Passe-Partout

By

Jared Flaming

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Art and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

________________________________________
Chairperson Shawn Bitters

________________________________________
David Cateforis

________________________________________
Judith McCrea

Date Defended: April 2, 2013
The Thesis Committee for Jared Flaming

certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Passe-Partout

__________________________
Chairperson Shawn Bitters

Date approved: April 22, 2013
Abstract:

This paper conducts a critical examination in a deconstructive manner of a series of paintings by the author. It closely mirrors a post-structuralist style of questioning. It utilizes deconstructive tactics and notions formulated by Jacques Derrida. This paper poses interpretations on issues such as the limit of an image and the relationship between text and representations. It utilizes the terminology of semiotics to contrast different types of symbolism.
Jared Flaming

April 22, 2013

Passe-Partout

There is a paradox in the idea of transformation. If a transformation is deep-seated enough, it might also transform the very criteria by which we could identify it, thus making it unintelligible to us. But if it is intelligible, it might be because the transformation was not radical enough. If we can talk about the change then it is not full-blooded enough; but if it is full-blooded enough, it threatens to fall outside our comprehension. Change must presuppose continuity -- a subject to whom the alteration occurs -- if we are not to be left merely with two incommensurable states; but how can such continuity be compatible with revolutionary upheaval?

-Terry Eagleton

Passe-partout is a peculiar word, not only for its appropriated nature from French, but also for its polysemous meaning. It means both border and passport, a frame and a passageway. It denotes both a frame and master key. It is simultaneously that which marks a limit and that which allows one to pass freely. A frame is quite necessary for understanding. It forms the conceptual structure for rendering thought and thus dialogue. The framing mechanism (context, historical

---

reference, margins of a book, the edge of a painting etc.) is a constraint on discourse and understanding but also what allows it to function at all. A paint stroke conforms to divergent interpretations depending on the context such as when viewed in the context of modernist authenticity or through the lens of pop art appropriation via parody. One might even say that signification is found inside the frame itself. Without the frame we should be lost, but all the more reason to scrutinize it. In other words, to speak of a passe-partout is to view a painting from the side.

To say that an image is found inside the frame would not be a simple tautology but conversely it would be to say that the framing constitutes the image or that, at least, there is no image sans frame. Here it may be worthwhile to call on Jacques Rancière’s view of the image. He states that an image consists of operations, saying that images “are not primarily manifestations of the properties of a certain technical medium, but operations: relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them.”² For Rancière to speak of a “whole” is to highlight the very function of a passe-partout: that there is even a conceivable notion of something such as a unity of the image is to impose a frame, to draw a line demarcating a limit to the whole but also to bring into being the unified object in the first place. In this sense the image is constructed by an effect existing inside a preexisting structure. In other words images exist only by virtue of their framing, be that conceptual, political/historical, aesthetic or other. This also means that in speaking of an image we are not restricted simply to the visual image. Rancière

writes, “The image is not exclusive to the visible. There is visibility that does not amount to an image; there are images which consist wholly in words.”³ The image may be a twist in logic within a philosophical text or a political action taken within a certain society, all of which relies on a relation between an operation relating the parts to a structural whole. One sense of a conceptual frame that plays a decisive role, but may be hard to identify (are we always aware of the frame?), would be Michel Foucault’s notion of the *Episteme*. It is the contextual structure that forms the possibility of truth or falsity specific to a certain time and space. It is the *Episteme* of an era that qualifies a statement to be true or false. He defines it as the “strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within, I won’t say a scientific theory, but a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false. The episteme is the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised as scientific.”⁴

The point being, in regards to the image, that without this frame or structure, the picture evaporates, the words lose their grip. Value is attributed via the relation of the operation to the system.

