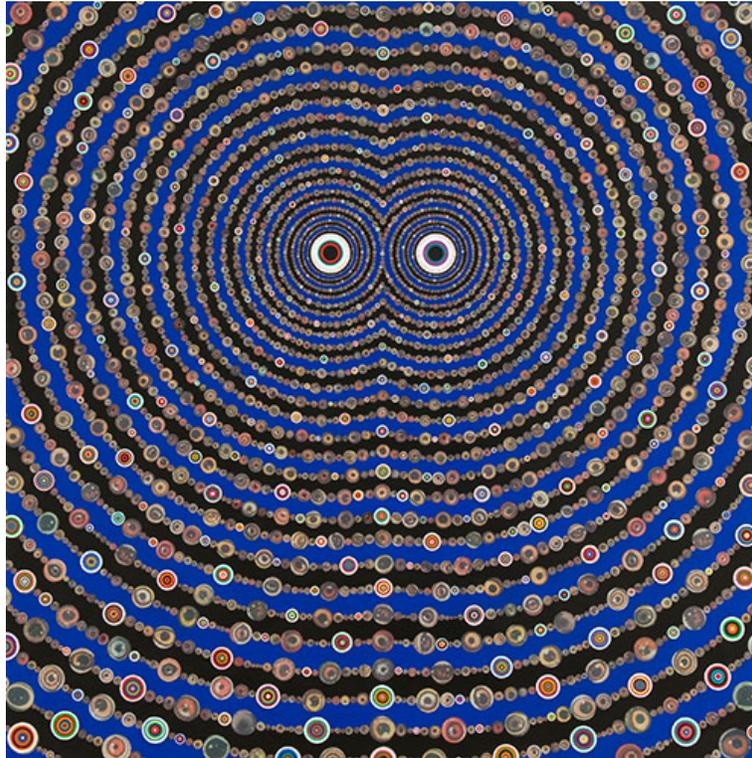


Painting Between the Lines @ CCA Wattis

Fred Tomaselli, "Watt", 2011, photographic collage, acrylic and resin on wood 48 x 48"



"Writing and painting have been connected throughout history, but literature has, of late, become a diminished subject in the medium of painting," observes CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts Director Jens Hoffmann in a statement accompanying *Painting Between the Lines*, a thoughtfully conceived group show. It is intended as a corrective. Hoffman commissioned 14 celebrated contemporary painters, including Laura Owens, Laylah Ali, Marcel Dzama and Fred Tomaselli, to create a new work inspired by a description of a painting from a famous novel. The presentation is an outstanding blend of style and function. The gallery is filled with spoke-like, freestanding wall structures, each forming splayed faces that resemble open books. On the left "page" of every spread, a copy of a novel is displayed in a wall-mounted vitrine alongside the excerpt that the artist responded to. The arrangement is framed by bold lines that call to mind antique frontispieces that include the page number of the excerpt appearing near the wall's base. The commissioned artwork hangs in the center of the right "page".

Yet, despite good intentions and smart design, *Painting Between the Lines* is an inconsistent and frustrating show. More often than not, the juxtaposition of the literary fragment with the painting it inspired does a disservice to both. Cecilia Edefalk's "Ko" provokes a chuckle, but the picture registers as a clever illustration rather than a complementary artwork when displayed alongside its companion passage from August Strindberg's *The Red Room*. Laura Owens' *Untitled* is uncertain and dull next to its inspiration, a quotation from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Raqib Shaw's exuberant, candy-like *The Blue Moon Beam Gatherer* is a jewel when viewed up close, but it seems showy and frivolous from a few feet away, an adolescent's interpretation of the painting described in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Marcel Dzama: "That uncertain Moment", 2011



