

The Intentional Brushstroke

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Can there be an intentional, authentic brushstroke if I know that my subjectivity has been constructed by my social and political environment?

The question of the nature of subjectivity is central to the practice of abstract painting. In the history of Western abstract painting we go from one extreme of the autonomous, free agent to another extreme of ironic expressive mannerisms as a semiotic show of fake subjectivity.

How can we, as abstract painters today, approach subjectivity and, is it possible to find a new, critical intentionality beyond both the autonomous agent and irony?

Contemporary thinking sees subjectivity as something constructed by culture and ideology. Autonomy and freedom are questionable. We see gender as constructed, we see our political views, our likes and dislikes as being constructed. Even the idea of subjectivity itself as being something illusory.

The idea of the constructed self is not a 20th century invention, it has already been explored by Buddhist philosophy 2500 years ago. The Buddhist concept of anatta, not-self, questions the very idea of the self. It suggests that there can be no such thing as an unchanging, eternal self. Within this frame of thinking there is no possibility of digging below the constructed to find the 'true self'.

Referring to texts by Judith Butler and early Buddhist philosophy from the Pali canon as well as contemporary Buddhist scholarship, I establish a sketch of a self-less subjectivity.

The idea that my thoughts are conditioned raises questions regarding agency and free will. Can there be autonomy, can there be intentional action, if the self is constructed? And so, can there be intentionality in the brushstroke? I argue in the affirmative. Yet, it is important that we remember that, although, it is imperative that we question culturally inflicted conditioning, we need to be aware that our questioning is also something caused. This relationship with subjectivity is always something provisional. Intentionality needs to be seen as provisional.

This provisional relationship with subjectivity, a relationship held lightly, ready to be questioned, can become the starting point of painting that engages with subjectivity.

Knowing that the things that arise in my awareness are conditioned, I make this the locus of my practice. In this sense painting is meditation, every action is a watching of conditionality. I make an intentional brush stroke but I also know that this intention is provisional. The mark on the surface is not an index of my 'self'. It does not speak of an unchanging, fixed subjectivity. It *does* speak of specific moments and specific conditions. It becomes almost

like a game, a playful watching of a subjectivity that is not a thing I can ever get to know. And, by extension, painting becomes an ethical practice of disentangling from ego-attachments. Painting, here, is not an expression of an individual but something that explores the self-less through critical intentionality.