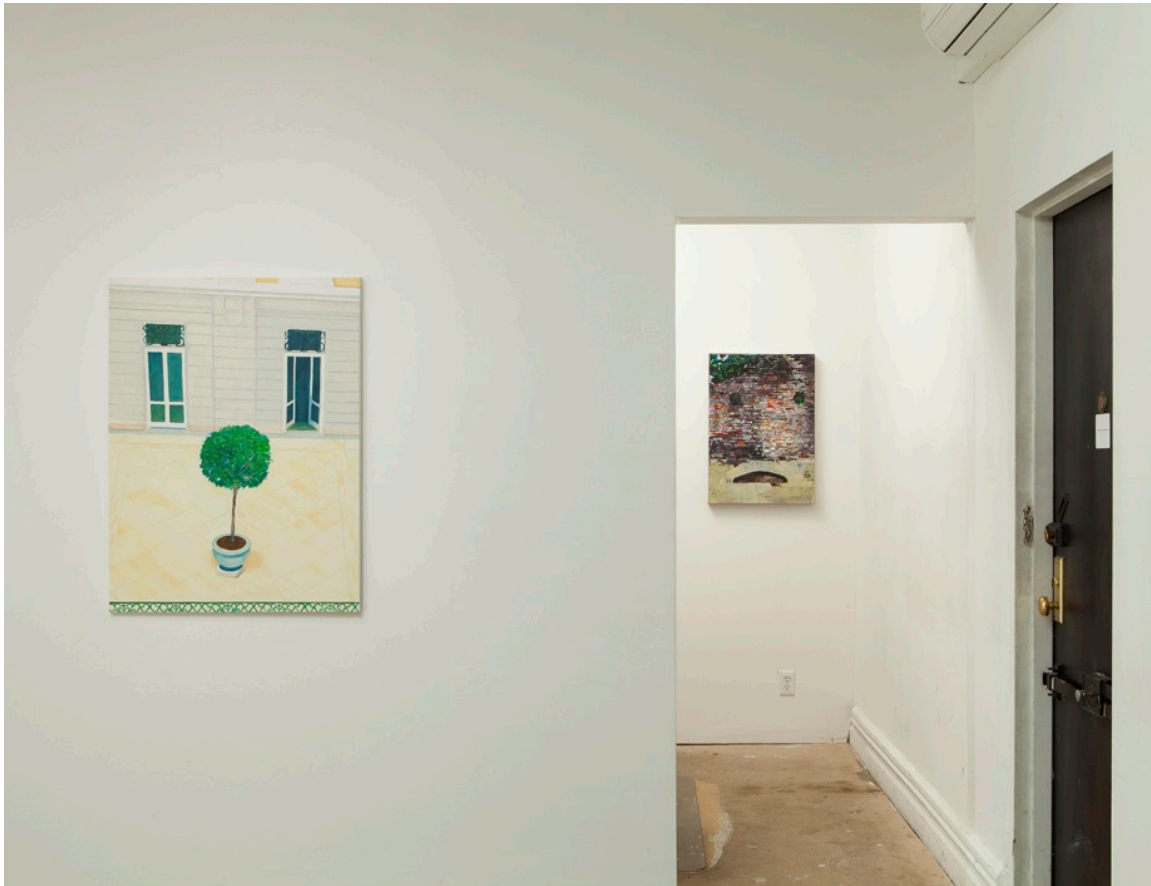


on painting, pumps, people and some emails from 2012...



Nolan Simon, *Paintings*, installation view. Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

The first solo show of Nolan Simon in New York appeared as an unapologetically traditional installation of nine paintings made between December and May of 2011-2012. Nolan Simon's paintings may look like rather straightforward representations of ordinary people and objects, but they are not portraits, nor Romantic landscapes nor bourgeois still lifes. Consisting of painterly brushstrokes and figurative elements that look suspiciously familiar, these images are drawn from a broad range of modern sources easily accessible to the artist: tumblr, 4 chan, gallery press release, popular magazines etc. References to Symbolism, Painting, the Hudson School and architecture are sourced then channeled through a projector onto a canvas to be realized in paint. Certainly, thinking through the complexities of what digital sharing does to contemporary image making is no new idea for artists today; yet unlike most artists who subvert these ideas, Simon celebrates and embraces the experiences that come with an expanded culture and communications system.