As it has been stated above, the framing condition is not specifically a conceptual one, but also a physical one. Do the material limits of a painting determine its possibility to speak? Does the physical frame prefigure how an image is received? Here let us turn to the real occasion for this interrogation: the painted

---

This inquiry will take a tangential path, or rather a peripheral one. Peripheral in both senses of the word: it will be tracing the outlying edge and also concerning itself with what is marginal to the discourse. These tangents, skirting along the periphery, will happen in concentric circles (or rectangles in this case) around the painting, edging towards the center but never quite touching it. For one knows already that it is empty.

The Limit of the Painting

*Parergon* is a word rarely used but its implications are always present. It supposedly delineates a boundary between the primary and the secondary in regards to a work of art but where does this line come from? The *parergon* immediately gives breadth in the *limits* of our object and opens up a grey (in this case white) space where the object supposedly begins and where it ends. *Parergon,* as Derrida has used it via Kant, is defined as that which is supplementary to the primary work. Kant used this notion to distinguish between the proper work of art and what is superfluous or detracting from true beauty. Derrida seizes on Kant’s use of the *parergon* within a footnote (itself a *parergon*) of Kant’s third Critique. In this deconstruction Derrida pulls at the *parergon* until what was once a clean edge, a perfectly crisp line, seemingly without width, becomes a gaping abyss for the entire critique to fall into. Derrida writes, “A frame is essentially constructed and therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame. If it had any. But this “truth” can no longer be a “truth,” it no more defines the transcendentality than
it does the accidentality of the frame, merely its paragonality [sic].” He continues, “Philosophy wants to arraign it and can’t manage. But what has produced and manipulated the frame puts everything to work in order to efface the frame effect, most often by naturalizing it to infinity, in the hands of God (one can verify this in Kant).” Further on he writes, “The reflective operation which we have just allowed to make itself writing on the frame or have itself written on the frame (this is—writing/written on the frame): a general law which is no longer a mechanical or teleological law of nature, of the accord or the harmony of the faculties (etc.), but a certain repeated dislocation, a regulated, irrepressible dislocation, which makes the frame in general crack, undoes it at the corners in its quoins and joints, turns its internal limit into an external limit, takes its thickness into account, makes us see the picture from the side of the canvas or the wood, etc.”

For our case, the presupposition of a determined object supposes a center, or grounding for our object. However in order to assume a center, we must assume a boundary. To say that there is a proper object of study to speak of implies that we can discern what is intrinsic to the work and what is extrinsic to it, but as Derrida has already shown this boundary is not a clean cut (incision). It is a space with its own dimensions. To determine the internal and external boundary of what is already supposed to be simultaneously the internal and external boundary to the work proper immediately eludes us as soon as we attempt to locate it. The frame is internal in regards to the wall or the gallery or the institution, while being external in regards to the painted image. The parergon stands out both from the ergon (the work) and from the

---

milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on a ground. But it does not stand out in the same way as the work. The latter also stands out against a ground. But the parergonal frame stands out against two grounds, and with respect to each of those two grounds, it merges into the other. With respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then gradually, into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background. There is always a form on a ground, but the parergon is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.” So then what is the Work? What can be discerned from this teasing of structural definitions is that the internal calls into being the external in order to constitute its own ontology. These two notions require each other as they are only defined through this binary opposition. This folding of structure, a circular house of cards all assuming (and consummating) each other, illuminates a fantastic turn of thought: the construct of a boundary must be assumed to define our object of discourse at all. It is a passe-partout: pragmatic blinders needed to produce discourse at all, both a master key and a cage, without which our object evaporates before we could ever speak of it.

In regards to the paintings at hand what constitutes what will be called the Work? Does it begin at the edge? But this edge is a rounded curve. Does it begin at the front edge of the curve where the flat surface first begins to slope or the side

---

edge of the curve? Is it at the apex of the curve where we may draw this line? Is the edge of the sides where the object meets the wall the true end of the Work? But this edge is just another turn as the face of the painting turns to the side where white melts off the box and onto the wall. And are we not speaking here of a body of work? This body of Works is a collection of multiple objects that have a lacuna between them all. Do we skip over this gap between our proper objects? Doesn't the spacing, the exhibition itself, the interaction in a contained space of these objects have its own voice in this discourse? As we step back from any individual painting in order to turn our gaze on to the body of work in its totality we immediately include, must include, the parergonal intervals in between each painting which constitute the ground on which the rhythm of the paintings' spacing takes place. So is this parergon inside the Work? Or is it superfluous?

