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Craig Staff

### *Painting, History and Meaning: Sites of Time*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 200 pp.;  
20 color ill. Cloth \$49.00 (9781789382884)

Kiff Bamford

CrossRef DOI:



*Painting, History and Meaning* is an ambitious book that seeks to redress conventional understandings of temporality within the study of contemporary painting. Craig Staff takes his “interpretative framework” (4) from the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s notion that painting occupies several “sites of time” simultaneously. Staff seeks neither to replicate the arbitrary attitude to temporality apparent in some works of postmodern eclecticism nor to reduce painting to the linear history of progress inherent in modernism and modernist criticism. His approach is rather to construct an alternative that opens up the differences in time inherent in the object that is the painting. Drawing on the work of other commentators, critics, and exhibitions, the book highlights the extent to which examples of contemporary painting are able to “converse with paintings of the past” (3) rather than simply quote, sample, or remix their signifiers from the privileged position of now.

Lyotard’s approach to painting as necessitating a consideration of several different “sites of time” is central to Staff’s approach. The essay from which he draws, “Newman: The Instant,” is quoted at length, including the entire opening paragraph. It is perhaps surprising, then, that further consideration of Lyotard’s writings do not appear in the book, especially given the privilege that the philosopher gives to painting, albeit in an expanded sense. Leaving that observation aside, what is more curious is the unfortunate typographic error in the given quotation, which omits the italicized emphasis in the fifth site of time mentioned; following those of the painting’s “production” and “consumption,” “the story told,” and its “circulation,” Lyotard adds “finally, perhaps, the time the painting *is*” (*The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Polity, 1988, 78). The typographic rendering of “*is*”

deliberately draws the reader's attention to the awkwardness of the syntax, highlighting how odd it feels to ask questions of the painting's being. This emphasis, absent in the quotation as printed, is present nonetheless throughout *Painting, History and Meaning*. It is not a consideration of the status of the object or what it does, but how it exists in time, through time, through a multiplicity of temporal positionalities. The time the painting *is* invokes an ontological repositioning of contemporary painting, discarding its somewhat passé position in the contemporary art world for one that questions the meaning of its own presence as enmeshed within strata of histories.

The interest and concern for French theory extends beyond this single, if significant, reference to Lyotard as Georges Didi-Huberman becomes an important reference point in both the first and fourth chapters. Expanding notions of anachronism as a strategy with potential for contemporary painting, Staff draws on Didi-Huberman's essay "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," asking "what painting, grounded as it were within an ostensibly conjugate series of temporalities, asks of the viewer" (9). In order to pursue this question, Staff considers moments where painting's temporalities are brought to the fore. Consequently, the opening chapter covers a great deal of territory: Didi-Huberman and John Berger on the Quattrocento, Pliny the Elder and Leon Battista Alberti on the foundational myths of representational painting in the West, and the pivotal debate in modernist discourse played out in the United States through Michael Fried's articulation of presentness versus presence. Staff's tour of these key moments in the story of Western art history is read against the understanding of representation in painting as simply bound up with mimesis and the dialectic of absence and presence. Pliny's account of the daughter of potter Butades, who drew around the shadow cast by her departing lover's face, is illustrated on the cover of the book through a detail from Joseph Wright's painting *The Corinthian Maid* (1782–84). The moment of light and shadow that enabled this transcription highlights not only desire for the presence of absence but also the unstable conditions of such "capture." While it may seem a surprising choice for the cover of a book that is predominantly about contemporary painting, it is the long reach of its references that makes the book provocative.

Following the theoretical overview in chapter 1, the remaining four chapters are concerned predominantly with paintings produced in Western Europe and the United States in the last three decades. Staff deals with the haunting of modernist abstraction, a specific approach to history painting through the figure of the corpse, figurative painting that adopts anachronistic styles, and, in the fifth and final chapter, projects that use or refer to paintings as site rather than as medium.

