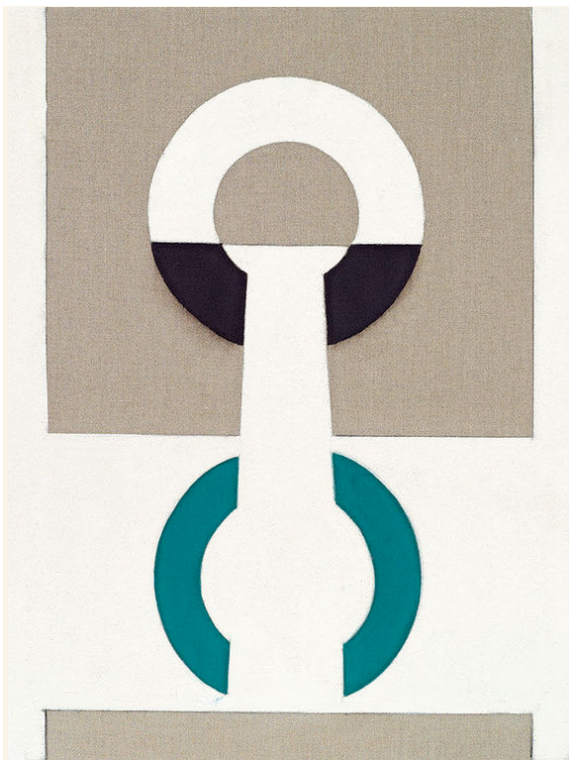


Ways upon ways of seeing: Suzanne Caporael's paintings

Michael Abatemarco | Posted: Friday, September 5, 2014



Suzanne Caporael: *631 (Newton's Bucket 2)*, 2012, oil on linen

Ostensibly, the paintings of Suzanne Caporael, on view at Peters Projects, are abstract. But one hesitates to say they are nonobjective. Judging from their titles — some taken from place names — her works could be a conceptual consideration of locations Caporael has visited. There are abstracted, figurative elements in the paintings, but they are seldom explicit enough to be definable or recognizable as something specific. “Everything is abstracted, nothing is nonobjective, and everything is conceptual,” Caporael told *Pasatiempo*. “[Curator Ylise Kessler] has chosen to display paintings from two different bodies of work, so I should first tell you that the most consistent factor in my work is the approach and the resolution. Curiosity has driven me to become my own teacher and my own student.”

The older paintings in the exhibit are from Caporael's Road Work series. Over a six-year period that began in 2006, Caporael took several road trips around the United States. “In that group of paintings, place was important as an observation of collective endeavor — how people shaped and named a place for themselves where there had only been nature.” The color palette, developed specifically for that series, was taken, in part, from color swatches used in corporate marketing. “The studies

for those were made during the trips by collaging cut-out ads from *The New York Times*, surprisingly available in even the most remote places,” she said. “I used my cellphone to photograph the collages, which later served as source material for the paintings.”

More recent compositions in the exhibit, selected from a body of work called *Seeing Things*, are inspired by Caporael’s explorations into the nature of seeing. “My interest in the hierarchical eye/brain mechanics — there are several wonderful books and articles on the subject, for example, those by Semir Zeki [a cognitive neurologist who teaches neuroesthetics at University College London] and Alva Noë [a philosophy professor at University of California-Berkeley] — evolved into a wider view that included memory, imagination, and reconstruction as necessary parts of seeing.” The underlying premise is that how we see is shaped by experience as well as through direct observation. In other words, what we see is not necessarily what’s actually there. “The brain is only interested in obtaining knowledge about those permanent, essential, or characteristic properties of objects and surfaces that allows it to categorise them,” Zeki has written. “But the information reaching the brain from these surfaces and objects are in continual flux.”

There are implications for art in these findings, particularly for art that purports to be abstract. Seeing is itself a means of abstracting, but it’s also a means of filling in the information the brain needs to process what’s happening in our surroundings. “You ‘see’ a chair, even when part of it might be hidden by a tablecloth, because you have in the past fully seen a chair,” explained Caporael. “We do recognize quite a lot with very little prompting. We instantly know a stop sign without its color or its wording.” None of this is to say that viewers need to examine Caporael’s paintings for visual cues that suggest larger constructs. But her paintings do suggest that their associated mental images — that is, the images from memory and experience — while abstracted, are not incomplete.

Whether or not one considers Caporael’s painting titled *631 (Newton’s Bucket 2)* a reductive treatment of its subject, it does extend its own particular integrity to the viewer. Though its title holds a specific reference (Newton’s bucket experiments dealing with motion and rest in relation to absolute space), it isn’t necessary to be aware of Newton’s argument in order to understand or appreciate the work. The act of seeing, as described above, implies that our individual associations are brought to bear. What we see and how we see it are essentially subjective.

Caporael's paintings deal with reductive elements that can broaden or narrow the viewer's associations and the degree to which a painting is regarded as abstract or figurative. To give an example, Caporael's composition *621 (Red Pitcher/Can)* is, on the surface, a rendering of a cylindrical item, but the cylindrical shape is merely suggested by two carefully placed linear elements: a curving line near the top of the red can and an echoing second line near the bottom. Without those simple curves, the central image of the painting, the red pitcher/can, is simply a rectangle. Its state of being cylindrical is a perceptual illusion. "The shifting back and forth, the broadening and narrowing of reference, is deliberate," writes Caporael. "It makes the viewer the context, gives the beholder his share."