And what of the white on the face of the works? Is it the background of the images, their theater, or simply the ground of the armature? Is it an illusionary fantastical white vacuum of space in which the images float? Or is it the same white as the gallery walls, as the sides of the boxes, of the curved edge? Taking “ground” in its sense of an area of knowledge for discourse may be a better way to frame this subject but it comes no closer to answering the previous questions.

Traditionally the frame acts as window. The thinking goes that what is contained in the frame may continue behind and beyond the frame. Consistently throughout this body of work, none of the positive imagery touches or acknowledges the frame. Really though, a consistent avoidance is as much an
affirmation of its existence as anything. Here though, in the body of work in question the edge has already been complicated. It has been widened and the question is no longer “does one breach the edge or not” but where would the imagery actually cross the edge if at all? Where would these images end if I chose to breach the edge? Where would they disappear? At the curve? The interior slope of the curved edge? The exterior? The side of the panel? The edge of the wall? And what if an image did slip off into the abyss? Where does it go? Must images stop at all? We fall overboard into absurdity here. Again, this line of thought needs recourse to an arbitrary limit.

The Surplus of the Word

There is a conflict in these images. It is a conflict of paradigms and of spaces. The illusion of represented images confronts the space of the text. The space of text (such as this space you are perceiving in this essay) is an odd space, full of significance but utterly lacking in depth. The text, when introduced into the paintings, instigates a flattening of space, but meanwhile opens up a space of play in regards to interpretation. When depicted in white the words are seen only in a negative sense: they empty out onto (into) the white abyss. But perhaps the white abyss encroaches upon them, infiltrating them and carving them out. Is it even the same white as the ground?

Here a comparison may help this dance along. Ed Ruscha’s paintings, in which text is written out by the illusion of spilled liquids, offer a contrasting
example. In the paintings at hand, such as *Under Erasure*, the physical material of the text is drained of its positivity thus rendered absent (but still there nonetheless). Ruscha's image takes the empty vessel of the signifier and renders it as physical. Ruscha takes the transparency of a symbol and transforms it into matter, a thing in itself, no longer the vehicle of simple signification. In a similar short circuit of meaning, the (empty?) whiteness of the letters of *Under Erasure* questions their status as positive signifiers.

Ed Ruscha, *City*, 1968
The hollowed out words may be viewed as an attempt to place them under erasure such as Heidegger and Derrida have done. Heidegger did this in attempt to highlight the fact that the word in question, such as ‘being’ [this should properly be written with an ‘X’ like crossing through the word], was insufficient, but because it was still necessary it remains legible thus questioning its use. However, Derrida used the practice in an attempt to show the impossibility of signification altogether. A word, such as ‘SUBJECT,’ depicted in this group of paintings only registers as visible by virtue of the positive materials around it as if it was created with an eraser. If the word is only legible as a negative space, carved or incised through the subject matter of the painting, is it really there at all? While ‘SUBJECT’ is still intelligible one cannot read it without questioning its presence. If the white of the word is indeed the white of the ground then the ground itself could be a surplus of the letters. It may be an overflow of signification, a vision of the Derridian trace. Trace being the unending progression of signification leading nowhere that is at the core of Derrida’s assault on metaphysics. If one was so tempted to look up this word ‘subject’ in the dictionary all one would find is more words, words which themselves could be searched for in the same dictionary ad infinitum. When following the trace the significance of a word becomes ever more elusive, meanings proliferate. The vessel springs a leak and the word spills out onto the ground.