As indicated in the title "Perpetuating Modernism," chapter 2 focuses on works that acknowledge, incorporate, and pursue elements from modernist abstraction, arguing that interest in it has not yet run its course. Highlighting the self-imposed rules adopted by R. H. Quaytman and Tomma Abts and their shared concern for historical precedents, Staff seeks to demonstrate a certain reflexivity in the work of both practitioners and their audience. This reflexivity aligns with the influential account of paintings' position within a network of iterations put forward by David Joselit in his article "Painting Beside Itself" (*October* 130 <sup>2009</sup>: 125–34). Such an explicitly networked take on contemporary painting is countered by quotations from Mark Godfrey and Hans Ulrich Obrist to suggest that it is in resisting, not reiterating, the network that painting maintains its specificity. Staff mediates another position, seemingly siding with the contemplative niche for painting while arguing that this does not

preclude painting from engaging with its own history. Such quietude is countered later in the book when practices more aligned to Joselit's "transitivity" are explored: the role of paintings as objects and carriers of meaning circulating within and contributing to networks of production, consumption, and narration through "infinite dislocations, fragmentations and degradations" (Joselit, 134). A similar sense of dislocation pervades chapter 3.

"I always had issues with making this painting, everything about it. And it is still uncertain for me" (62), Dana Schutz reflected on her painting *Open Casket* (2016), a gestural rendering of the infamous photograph showing the brutally disfigured face of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old subjected to torture and lynching in Money, Mississippi, in August 1955. *Open Casket* was the center of much controversy when shown at the Whitney Biennial in 2017, including calls for its removal and destruction by the artist Hannah Black, which Staff details here. This chapter, "Of Absent Bodies," feels uncertain for me, particularly given the inclusion of Schutz's image as one of the sixteen colorplates. The pairing of Schutz's work with paintings by Gerhard Richter and Marlene Dumas, both based on newspaper images of the corpse of Ulrike Meinhof published after her suspicious death in prison in 1969, seems to force an uneasy claim for equivalence. However, the role of affect in the presence of these paintings and the material effects used in different ways by the three artists comes close to "the time the painting *is*," cutting to feelings that lie at different sites of time, sutured together through the painting. The extent to which this presence is dependent on a physical encounter with the painting is neither foregrounded nor discussed within the book as a whole. If we knew that the author's selection of works was the result of their own experiences, filtered through the exhibitions visited in the last decade, or seen in reproduction, we might be closer to acknowledging the role of affect as a site of time. Within "the now" of the encounter, multiple sites coexist as an interweaving of the work's time, its production, consumption, diegetic scene, circulation—ultimately questioning what it *is*, and what that presence might be. Instead, the book enacts some of the chasing-after-meaning that work premised on presence resists. The mediation of the author's own experience and voiced hesitancy is ultimately lacking—I want to know how Craig Staff felt writing about this work, a stance that is absent.

I will skip ahead here to the final chapter, "Re-siting Painting," which is in many ways the most straightforward and a pleasure to read. Replete with engaging narratives deftly told, this chapter is about paintings as objects: Sophie Calle, Francis Alÿs and Taus Makhacheva engage with the organization, reception, loss, and recovery of paintings, involving a form of artistic practice beyond the traditional scope of painting. Yet the focus remains clearly within the remit of Staff's book, highlighting painting as a portal not to the past but to the past within the present, through a "certain mechanics of displacement" (106). In Makhacheva's work *Tightrope* (2015), the tightrope walker Rasul Abakarov selects and carries reproductions of paintings from the Dagestan Museum of Fine Arts' collection across a dramatic ravine high in the Caucasus mountains. The act, which involved more than a hundred crossings, "becomes analogous to the precarity of history and its susceptibility to both collective amnesia and cultural vandalism or exclusion" (104). Staff notes that one of the first paintings to make the crossing shows the brutal siege by Russian troops of Aul Gimry in 1832, during the Caucasian War, as depicted by Franz Roubaud in 1891. As with many of the works discussed in

*Painting, History and Meaning*, the reader is motivated to research further and get lost within the temporal layers opened by digital resources, which is testament to the importance of good storytelling.

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