

Steven Cushner: *Paintings*

One has to imagine the world as a sheet of paper and a creator's hand drawing, trying out objects which don't yet exist.

-John Berger¹

Entering Steven Cushner's painting studio, the floor gets lower as the ceiling rises. It is a kind of white box. Large canvases are stretched and stapled to the walls, each one spilling a rainbow of now-dry pigment beneath it. Caught on a floor ledge, the pigment has transformed itself into a mountainous topography of color made out of years of falling paint. All around is the evidence of what happens here, the physicality of the materials and pigment, the act of painting, the force of gravity on paint and on the space that holds it.

After weeks, sometimes months, a canvas is finished, peeled from the wall, and stapled to a stretcher bar. The wall remains, still holding the outlines and traces of this painting and the many others that preceded it. The finished work enters the world as a record of the thinking, the act, and the physical resistance of materials.

One can argue that an image is about loss, in the sense that an image of an object stands in for something that is no longer there. When we look at a representational still life or a portrait, we are confronted first with the replacement of the *real* by an image of it.

By the same token, as more and more images are generated by computers and exist only in transmittable form, the *visible* has separated itself entirely from the world occupied by humans. The visible inhabits a virtual place that we can look into, but from which we are shut out. Thus a double alienation occurs—first the loss of the object through its depiction and then the loss of the whole world of objects, by means of our alienation from the visible.

Unlike a virtual image, a painting is at once image and material object. Hence, it embodies--indeed signifies--a connection to the visible. A painting that *refers* to a natural object without *representing* it, or a painting that simply points to itself, is proclaiming its presence. This aspect of painting is at the center of Steven Cushner's investigations.

Cushner describes painting as a three-way dance between the *objective* (what is in front of the artist), the *subjective* (what she or he feels and experiences), and the *material* (which always has its own agenda, and embodies a resistance). The visual sources for Cushner's images are all around him. And yet he is creating something that is not yet visible, that doesn't yet exist.

The original source for the painting titled *Stacked*, for instance, is a wooden floor. When Cushner looks at the floor beneath his feet, he doesn't see an *image* of the floor so much as the *problem* of floor, that is, a patchwork of parts that don't quite fit together. He might start here, by painting this problem of imperfect connectivity, thus transforming the retinal image into the experienced image.

Cushner's paintings flow out of this repetition of seeing, interpreting, acting, feeling, transforming, and being transformed. Thus his process for making a painting produces an image, not of an object, but of the internal gesture of its existence. In this sense the painting becomes an analog of the object rather than a picture of it. The painting, rather than *representing* the world, becomes the world.

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¹ Berger, John, *The Shape of a Pocket*, New York: Pantheon Books.