So what of this specific word ‘SUBJECT’? Since it was mentioned it could be interrogated further and because all the words at play in this body of work cannot be fully exercised (and exorcised) this word can be examined further. Without the context of a proper sentence (both a set of words and a fixed punishment) this word
could be either a verb or a noun and it must be taken as both simultaneously since no attribution is afforded. In one sense it is the main component of a clause in a sentence upon which the rest of the clause is predicated. It is also the thinking and feeling entity on which so much of western philosophy rests: the Cartesian Subject. Subject may refer to that which is at the core as opposed to its attributes (the *parergon* at work). Seemingly the inverse also applies to this word: it denotes dependency and the state of being under domination, as the people of England are subjects of the crown. The verb form of the word caries particularly sinister connotations, such as in forcing one to undergo something. How can all these implications be restituted to the word in question?

However if Foucault’s view of the subject is taken into account, the whole problem of the word becomes inverted. If, rather than taking ‘subject’ as an *a priori* core of an entity as the Cartesian sense implies, it is viewed as an effect rendered by the impression of the social milieu and political technologies around it. The subject is only perceivable as a result of the impressions of the context around it. By this reading, ‘SUBJECT’ is nothing in itself. The word in the painting acts as a (subjectified) *subject*. This word is only the forms around it. A passe-partout not only frames its image but also constitutes it.

Within this group of paintings there are two words that are not rendered in white. Two words (and one symbol standing in for a word) which stand apart from the others not only in their rendering but also in their function. ‘These’ and ‘Those’ are not things in themselves but indexes, and more shall be said of the index later.
But for now it is sufficient to say that, due to their grammatical nature, these words only gain significance through their proximity to that which they are called on to represent. These words do not represent concepts as others do. They are purely contextual.

Icons and Indexes

In Peircian semiotics signs are separated into three categories. These terms are useful for this discourse as tools of dissection. The three categories are the icon, the index and the symbol. The operation of written and verbal language falls under the symbolic sign (this is also the domain of Saussure’s proposed semiology where the play of differentiation is at work). The two other categories are of particular significance for a discourse around painting. The iconic sign implies that which connects (the word ‘connects’ should here be viewed with suspicion) to its referent by way of mimesis. In other words it looks like its referent. The index has an entirely different operation at work. It points (hence the index finger) at what created it. It refers back to its referent through its explicit trace of its manifestation by something other. A footprint on a beach is an indexical sign referring back to the foot that imprinted itself in the sand. The footprint does not signify a foot by mimaetically resembling a foot, no more than a thumbprint on glass looks like a thumb itself, but by showing us the material effects of a foot pressing itself into the sand. A thumbprint found at the scene of a murder is viewed as the most profound evidence of presence. Similarly a singular brushstroke not aligning itself to any representational structure immediately shifts in our eyes to be the evidence of the imprint of the painter at work. The signatory stroke that declares that ‘the artist was here.’ It was no accident that Existentialism arose simultaneously with the declaration of the material paint stroke (or drip) in
modernist abstraction during the early post-war years. So the index reaches out
towards its process of its manifestation by a tenuous thread. I say tenuous because I
could meticulously craft what looks like a footprint in the sand and if I craft it
convincingly enough an unknowing viewer might interpret it as an index of a foot
with no hesitation. What then is one dealing with here?

In 1961 Claes Oldenburg created a storefront art installation filled with
commonplace object created out of plaster and adorned with splattered paint in a
manner that both imitated the paintings of Jackson Pollock and helped articulate the
iconic identity of the objects they represented. In writing about the dialog between
the work of Claes Oldenburg in his storefront installation and the work of Pollock
from the previous decade, Richard Shiff points out the confusion, or rather the
inherently contextual nature of the difference between icons and indexes. “As
indexical as [Oldenburg’s] handicraft procedures might be, he thus revealed a core
of iconicity in his art—showing how much alike things could be, or rather, showing
how they could appear alike...For the viewer who looks from more of a distance,
Oldenburg’s act reduces Pollock’s indexicality to an iconic convention, whether
Oldenburg intended it or not...We need not think of any particular painting by
Pollock to sense the analogy that Oldenburg created; the general configuration and
fluid marking of Air Mail Letter suffice to make it look, iconically, both like a
handwritten, stamped, postmarked envelope and like an Abstract Expressionist painting.”