Other artists appear to have phoned in their commissions. A brochure accompanying the exhibition claims that Michael van Ofen's *Untitled* offers viewers "a spare version" of Umberto Eco's illuminated Madonna from *The Name of the Rose* –an ambiguous form "reflected in [the artist's] decision to render her face as a featureless soft oval." But van Ofen always paints undefined faces; it seems clear he painted a vaguely Madonna-like figure and called it a day. Likewise, Maaïke Schoorel's *Self-Portrait as Rebecca* is, as the exhibition brochure claims, a good example of the painter's "muted but evocative style," but, title aside, it's difficult to connect Schoorel's abstract picture to the text from Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Jordan Kantor elected to reproduce a simple text painting described in Albert Camus' *Exile and the Kingdom*. It consists of one word written in small script on an otherwise blank canvas, either "solidaire" or "solitaire". Reading about the image produced by Camus' reclusive artist, Gilbert Jonas, we ponder the moral significance of his opting for secluded contemplation over civil engagement; it's heavy stuff. By contrast, Kantor's literal response to the excerpt seems like a footnote. Samuel Beckett's 1953 novel, *Watt*, includes a scene in which a frustrated art viewer struggles to make sense of a painting, driving himself to tears in the process. Unfortunately, Fred Tomaselli's *Watt* lacks the earnest wonder that imbues most of the artist's pictures. Also conspicuously absent from his painting is a sense of Beckett's protagonist's urgent need to comprehend the incomprehensible — "a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a center and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time." Orbiting circles radiate outward from bloodshot eyeballs in Tomaselli's painting, but, presented alongside the Beckett quote, the piece seems like a cartoon rendering of a grand, if indistinct idea. This is not entirely Tomaselli's fault. Whereas the reader of Beckett's novel can imagine an impossible painting, the *Painting Between the Lines* project asks Tomaselli to make something concrete of a figment. His attempt is laudable, but the quotation and painting would both be better off divorced.

Michaël Borremans, "The Hovering Wood", 2011, oil on wood, 10 x 13"



Fortunately, some pairings work very well. Marcel Dzama's *That Uncertain Moment* captures the magical realism of Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*, and Michaël Borremans's confidently painted *The Hovering Wood* reveals the making of an illusion not unlike those produced by Raskolnikov, the surrealist artist in Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum*. But the few exceptions don't carry the show.

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but it can't compete with a reader's imagination. This fact trips up a number of the artists participating in *Painting Between The Lines* and raises a surprising question: Should fiction and painting be connected in so explicit a fashion? Moreover, are the two spheres as disconnected as the exhibition suggests? Maybe it's simply that most contemporary artists reference fiction in more oblique ways. If so, perhaps that's not such a bad thing.

—CHRISTOPHER REIGER

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"*Painting Between the Lines*" @ [CCA Wattis](#) through December 17, 2011.

About the Author:

Christopher Reiger is a writer, artist, and curator living and working in San Francisco. Artwork can be seen at his [website](#), and essays on art, natural history, and miscellany can be read at his long-running blog [Hungry Hyaena](#).



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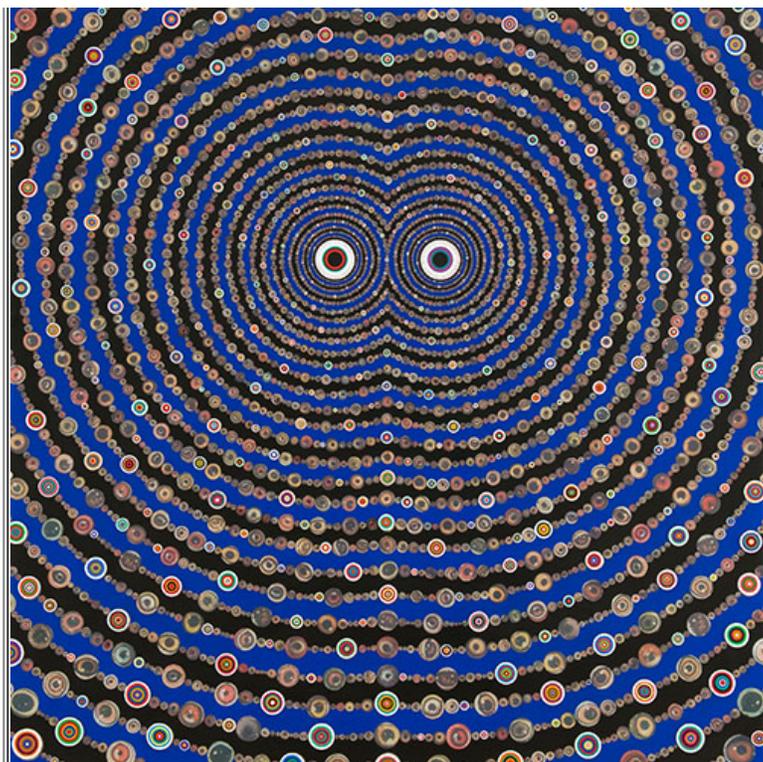
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Posted on 29 November 2011.



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