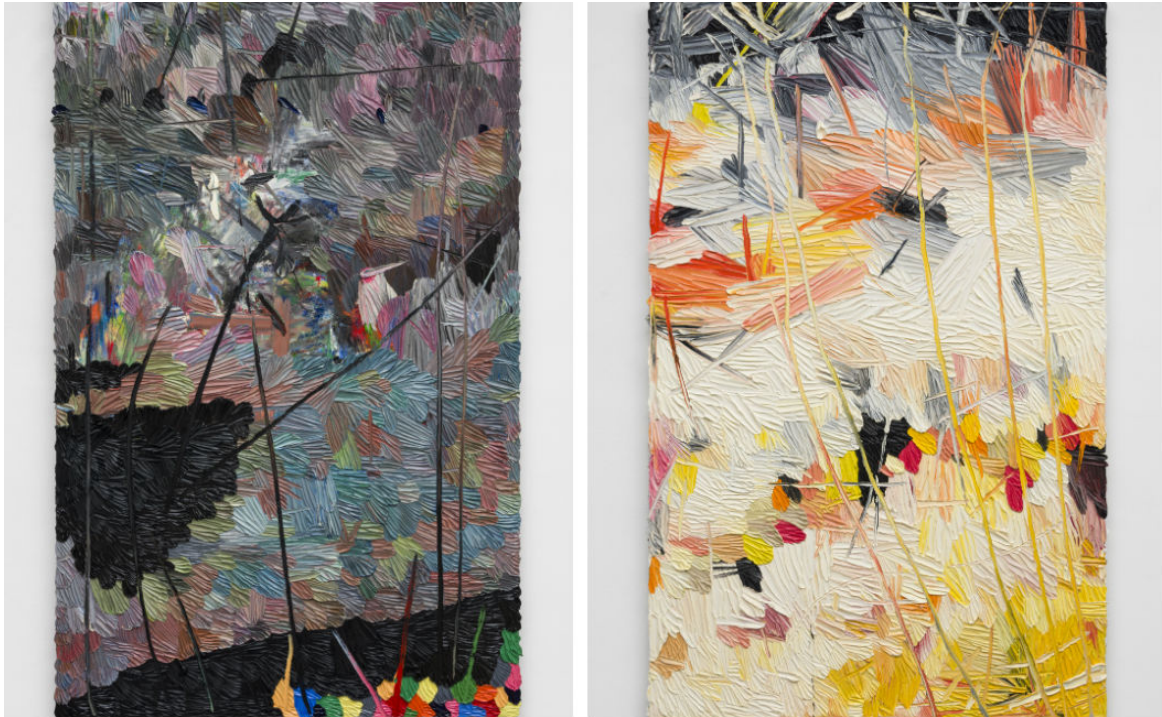


Breakdown: Dashiell Manley Deconstructs the News

By Margaret Carrigan

November 17, 2016



Detail of Dashiell Manley's "Elegy for whatever (the disruption)" (2016) and "Elegy for whatever (the angular appearance)" (2016). (Courtesy of the artist, Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco. © Dashiell Manley. Photo credit: Jeff McLane.)

It's been a tough news year: routine reports of police brutality, ongoing terrorist attacks around the world, icon losses like David Bowie and Prince, Brexit, a "yuge" US election upset. It's enough to make anyone's head spin, especially for Los Angeles-based artist Dashiell Manley whose painting practice revolves around processing and "working through" the daily news, however disheartening. In his first solo show with New York's Marianne Boesky Gallery, "whatever, a vibrant holiday," Manley presents a new body of work titled "Elegy for whatever," which explores the emotional and psychological experience of the breaking news cycle.

This isn't the artist's first attempt to tackle the news media beast. In 2014, Manley began his "New York Times" series, in which he transcribed every word from the front page of the paper onto canvas in watercolor pencil before blurring and abstracting the text with water. His subsequent series, "Various sources (quiet satires)," featured reproduced political cartoons that he then manipulated and collaged to decontextualize them from the news subjects they reflected.

However, Manley's "Elegy for whatever" works are less about mediating the news, as he did in the previous two series. Instead, the "Elegy" paintings represent what it feels like to *be* the mediator: They reveal the artist's emotional responses to the often difficult stories he spent hours, days, and weeks pouring over and manipulating. Manley spoke with ARTINFO about his labor-intensive process and how it's changed the way he views the news.

Your "Elegy" series grew out of your previous body of work that was based on the front page of the daily New York Times. What attracted you to the venerable newspaper as creative source? How does the "New York Times" series relate to this new work?

For the "New York Times" series — which are large text-based, watercolor on canvas paintings — I essentially used the front page of the Times as a set of instructions to make a work. I rigidly copied by hand every piece of text from a given day's front page on to the surface of this canvas, writing in multiple directions and washing that text out with a little water after each line. I started the project because I wanted to re-engage with information on a daily basis: At the time I felt like I wasn't reading news, I was just looking at news streams. I was getting my news from websites like Facebook and I wasn't really ingesting information, I was just kind of skimming the surface. That series, then, was an attempt to try to understand and process information.

