

Black White and Grey

By Scott Watson, 2011

In: Attila Richard Lukacs: from the collection of Salah J. Bachir

Attila Richard Lukacs has been painting for about thirty years. Because he is mainly known for figurative work and has invested a great deal in positioning himself as a history painter, the current abstract paintings will surprise some. But abstraction has always been part of a practice in which the artist periodically directs his attention to "the problem of nothing," or the condition of painting after the end of painting.

I wonder if it would not be helpful in thinking about the new abstract paintings to consider their genealogy in terms of photography, collage, video, sculpture, bricolage, index, performance and confessional. All these non-painterly practices have a contemporary life in that they are able to disclose to us something about our condition in a way that abstract painting perhaps cannot. They are also part of the activity in Lukacs's studio. His attempt to resuscitate painting has deployed a skein of strategies. In the past he has projected videos on canvas, painted on surfboards, arranged paintings in magical formations and painted on both sides of translucent material, all in the interest of reanimating painting.

His approach to painting plays an important role in the development of the subject matter in any particular work. While most of the paintings in this series lie within a specific thematic framework, each individual piece has evolved on its own unique path. Essentially, he tries to start every painting with only a very vague idea and then expand this idea through multiple layers. Each layer adds to, subtracts from, or alters the original concept, until the piece resolves itself in a satisfactory way. This gradual approach, with one layer dictating the following, parallels the process of remembering, where memories are formed not in a linear manner, but rather as result of free association and mutual influence through the passage of time.

Lukacs usually works automatically, referentially and by accretion. His paintings are made by brushing, dripping, pouring and scraping. There are never preliminary drawings. Certain substances have fascinated him for a long time, but mainly bitumen. It would be too crude to give this material a national/biographic spin: Alberta contains the world's largest deposits of bitumen; Lukacs was born and raised in Calgary; his father is in the oil industry. Rather one

might think of the refined industrial uses of bitumen, mainly for waterproofing housing and surfacing roads, in ancient and modern times, but also, as a poetic correspondence.

Bitumen was used to make the first photograph. It is the original black in the black-and-white world inaugurated by photography. For a painter the viscosity of bitumen is an available, unavoidable bodily metaphor. It is something organic and dead and also something photographic. Something crude, something refined.

Lying behind the current paintings—let's call them the grey paintings even if they aren't all grey—are other series of abstracts. I'm thinking of the assembly-line-produced bamboo paintings Lukacs started in Hawaii around 2003, by pouring and paddling bitumen to make bamboo stalk or bone-like scrapings. These bamboo paintings never became modules for larger compositions. But they did serve as a model for the production of "a line" through which the studio could realize its dream of becoming a factory that produced the same rather than difference. That utopian idea of process was democratic, making the same available to all. To underscore this, most of the bamboo paintings were given as gifts to friends. But the idea of producing the same also involves the notion of repetition as death, an association underscored by the very medium of bitumen, compressed dead organic goop. The bamboo paintings were a sidebar (like the flower paintings) to history painting. They were produced on the floor while the big allegorical war paintings were being painted upright on the wall. But I think they were an important trigger to the current engagement with abstraction. The history paintings rebuked war and our current Islamophobia; they had an agenda. The bamboo paintings could be seen as perversely Orientalist, redoing Zen ink with Calgary oil, but what were important about them were their repeatability and their modularity.

More recently, Lukacs began preparing small canvases on the floor in groups, in an assembly-line procedure that pointed to the logic that connects material to process. Made by pouring and spattering bitumen and white oil mixed with white enamel house paint, some look like swirls of intestines, others like the nervous graphism of Henri Michaux or criss-crossed barbed wire. The bamboo paintings were single-medium works in which white was the exposed ground of the canvas. The black-and-white paintings are Manichean, not Taoist. There are no shades of grey, just black cobbled into white and vice versa.

Some of the smaller canvases became sculptural, shown double-sided on a stand. But most were meant as modules for larger compositions of irregular grids. And some of these bigger compositions began to incorporate Plexiglas and fluorescent light elements. The production of the small canvases on the floor left a grid pattern that was then captured by preparing and painting the small canvases on a larger canvas laid on the floor. The grid is part of the very essence of painting. But it might have been the multi-year project initiated by Michael Morris to arrange Lukacs's Polaroids into grids that was the immediate impetus to start working with grids and units in the studio. (The bamboo paintings never became modules for larger works.)

