

Standing Eight Count: Ed Moses and the Freedom in Unfreedom

KEVIN APPEL

Ed Moses constructs his paintings on the ashes of the destroyed. The abused and amended surfaces evident in each successive body of work are wrested into being through resourceful systems of application and brute physical materiality. These methods allow Moses to find the “freedom in unfreedom,” as Philip Guston so eloquently described the process of finding one’s work.¹ The unfreedom is the self-imposed limits on his procedure, while the freedom (often drastically) challenges the limitations of the imposed procedural structures, thereby opening the work up to unknown outcomes. Moses’s paintings exhibit a forthright and hard-won complexity, shown through an intensive series of declarations against conventional painting methodologies that have often anticipated aspects of current abstract practice. Moses is never satisfied with having a clear place to arrive; to the contrary, he produces work that hinges on abandonment, repetition, and negation as much as it does on constructive additive strategies or goals. Because of this, the works are as interesting to consider in relation to one another as they are to view as individual paintings. This is true of many painters’ catalogues, but in Moses’s case, and spaces between bodies seemingly finished serial works in importantly, mistrust of the

In the resin paintings of work that dismantled the rectilinear gave way to a blanket-like form visually “woven” chevron patterns allowed to flood the fabric, allude artist’s ongoing incorporation of of high modernist abstraction in deep history, and in this case



the radical upheavals, reckless abuses, become cues for understanding the the context of his own restlessness and, standards given by the historical canon. the early 1970s, Moses began making form of the stretched canvas, which of resin on unsupported fabric. The seen through layers of resin, which was to Navaho textiles and demonstrate the associative imagery beyond the trajectory (fig. 5). Moses has an abiding interest he points toward images of Navaho

history, westward expansion, manifest destiny, and the arid brutality of the American West. These works are ruins: decayed, aging, yellowing over time, and both weary and regal in their blunt material qualities. Inbuilt in these paintings as well is the material connection of resin to Southern California surf culture, a community of which many in the Venice art scene were part. Moses’s use of resin brings in another reference from outside the frame of pure painting, upending normative art materiality in favor of experimentation with the industrial materials of 1960s surfboards.

By dismantling the given structure of paintings’ rigid anatomy, Moses creates a formless substrate that implies a deconstruction of the ideologies underlying the modernist project itself—an apt nod to failure implicit in the above-mentioned American historical referents. The crisis of the monolith of abstraction made limp and nomadic was further traced out in subsequent works on tissue, such as *Mal-A-Vitch* (1973–74), which clearly uses modernist motifs as a base from which to enact these disruptions. The resin paintings can also be seen as bedfellows of the works of French Supports/Surfaces artists (Pierre Buraglio, Daniel Dezeuze, Claude Viallat, and others) (fig. 6) and American artists (Lynda Benglis, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, and Alan Shields) who aligned with them in challenging painting’s established material methods in favor of humble processes and materiality and a wholesale destructuring, which was born out of the political struggles of the preceding decade.

Fig. 5 Saddle or child’s wearing blanket (Navajo), ca. 1850. Wool, 51 x 33 in. Santa Fe, New Mexico, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, 46103/12. Courtesy of the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology. Photo: Blair Clark.

The game board is tossed again in 1974 when Moses, a compulsively restless creator, emphatically welcomes the grid into his practice—a structural armature that seems almost diametrically opposed to the formless traits of the resin works. The trac paintings are at once indebted to a hallowed regulated framework and its subsequent diversions from De Stijl to . . . (well, it clearly hasn't ended) and opposed to the chilly intellect the grid often implies (fig. 7). With Moses this matrix is imbued with the cranky and impious attitude that is emblematic of West Coast painting. This is the rambunctious perversion of ascetic East Coast minimalist practices, privileging instead vehement process, grimy incident, and a diagonal orientation that, rather than aligning with the edges and weave of the canvas, positions itself in antagonistic relation to them and the discourse at hand. If, according to Mondrian's argument, the rigid orthogonal orientation refers to a body on the earth, the body would then be placed in a precarious position in Moses's canvases.