But it very quickly became a process that functioned much differently for me. The front page of the Times has four to seven stories on it daily, and I would be dealing with those stories very slowly: It would take me anywhere from 12 to 20 hours to complete a painting. I would usually work straight through, so I was ingesting and dwelling on those specific stories for a prolonged period of time. I routinely found myself in a state where I was overwhelmed with all this information — at that time, about Ebola, ISIS, Ferguson: big stuff.

I felt like I was blindly accumulating data in the same way that the NSA is accumulating data to no end — they're spying on the people of the United States, but for no particular reason. It's just pure and utter accumulation of data for the sake of accumulating data; how they begin to organize and parse information from that data is another question entirely that they'll have to deal with later. In a way, I began to feel like this machine that was accumulating information, but because I'm not a machine, it became utterly overpowering.

I started to think about the inadequacies of language as a vehicle for disseminating information. I thought a lot about pre-linguistic forms of communication: symbols and images. I was looking a lot at these cave paintings at the time for a different project I was working on and, for me, there was an analogy between cave painting and journalism. I would Google a lot of the headlines that I was working with in the "New York Times" works and search what came up in the "Images" results. It led me to satirical political cartoons based on the events that were in the news. These political cartoons, particularly when decontextualized and stripped of any formal language or formal text, were non-linguistic, non-text-based news communication.

So I began making new works using the same process as the "New York Times" paintings: I would take political cartoons from various sources and copy them, then wash them out. At first, I was mainly using New Yorker cartoons, but a few Charlie Hebdo cartoons had found their way into one of the paintings. This was right before the attack on Charlie Hebdo; all of a sudden, within a day, the meaning and weight of the paintings completely changed. And it had nothing to do with me. It felt a little freaky and I felt a little vulnerable with it. As a result of that, I stopped making the cartoon paintings for a while, which I called the "Various Source" paintings. I would come into the studio and I would start to work on one of them, and I would draw one of the cartoons on the surface of the canvas and I would just kind of freak out. It was a mix of anxiety and a reluctance to think about what was occurring in the world around me.

The whole experience opened up this mental and psychological place in me that these "Elegy" paintings came out of. In a lot of ways, these works come from or use similar content to the "New York Times" and "Various Source" paintings, but they deal with that subject matter in a completely different way. I view the three series as a kind of trilogy. The "New York Times" paintings deal with the world as its reported textually, the "Various Source" paintings deal with it as it's being reported pictorially, and the "Elegy" paintings are the result of me processing this information on an emotional level.

The paintings are very beautiful: abstract, almost impressionistic, often awash in muted colors. But when you're describing your process, it's very angst-ridden. Is there much of a relationship between the colors

you choose and the topics you're responding to when you create these works? Is there a kind of color theory involved with this process?

I would say I never sought to make something that could occupy the same space as the event in question. In other words, it was never my intention, nor do I think I could, make a painting that carried the same intellectual or emotional weight of the event itself. Therefore, I initially – and still do – think of these paintings as counterpoints to the ideas presented in the news. I saw them as a kind of refuge from the chaos, from a lot of the terror I was meditating on as I created them.

That said, I always approach a painting with a specific color and palette in mind. It's never just completely intuitive for me, like starting with 20 colors and just going for it. Early on a lot of the first paintings started out just using a palette of red, green, blue, and yellow. Then I would apply copious amounts of white over that as an attempt to cover it up. As a result, I ended up with these really pastel-heavy pictures. But then I started looking at specific examples of paintings throughout history, finding moments in particular paintings that I really responded to or that resonated with me for a particular reason – usually for poetic reasons. I began basing a lot of paintings off these isolated moments within larger paintings. So there's one work in the show, "Elegy for whatever, partial haystack," that is based on a one-inch by one-inch section of a Monet haystack, where the hay hits the ground and this light is shining through it. It's an otherworldly moment in that painting and I wanted to explore it.

The color black was something I was afraid to use in these paintings for a while. So I would say the first half of the works there's no black. I think "Approaching Darkness" was the first painting I used black in. I suppose I was worried that it would just overwhelm the works. I didn't want there to be this one-to-one relationship between content or subject matter and the pictorial or formal qualities of the work. In other words, I didn't want it to be like, "I'm dealing with really dark subject matter, so therefore I'm making these really dark paintings." I wanted to reinforce the idea that these works were counterpoints to the news, not embodiments of it. I just felt like that would keep them open for the viewer. Once I did introduce black, I realized that that wasn't the case: It created moments within the painting that did have a kind of moodiness or a different psychological effect, and I thought that was actually really positive.

Do you feel like your relationship to news is different now based on the evolution of your work?

I think of these things – and again, this is a direct result of all three of these projects – less in terms of the specific events that generate them and more of the significance of those moments. So, not necessarily how these events will play out, but I suppose how they mark time from a historical perspective. Like in the "New York Times" works, every single one of those paintings has a story about Ebola in it. At the time, it was the biggest, scariest deal. And all of a sudden, one day it just wasn't in the paper anymore. What struck me is that nothing about Ebola necessarily changed, it just became this non-issue all of a sudden.

With the "Elegy" series, I wanted them to function more poetically. I don't feel like they're closed historical markers. I feel like they're these open containers in which one can dump whatever anxiety or angst – or in my case, I'll end up dumping a lot of depression into them – and kind of use them as these generative tools to move past that stuff.