Rosalind Krauss called a similar confluence of icon and index in the work of Duchamp a “trauma of signification.” In dealing with the body of work at hand what are we to make of the paint stokes that populate these paintings? To call them painted paint strokes both confuses and highlights the movement that they embody. What does one make of a paint stroke, obviously composed of paint applied with a brush but which refers to the act of painting, not through an indexical relationship to its creation but in a mimetic iconic fashion? Is it a simple rejection of Existentialism or perhaps a suspicion of the a priori subject? In simpler terms they are icons of indexes. They take what is often the immutable sign of the presence of the artist, of the authorial nature of a work, and render it by other means. Other means which bear the stamp of forgery. Indeed, these brushstrokes will from here on out be referred to as forgeries: forgeries of a signature as well as the material presence of the paint they represent. This double movement, of the iconic resemblance to the signified paint stroke, and the signified paint stroke to the referred hand, crosses over itself in the form of an 'X'. It is an 'X' like crossing similar to that of a word under erasure. There is nowhere seemingly sufficient to restore the source of meaning to in the rift opened by this crossing. Do they

represent? Do they point? The context for these signs is a constantly shifting one.

“The passe-partout remains a structure with a movable base.”

The Aphasia of Representation

To begin this section on the images (re)presented in this group of paintings, a moment should be given to scrutinize the word often used in verbalizing this instantiation: rendering, or to render. I render an image in paint. I have rendered, here before you in multiplicity, images, images that reference a source. They render (give back) their likeness to an origin. These images are in the process of rendering (submitting) to their progenitor. They are also renderings, having been rendered (made, brought into being). Would it be useful to introduce render (to process the carcass of something in search of useful parts) into this exposition? It is tempting to cut off the ‘er’ or ‘ering’ and just leave the word as rend, as to say these likenesses have been wrenched from their proper place and placed into these paintings. But that would be somewhat misleading. What is of concern here is the seemingly subtle but old bond between the notions of causing something to come into being and to return (or give back something, yielding) that is found within the word render. And perhaps from this point on when the word render is rendered in this text the implication of the word might be more elusive than it otherwise would have

---

been. The idiom of the words renders their meaning collectively and never singularly.

What is the object of scrutiny here, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (represented in *Surplus*), the sculpture by Bernini? To be more accurate we should say a representation of Bernini’s sculpture. Better yet, a *rendering* of a sculpture carved by Bernini. For the sake of total divulgence I will declare this was painted using a photograph of the sculpture. So a rendering thrice removed, thrice mediated via a different medium: marble, photograph, digital processing, and finally paint. And it has not been said that it is the saint sans the Cornaro Chapel, sans its aedicula. It is even rendered here without her companion angel holding the arrow aimed at her chest, rent from the cause of her ecstasy. Is there somewhere a rendering of the whole of Bernini’s sculpture missing its saint? In *Under Erasure* the *Laocoön* is rendered cut from the monstrous snake that causes his demise, cut from his children, and even cut from his body. Just his agony remains. No, just his face and hair are rendered here. Then where is his pain? Another presents Rodin’s *Adam* with his face obscured (or severed). Contrary to all these art historical references there are the two mannequins, one male and one female, chromed to a mirror finish, taken from their supposed store front displays and the products they would display, no longer mirroring their surroundings (no longer rendering). Dummies in all their ideal form, they are stripped of their identities. This is not because they are dummies that they have no identity, but that their identity is a function of recognition. A chromed form only presents what is reflected on it. In this sense the chromed figure is a mediator.
Jared Flaming, *Surplus*, 2013
Jared Flaming, Sunder, 2012
Jared Flaming, *The Desire to Be Desired*, 2012
To where, or whom, do these images owe their debt? To whom must they render their meaning? What is the proper frame for viewing these images? Is it, as with the passe-partout, that the concept of a frame of reference for these images becomes a shifting multiplicity with no stable ground? There is still the issue of the interactions between the depicted elements that requires its own scrutiny. Here none of the elements necessarily interact, or at least no interaction is illustrated. They merely overlap, however we already know that in the paint they simply bump up against each other, consequently some depictions are only partially rendered (we know they do not continue in some space behind the other objects). It can be viewed in grammatical terms: these objects are nouns, but nouns without predicates. In this sense they are incomplete sentences. Any interaction is done through a sense of connotation, which, as a product of interpretation, opens up to a proliferation of meaning (although closure may be attempted through an illusory claim to truth). It can be said that, through connotation, Adam has been decapitated, de-subjectified, and an allusion to the Acéphale and Nietzsche. On the other hand, Adam has been crossed, traversed, incised. The figure has been mediated (in more ways then one) as the text suggests, rendered partial. After all these divergences through mediation (figure, clay, plaster, bronze, photograph, digital manipulation, paint, borders, dissection, juxtaposition, et al.) it would seem absurd to render the meaning of this representation to an original to be placed on a plinth, situated in history, somewhere in France (and Rodin's sculpture further complicates this since there are multiple castings) while the image in front of us proliferates meanings.
Meaning is entirely a function of framing, of a passe-partout. Derrida illustrates this with the opening line of *The Truth in Painting* when he writes “I am interested in the idiom in painting.” Outside of any frame or context this statement, so ambiguous, leads to a process of interpretation that is so broad that the very notion of signification becomes disturbed, deferred, and problematic.