Mondrian was also concerned with unifying the figure-ground relationship into an inseparable entity—in other words, with integrating the surface into a flat, nonobjective whole. This premise holds true in much of the ensuing examples of orthogonal abstraction—Agnes Martin, Sol LeWitt, and Frank Stella all adhere to this basic tenet. In Moses's grids, the process is one of a dominant lattice structure along the track of a straightedge built he formed by tracing his arm alongside lines masked by tape. This creates spatial definition to the flat standards of the paintings resist being read as objective world; consequently, they exist as language of “pure” abstraction and



Simultaneous paths in unnecessary to attempt a chronological narrative of self-cannibalization. The model is more one of a cross-pollination that allows each species to continue growth and to germinate others while unfamiliar ones conjointly take form. A large part of Moses's practice is about vigorous physical discovery—the mad scientist in his lab testing new materials and tools with an unbridled abandon, and then seeing what sticks. The discoveries that Moses makes on a physical level are the basis of a system that gives way to interpretation both during and after the maelstrom is concluded, once the monster has emerged.

The trac paintings continue, in varying degrees of structural clarity, throughout his enterprise, often giving way to a nervous liquid version, layered and knotted as if the diagonal grids became untethered and the binder in the paint flooded the surface of the canvas to obscure the clarity of the motif. As in *Snail Struct* of 1974 (humorously, a title and composition referencing the routes of these dilatory mollusks), there's a direct hand at work here, but one that can't find its way all that easily (it takes a circuitous route to the grid)—yet one that also has a slow natural material directness not always seen in Moses's work. It is more a meditation than

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pick-up from plate

Fig. 6 Jean-Pierre Pincemin (1944–2005), *Carrés collés*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 106 x 94 in. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 7 Ed Moses, *NY-Trac IV*, 1975. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 66 in. Courtesy of Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles.

is seen in the steady, fast hysteria of the tracs. The colors are muted and restricted to earth tones, suggesting the natural palette of Chinese landscape painting of the late Tang dynasty (AD 705–907). These paintings evoke the concept of withdrawal into the natural world, a common thematic focus of poets and painters of the time. Faced with the failure of the social order, artists sought permanence within the natural world, retreating into the mountains to find a sanctuary from the chaos of a failing dynasty. In these works Moses seems to be inspired by this tradition of a more direct intercourse between body and materials.

Likewise, there's a single layer at work in what Moses calls his apparition paintings of the late 1980s through the middle 2000s. They find connection to the works of Korean painter Lee Ufan and other artists of the Japanese Mono-ha movement (fig. 8). In *VGA* (2006), working wet into wet, Moses completes the painting in one sitting using essentially two gestures performed with a large sponge: one vertical and a second horizontal, with the arm tracing a continuous serpentine calligraphy in which the hand does not leave the canvas. This is a direct emptying out of the anxiety in other works—a paring down of thought and action, through what open mind.”²



From the 1980s through the eighties there begins an aggressive, in large multi-panel paintings paintings bubbles up to the surface necessary, leaving an eviscerated catastrophic patterning. Through buckets, and whatever else was at beaten down over and over again, connoting an entropic, phenomenal decline into disorder resulting in painting in crisis; this is throwing oneself at a work to the point of exhaustion, this is a bruised road.