The exhibition *Paintings* at 47 Canal reveals a persistent and earnest experiment in aesthetics and image making, exploring the Krebber-esque problems of painting and being a painter in an intensified neo-liberal culture, where images are digitized, copied, downloaded, manipulated and easily distributed beyond their author's original intent. It is in this realm Nolan Simon responds to the interplay between digital images and social relations by creating works that show enthusiasm for sharing experiences and knowledge and framing images as something we can participate in.

Alaina Claire Feldman: The works in your show obviously look like they were culled from the Internet to me, but could easily pass as the original if one was not looking for differences or familiar with your work. The longer you look, the stranger they seem. For example, in the painting of the young boy painting en plain air, the psychedelic colors of the tree leaves might go unnoticed, it's just the small detail of color that's enough to pass undetected by a contemporary art audience. What do you think about these alterations and their ability to pass/ to not pass? Do you think your painting is like pirating?

Nolan Simon: The young boy is actually Sylvia Plimack Mangold. She shows with Alexander and Bonin, where I work. I found that image while we were going through her press materials for a show she had back in March. <It's an almost perfect image, isn't it> I made the painting without discussing it with her, and only got in touch about it after it was finished. She said she liked my version of her painting better than she liked the original, which I find hard to believe, but I enjoy the sentiment regardless.

But, that tension you're talking about between origination, sourcing and reproduction breaks down with digital information. It hardly makes sense to talk in terms of original and copy. To some extent I *am* a new source despite the fact that every painting I'm making has a life before me. You make something and put it online and someone else takes it and repositions it or calls it feelsgoodman.jpg and becomes a new source. This is how digital technology makes images useful – it opens them up to manipulation by just about anyone.

Seeing your work a second time was definitely important, because I had seen pictures of your paintings first on your cell phone when they were incomplete, and then I saw your studio with none of these paintings in it –and then I half saw them at the opening because it was crowded! So returning to see them in person, not as .jpgs as you and the gallery had sent me was important because I looked at these objects on a wall, not on my computer, alone, but also with these ghosts of 4chan and your mother, and your ghost too. I tested myself to think about where they could have come from and checked that against the checklist with corresponding titles. Simply put, there was a lot of pleasure in looking at them a second time because I thought about all the other people and structures that created them. I think these paintings attempt to understand the relationship between communication technologies and social relations, or social respect and that is a very honest, humble, and human venture.

It's funny to want to invoke Benjamin's *aura* in the midst of a conversation about infinitely reproducible images (the work of art in the age of instagram and the copyleft), but there we are. All joking aside, there is definitely something important about their made-ness, and their proximity to one another in space. I'm not a great painter, but I think they work quite well as paintings.

Obviously, I wasn't looking to make paintings that everyone would like without question.

I've experienced some trepidation around the thought that I'm making fun of, or condescending to, a tradition of 19th c. American amateur \ leisure painting. If these paintings were just poking fun, they would be pretty harmless. It's apparent that there is fun being had, and that to some extent the choice of images involves playing with traditional, conservative painting tropes, but if it were left there, superficial, undeveloped, they wouldn't be interesting.

I give the art viewing audience a lot of credit. And, 19th century landscape painting does have a certain undeniable appeal. I'm particularly interested in its appeal to a certain contemporary audience who sees 'formalism' as the enemy of art, who look to beauty as a window to truth in painting -- a view of the world and art's role in it that I admit to finding unconvincing. But there are a series of cultural propositions built into that worldview that lend themselves to experimentation. To that degree, painting can become a game; How to identify with a toxic neighbor. Ultimately I see these paintings as political (small p) for that reason.

A small p because they are about communicating how others without a contemporary art understanding might view images? Might view these images as paintings- or just as they were when they were present to you? Maybe the p is also for populist?

Populism definitely plays a role, and is definitely more interesting to me than the more discrete *kitsch*. I do sometimes read articles in The National Review to get ideas. But it should be said that these are not people without an understanding of contemporary art; they're not ignorant. They simply reject our explanations as to our motives.

When it comes to my work politically, regardless of your level of participation, these paintings are always *for* you as much as they're *against* you. But, as an amateur Marxist, my paintings engage the appeal of populist images within the field of critical painting.

Besides *Pump*, which came from an email chain your mother forwarded you, in what other ways you do relate to the people who brought the images to your attention?

It's almost as if we've adapted to absorb images through the skin. I don't always know where I find what I find. Many of the images come to me from people, some of whom I know. I just stay attentive and take what's right.