André Masson, cover for the first issue of *Acéphale*, 1936

---

Mise en Abyme

There is a conflict of space in all of these paintings. More appropriately it would be called a conflict of paradigms of space. Even though all represented elements are rendered in paint they conjure different senses of how space is to unfold. An illusion of depth insinuated by the voluptuous cascade of marble cloth in The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa is not the space of the written word inscribed in sections across her likeness. The space of the word is not perceived as one of pictorial depth but a sense of space that lies flat on top or inside a flat page (but perhaps a different sense of depth as when words are placed in parenthesis, such as these, but do these words exist in the background of the primary text, below it, inside it?). What of those elements that are seemingly rendered on the surface of the painting: the black scribbles, the paint strokes, the white line across Adam? It is uncertain if that white line rests on the surface of the image or if it floats in front of Adam. Perhaps this white line goes through Adam, incising him into multiple sections as those scissors suggest. All of these notions of space carry along with them their own passe-partout, which may be exchanged, swapped (could they be stacked? Could there be frames within frames?), each framing the paintings in a different order. A series of interactions thus occurs: the pictorial space in conflict with the space of the text, the pictorial image as text, the text as form, the white as abyss, the white as ground. This does not even take into account the idiosyncrasy of the painted paint stroke and its rhetorical reinforcement of the material nature of the overall painting, nor does it recognize the peculiar structure of the panels themselves with their simultaneous amplifying and diminishing of the edge of the painting. There are still
the historical and canonical frames to consider such as the frame of pop art appropriation, of abstract expressionism, or of baroque art. There are more frames then one can manage in interrogating these paintings. Must one juggle the frames, holding only one or two at a time while suspending the rest in air? Can one stack them all, and look through them like a tunnel at the painting? If they were stacked then a hierarchy would become apparent-- a hierarchy that was most likely already there and would need to be interrogated itself.

The infamous phrase written by Derrida that there is “nothing outside the text,” implies the operation that has been reinforced repeatedly throughout this essay: there is no meaning outside of idiom. Meaning only arises as a result of an idiomatic function, by means of the framing of the words, or of the image. Framing, context, and idiom are all a passe-partout and this is the vehicle of signification (as far as we can call it that) whereby only through a formal interaction do things signify (it is tempting to say things speak here but that would seemingly place painting into a space where the voice has privilege). The image is only an image by its relation to its structure in which it plays out. The frame is always at play, allowing play, as the movements of a knight have no implication outside of a chessboard. The frame is constant and it is because of this that it is necessary to scrutinize it.

---