The year 1982 was the middle of a renaissance in West Coast punk, and these works align themselves with the friction, energy, and insolence embodied in the movement. Hardcore bands like Black Flag, Vicious Circle, and Youth Brigade came from suburban parts of Los Angeles County; the aesthetics that surrounded the movement are of a similar persuasion (fig. 9). Screen printing, Xerox copies, scratched and scraped surfaces—this was the language of punk culture, and although executed entirely in paint, the affective qualities of these works exist in concert with this drive. Unwittingly or not, there seems to be a connection with the Reagan-era dissatisfaction exemplified by the punk movement. Negation, cancellation, obliteration—all repeated until the resulting work embodies physical exhaustion, a proverbial slam dance. Moses's palette in this series is both palimpsest and club wall; these works contain the black, off-white, and asphaltum tones of urban decay and are run through with discordant toxic tones of protest. From a term coined by art blogger Martin Mugar, today's so-called Zombie Formalist painters could look to Moses's approach in these irascible

Fig. 8 Lee Ufan, *With Winds*, 1989. Oil on canvas, 85 7/8 x 114 1/2 in. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 9 Edward Colver, *Black Flag Damaged LP cover*, 1981. Courtesy of the artist.

hold tone

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works, which manifest the passage of time through a vast variation of materiality and rhythm on a surface in duration, rather than being paintings made by an artist simply using canvas as a drop cloth in the studio. The sense of bodily exhaustion is evident and lends the work an air of invested vigor.

The expansive skin of solid, regulated color termed the monochrome became the ground zero of millenarist termination, where the clarity of materiality becomes a locus of closure for the disorderly business of allusion and implication that are the real guts of abstract painting. After such claims of resolution, there is liberation. In other words, by dying, painting becomes free. What is perhaps the most epistemologically challenging artistic proposition to emerge in painting also becomes a site of projection. The field can be brute materiality (Rodchenko), silence (Robert Ryman, Brice Marden), or radicalization (Olivier Mosset, Steven Parrino), and as with such sites of projection, through subtle variation and surrounding language, the list can go on and on.

A contingent outgrowth to defile, to destroy—to kill the the newest work in Moses’s que lure paintings, which have strategies of the Zero group. represents “a zone of silence new beginning,”³ and the group such as Piene, Lucio Fontana,



of this necrosis would be a site silent. This is seen strongly in oeuvre, the aptly titled cra- precedent in the experimental In Otto Piene’s words, Zero and of pure possibilities for a of disparate European artists Yves Klein, Bernard Aubertin, and Heinz Mack set about scraping, slashing, burning, embossing, and defiling the surface of the monochrome in response to the subjective expression found in preceding abstract methodologies.

The craquelure works deliberately use incompatible materials to create their surfaces: a coat of solid color is painted over another coat of solid color with a substance between them that causes the top material to resist congealing into an even coat; instead, it separates into cracking patterns that reveal the color beneath. A splitting of the surface, a cutting through in the “space” of the painting suggests an unstable premise of purity. It is a visually penetrable space, akin to what Lucio Fontana called his Spatial Concept (fig. 10). In Fontana, the slashing of the canvas literally cut between the space occupied by the viewer, through the surface of the canvas, to the space that lies beyond. He saw this as evocative of infinity, claiming “a new dimension of the infinite.”⁴

Alongside the infinite space suggested by both Fontana’s and Moses’s acts lies an assault on the surface of the works themselves. In accordance with Moses’s tendency to enact a kind of violence onto his paintings, he may help the cracked surfaces along by pummeling them with his fists. That these are the latest works in a forty-five-year survey exhibition is telling, as there is a great cinematic image at play: the body of an august painter in a literal fight with the painting in front of him, a fitting representation of an unfailingly experimental and unsettled maker at constant odds with a medium that refuses to deliver conclusive satisfaction.

Fig. 10 Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 39 x 49 in. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milano.

Notes

1. Philip Guston, “From the Chicago Panel, 1958,” in *Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*, ed. Clark Coolidge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 17.
2. John Gruen, “Agnes Martin,” in *The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists* (Atlanta: A Cappella Books, 1991), 82.
3. Otto Piene, “The Development of the Group ‘Zero,’” in *ZERO*, ed. Piene and Heinz Mack, trans. Howard Beckman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), xx.
4. Pia Gottschaller, *Lucio Fontana: The Artist’s Materials* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2012), 19.