The email containing the *Pump* image tells the story of a cowboy and his horse going to heaven. I don't think my mother intended anything but to share an uplifting story, but I recognized something in that image, so I saved it.

Actually, there is another joke going on in that painting, Occasionally on /b/ (4chan), people post images of sinks with the text "> Quick, mods are asleep, post some sinks!" The intention is to poke fun at the non-illicit-ness of posting pics of sinks by talking about it as if you're posting child pornography. I think 'sinks' might come from 'taps' which might be a misspelling of 'traps' which is a code-word for TS-girls. That's just my speculation.

On the other hand, for the Hudson School paintings I knew I wanted to deal with the Hudson School and started to build a collection of images for that purpose. It was only in trying to explain the idea to a friend that I started to gravitate towards particular strands of imagery, narrowing down the field.

For the exhibition at 47 Canal in particular I was seeking out images that felt like they could cooperate – as if they were already in on what was happening.

How different is it really to view something alone on your computer vs reading a copy of the NY Times in Starbucks?

I'm tempted to say there's not a whole lot of difference, given that every image appearing in print has been digitized. One difference when it comes to the internet is the understanding that you are part of the hive, that these things are owned in common and

can be fucked with however you see fit. If you scribble in a book, someone will ask you to pay for it. ;)

I don't think you hermetically paint to figure out why you paint, but rather as a practice like any other that engages with relations, production, digitization – and if painting is an *institution which casts very long shadows* (as Isabelle Graw so precisely puts it), how do you negotiate this? Is the question even relevant when mediums are so permeable and fluid anyway? Do you call your practice painting?



Nolan Simon, *The Pump* or *Painting of an image evocative of the male sex organs forwarded to me by my mother in the body of a chain letter*, 2102, (left) and *The Mountains* or *Painting of a Mountain Painting*, 2012, (right). Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

Yes, they're paintings. I don't want to say that 'printed paintings' are played out, exactly, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. Others (some artists) have worked to pull this information into the real world and often the impulse has been to reiterate the message through the same digital media. But I'm painting. I'm making these pictures by hand, which feels like I'm opening them to types of use and avenues of consideration that aren't provided online.

I had a great conversation with an artist friend of mine who's ten years my senior in which I realized just how much our relationship to images has changed. She brought up the problem of *truth* in painting and the various prohibitions over the years against painting representational images from photographs. She also had a difficult time connecting painting to painting and finding the associative threads, the little jokes. Where we were able to find immediate common ground was in technique – the ideas in the paint. I don't know enough about painting to engage in any magisteria. But my friend and I look at the same 'bad' painters, so we could talk about paint a bit, and why painting now, and why it might be valuable to be painting these images, or images at all really.

Do you hope that your paintings expand a viewer's participation? And, if yes, what relationship might that have to the virtual?

Yes and no, I guess. I'm maybe a Zizek-ian when it comes to the virtual –it's power to change material reality comes from it's virtuality. That's part of the reason religious language began to circulate around my work from an early stage.

I'm currently reading a biography of English sculptor Eric Gill. He was an old-world socialist; a religious back-to-the-land-er who advocated strong connections to craft and spent his life lettering grave stones alongside his sculpture practice. I think if my work has anything to do with participation, it might be by example.

Ok for fun: Thomas Kinkade vs. Bob Ross - who is more of the People's Painter? And in what other ways do you see painting seeping into the mainstream media today in order to address the present?

>>Actually, I just discovered William Alexander, who's a lesser known East German expat who had his own half-hour painting show on PBS. He's the frenetic stuttering reply to Bob Ross' cool demeanor, and his paintings are just a little odder – brighter, less compositionally staid, more expressive – he's very literally just a little more German than the other Wet-on-Wet painters. I've really kinda fallen in love with him and have started watching episodes on my laptop as I paint.

As far as 'The People's Painter' that makes me think of Leon Trotsky and his *What Is Proletarian Culture, and Is It Possible?* (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/art/tia23c.htm>). I read that essay a few years ago and it always colors how I feel about populism and bourgeois culture. I think on some level every artist thinks they're the people's painter. (...not sure I mean that literally...)