During the production of these new bitumen and enamel paintings, fluorescent colour reappeared. Fluorescent spray paint is a common medium for graffiti, and graffiti and tattooing are never too far from the arena of Lukacs's mark-making and are part of his Colour Research, an annex to the Colour Bar Research of Michael Morris and others of the late 1960s. Colour Bar Research, striations of colours in prismatic order, indexed from pure hues to gradations admixed with white, appeared in the history paintings about the Afghan war as post-death Bardo-state auratic encounters. Fluorescent colour is of the street and what we call the third world. Brilliant, harsh, artificial. But rather than use the spray cans, Lukacs chose to apply the fluorescent in an egg tempera medium as it will hold the intense colour much longer. So the appearance of fluorescent spray paint passages in the paintings is really trompe-l'oeil. Egg tempera masquerading as spray-can paint.

A model for Lukacs's modular grids was photographic and figurative. There is a copy of a 1992 erotic magazine, *Wrestler*, on his studio coffee table alongside a volume of late Picasso paintings and Aaron Siskind photographs. The cover of *Wrestler* is a pin-up board grid of irregularly sized squares, black-and-white photos of naked male wrestlers. The space between the squares, the ground to the literal figures of the squares, is an eye-popping figure/ground-reversing field of fluorescent orange, yellow and green. It's a vernacular deployment of Hans Hofmann's push/pull. This concern with the push/pull of colour space carried over into Lukacs's large canvases that are based on the assemblies of abstract modules.

There was another activity going on in the studio while these module assemblies were being made. Lukacs had also been working through a series of large canvases that explored loosely painted figurative biomorphic abstraction in a palette that emphasized pinks and baby blues.

He was attempting to redress and correct by queering the patriarchal impulses of Picasso, whose late paintings served as a guide and reference. One of the first large canvases to lead into the grey paintings was part of this late Picasso research. The title of *Haoli on Maoli Place* (2011) refers to Lukacs's address in Hawaii; he is the gringo or haoli. An exploration of grids and figure/ground relationships features painted squares on an agitated ground as a turn and homage to Hans Hofmann, who was also interested in irregular grids and back/ foreground reversals. Lukacs recreates the acidic Hofmann palette with a green ground the shade of freshly cut grass in spring, working against and dirtying up the yellow, red and blue. The structure of push/pull and the grid became the focus.

When Lukacs began to paint large canvases based on his previous module/grid work, he turned to thinned grey oil paint, using the beautiful warm and cold Mussini greys to make an oil-paint equivalent of a clay slip. With a heavily loaded wide brush he marked out squares and stacks, letting the paint drip and splash. I am most reminded of Richard Long's slip paintings on walls, but I don't think Long is in the coffee-table circle that is informing these paintings. These greys are not arrived at by mixing bitumen and white enamel, which cannot produce grey. The grey is the colour of clay and has the soothing tactility of that medium. Clay is a powerful cultural metaphor: God made Adam out of clay. Giving them titles like *Howe Sound* and *Silver Garden* invokes and layers references to the local grey scale of modernist regional abstraction based on nature (there is a nod to Gordon Smith here), and to the tarnished silver of old photographic prints. The stacking and dripping evoke the pictures of Siskind whose photos of weathered surfaces were key to the

Abstract Expressionist paintings of Kline and Motherwell, both of whom had worked in black and white and so themselves drew on the black-and-white of photography and cinema. In these paintings, Lukacs plays with thinning the paint to the point where it precipitates in its medium. The blue-greys recede, the warm greys push. The brushwork is almost like the pattern of washing or cleansing, although in the symbolic pentimento, one can discern Caravaggesque phallic loops or folds, swastikas and grand spurts. A hard-won, relaxing assurance is evident in these paintings, but they are pulled at by history and autobiography.

A grisaille is a grey monochrome painting. It has a special place in early modernity, mediating between painting and sculpture. In the early modern period a grisaille was often made as

underpainting, but it could also stand on its own as a kind of two-dimensional representation that lent itself to a sculptural effect. A black-and-white photograph is a grisaille. Painters of Rubens's generation would make a grisaille as a model for engraving, the then-mode of mechanical reproduction. So the grisaille was always intermedial: paint-ing, sculpture, architecture, photography. Lukacs's grey paintings reckon and reenact the figurative/abstract tensions that haunt modernist painting, foregrounding the doubling or mirroring of photography in painting, especially abstract painting. They are photographs of the ghosts of Abstract Expressionism. They assert that painting can stage a historical question, that it can witness and can engage in a dialectical relationship through the materiality and mode of its production.

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