetic flourish—streaks, scratches, luster—appear often. Rommel, for example, hand-stretches her canvases, often more than once, and assembles them with meticulous folds and fastening. This practice lies dormant beneath the layers of paint that turn the canvases into the monochrome faces they present. Kratz, too, works his canvases heavily, with brushes, drills, saws, and chisels, these various actions and movements being stored in the thickly-textured layers of the final works.

Joshua Smith at Eleven Rivington, installation view. Image courtesy the artist.

Conversely, Rees's paintings, so thinly painted as to look washed, hover between start and finish. Their surfaces are never purely opaque or complete, such that the artist is ever present within them. Even Smith's paintings, which seem the most straight-forward of all, possess a single idiosyncrasy: a pristine strip of unpainted canvas around their outermost edges. Such precision points to a precise hand, dependent on concentration and focus over inattentive multi-tasking. For the artist, this level of "isolation and commitment" is something to value and what keeps him from making "just…a bunch of garbage." (source) Here, the extended and focused experience of viewing the final product becomes synonymous with the extended and focused process of its making, such that to see the painting is also to recognize it as an object instead of an image, existing in both space and time, and not in a digital void that's outside of both—or at least can seem to be.

By forging this connection between viewing and making, Smith and company challenge the passivity which the Internet can promote, both individual passivity, in the sense of idly "surfing the Web," and collective passivity, wherein an increasing preoccupation with our digital endeavors displaces our activity in the physical public sphere. Their monochrome paintings mimic screens but provide neither information nor interactivity. Instead, they appear as voids that noticeably gape within the typical stream of visual and informational stimulation. Since much of our time spent with screens is at home, or else in offices, which fall somewhere between the realms of the domestic and the public, these paintings suggest their own home installation because it is in this realm that they can best fulfill their roles as reality reminders. Whereas Klein complained that viewers initially received his monochrome paintings as "a new kind of bright, abstract interior decoration" instead of pure, blissful color, these younger artists embrace this role within an understanding of its potential contemporary function (Hannah Weitemeier, Yves Klein, p. 15).



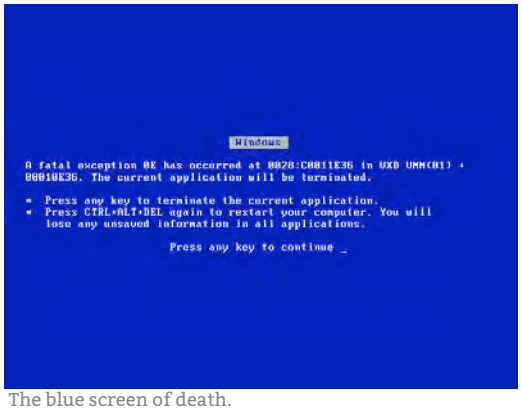
Julia Rommel, Delaware, 2012, installation view. Image courtesy Bureau.

In attempting to understand art's direction in the age of the Internet, the common expectation seems to be of a Pictures Generation-style engagement with modern media and technology, whether in the form of a "New Aesthetic," "net art," or refashioned neo-appropriation. Like Sherrie Levine, Richard Price, Cindy Sherman, and their brethren, Smith and his fellow monochrome painters are both attentive to and skeptical of visual culture, and particularly its seemingly endless growth. But while this earlier generation was the first to be raised on television, the point of reference for this new generation is the web, where images are so numerous as to be infinite, and where the kind of universal images formerly depended on seem barely to exist, if at all. If the Pictures Generation regarded illusionism as "the condition of our apprehension of what is present," as Douglas Crimp maintained in his seminal essay, these younger artists regard illusionism as the result of living primarily in a virtual world, wherein illusion is just as real as reality.

In a kind of reversal of the Pictures generation, they recognize the imagery around their viewers and dare them to look away and, instead, to focus on something truly, undeniable real. Therefore, to answer Smith's question, perhaps finally, a sincere monochrome painting may not be possible in today's culture if it depends simply on its gesture or its exhibition for its sincerity—the conversation around Henry

Codax would seem to indicate as such. Yet this is not to say that a monochrome painting cannot be sincere. By invoking the personal and intimate processes of their making and viewing, the artists discussed here propose a new function, and thus a new value, for their one color works. In scale and style, their paintings suggest that they belong more on the walls of one's living room than the walls of a museum; they are paintings not simply to look at, but to live with. Earthly and comprehensible rather than cosmic and encompassing, they inspire their viewers to existence rather than transcendence.

Yves Klein, Blue Monochrome, 1961.
Dry pigment in synthetic polymer medium on cotton over plywood,
76 7/8" x 55 1/8"
Image courtesy MoMA.



The blue screen of death.

While Klein's ultramarine might have once summoned an otherworldly realm, today it might be more immediately associated with the "blue screen of death," a designation that suggests that to become disconnected from the digital realm is to cease living. That this term is already dated and even out of use points to the decreasing rate at which such disconnections occur, as we are surrounded by more and more devices, signals, and connections. Smith, Rommel, Rees, and Kratz renew Klein's project by reassessing his concept of living, encapsulated by his famous "leap into the void." In 1960, the artist's unbelievable image expicitly toyed with his viewers' expecations of photography's facticity and veracity. But in our contemporary culture of Photoshop and profile pictures, photos don't need to be "facts" that confirm the concrete and constant truths of our world. As our individual digital realities take up more and more of our conscious time, it becomes easier and easier to let them disguise and even supplant the facts and unpleasantries of our shared, earthly reality. The difficult move now is not to leap into the void but to step out, to step back and remind oneself of the ground on which she stands, and of oneself standing upon it as an *acting body*. If these paintings enact a severance, or even a death, they do so in order to reaffirm life at its physical and thus most foundational level. Given this function, one of these monochromes becomes a useful thing to have around: on a living room or bedroom wall, or in Smith's case, perhaps above the bathroom sink. Domestically situated, its presence could remind one to take a few minutes out of each day to look at its blank face and expect nothing in return.

Joshua Smith's exhibition was open at Shoot the Lobster from April 26 to May 12, 2012.
"Delaware" was open at Bureau from April 29 to June 10, 2012.

http://thepaintedwrd.wordpress.com/2012/06/14/talking-monochrome-blues/