Bob Ross made his own work because he applied the paint, but it wasn't his image. He was reproducing a common traditional exercise in artistic practice that builds rendering technique but also dangerously flattens aesthetic value. Reproducing and reproducing and reproducing images so that they are nearly equalized does not address the changing present. Not like Thomas Kinkade was any more ethical. I'd be curious to know how much a Bob Ross painting is worth. I read in the Guardian that 1 in every 20 American homes owns a Thomas Kinkade painting and that at his height, in 2001, Kinkade generated \$130m in sales. But I doubt Bob Ross and Thomas Kinkade paintings are collected by hedge fund managers and considered a valuable asset. They want Picasso. The trajectories in which Bob Ross and Thomas Kinkade brought their art to mass markets are extraordinarily divergent, but neither managed to disturb the art market in particular. I can't recall seeing any contemporary art press mentioning Kinkade's death a few months ago. Yet as artists, they were extremely popular within the world of pop culture, and I think most artists are looking for an audience... In your case, 4chan's Painter of Light.

By the way, I was going through 4chan after we started emailing and then saw this and it made me think of you:.

Alongside this image, someone asked:



Since tools like projecting or transparent overlays exist, which enable a person to trace a life scene, what reason does a person have for not using these tools, if said person's intent is only to work from life? Pic related - it's David Hockney drawing from a camera obscura projection of a live sitter.

Vermeer is known to have used camera obscura in virtually all of his work, and many others masters, like Caravaggio, are suspected of having used such methods. Da Vinci wrote of camera obscura and other projection methods such as the "magic lantern," a candle-powered projector. And of course there are other methods as well, such as Durer's tools like his gridded "drawing machine."

Can you tell me more about why you use a projector?

I use a projector because of David Hockney, at least to some degree. It's a tool. Accuracy isn't a virtue in and of itself, it's not a window into the truth, but it does gesture towards the stickyness of representation. The projector is like a third retina: the information collects and gets filtered by some mechanism, which spits that information back out to be further processed, inverted. It turns the world upside down and renders it empty. But if this were the allegory of the cave we'd be making the argument that the shadows cast on the walls in front of the prisoners was more real than the world outside. Painting is a way of making the shadows *into* the world outside. And that's some kind of truth, right?

I was thinking this morning about Kierkegaard and the idea that transcendence isn't something you make little shitty paintings about, it's something impossible that comes out of you, something entirely broken off from society and culture, and something damaging and dangerous...also something always partial -- I'm not sure that my painting deals in any way with that kind of transcendence, but I think the people I'm talking about thought it did, or it could.

One can make paintings about transcendence and one can achieve transcendence via the act of painting, and that kind of self realization is more interesting to me than the former, even though it may only speak to one individual at a time. But who are you referencing when you say "people I'm talking about"?

I don't think anyone making art today really believes what they're doing is transcendental, at least not in the way meant by Kant or Caspar David Friedrich - the

grand glory of nature and God overwhelming the human. I don't think of my painting as transcendental, per se. Or maybe, with Kierkegaard in mind, it's the hard, absurd sort of transcendence I have more in mind. The kind I don't really believe in. Because more than being transcendent, the work is about trying out some other hypothesis, learning from what I think might not be right, and reaching out to something I don't think exists. I find things, but of course not where they're supposed to be.

And, ok, the transcendence within the act of painting, but do you think that's different from the transcendence within the act of athletics? That strikes me as something fundamentally human in scale and part of human materialism, i.e. not altogether transcendental.

But, on another level this is me playing the role of contemporary artist - self aware and critical and nipping at the heels of my friends. That's, in part, something I would like to undo. Not that I want to undo being self aware or critical or nipping at the heels of one's friends as some things artists engage in. I'd like to unravel the network of assumptions that encourage people to be self aware and critical and nip at the heels of one's friends in an entirely impassive, uncritical, and self-serving manner. Everything that makes it an automatic (and by that measure harmless, or maybe harmfully harmless) response must be challenged. Again, I'm reminded of Kierkegaard castigating his religious peers for being all too willing to accept Abraham's attempt on the life of Issac as an act of faith -- if one of your neighbors were to attempt to kill his son saying it was God's word, you'd consider him a murderer. It's the inversion of a murderer into the father of faith, the conversion of the worst kind of evil to the greatest kind of good that you must be prepared to do if you are to have faith. Kierkegaard didn't think anyone but Abraham had that sort of faith. Like I said, I don't think anyone making art today really believes what they're doing is transcendental, but I applaud anyone who tries to become the Abraham of painting. Or the Kierkegaard...



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