

Surfaces that Matter

Addressing Frank Stella's painterly aluminium constructions of the late 1970s, Douglas Crimp wrote that, 'the irony of Stella's recent enterprise is that he is only able to point at painting from the distance of a peculiar hybrid object, an object which may well *represent* a painting but certainly cannot legitimately *be* a painting.'¹ Crimp's response – as with Stella's work – points provocatively to the very problem of defining painting. The works to which Crimp referred turned away from the flat two-dimensional surface of modernist painting, taking the form instead of exuberant relief assemblages of cut and brightly coloured metal shapes. These hybrid objects, for Stella at least, did continue to operate *as painting*, albeit in a 'maximalist' sense. Yet, the question of whether these works should be called painting or sculpture, or something else entirely, has been extensively debated. In many ways this was a semantic problem that highlighted the insufficiency of language in describing new modes of practice. If Stella's work cannot *be* painting, this is only according to a certain set of conventions. Despite the apparent singularity of the term, painting has always encompassed a dizzying array of subjects, materials, and techniques, and this has only been amplified within the expanded field of contemporary practice. Indeed, Rosalind Krauss had already noted this in 1979 when she suggested that 'categories like painting and sculpture have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything.'²

Helen Calder's practice actively draws on this history, continuing to tease out the problem of painting's identity, and explore the potential of its contemporary condition. Her work emphatically declares itself as painting but does so through a disassembling of the medium to its constitutive parts: pigment, surface, support, site. Surfaces and supports have often been cleaved apart, with paint and armature reconfigured to suggest new relationships. Paint skins that have been metaphorically peeled from the canvas are variously draped, hung, piled, and pooled, while structures such as unprimed wood, hooks, racks, and ropes provide alternate systems of support.

These works embrace the agency of paint itself, and seem to revel in both its liquid viscosity and its tactile plasticity. Calder's process suggests a constant state of entanglement or negotiation in which she is working both with and against the material itself. Petra Lange-Berndt has pointed out that 'from a critical perspective, the term 'material' describes not prime matter but substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling, interaction with their surroundings, or the dynamic life of their chemical reactions'.³ To speak of 'material' is thus to speak of substances that are vibrant, mutable, and responsive. Certainly this is a way of thinking and working with paint that underpins Calder's practice. In describing her 2014 project *Qualia 760-620λ* at Enjoy Gallery in Wellington, for example, she noted that the work

¹ Douglas Crimp, 'The End of Painting', *October*, 16 (Spring 1981), 82.

² Rosalind Krauss, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), 30.

³ Petra Lange-Berndt, 'Introduction: How to Be Complicit with Materials' in *Materiality* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2015), 12.

was really 'about that movement from being a product or being a material – a raw product – to being part of the work, and potentially back again.'⁴

In this way, Calder's work is open to the chaos and contingency of paint. Sometimes it is poured and left to find its own limits, puddling on the gallery floor or dripping beyond the confines of the frame. Othertimes the skins are strung up and left to crease, fold, or droop as they require. In this most recent body of work, joyeously coloured paint skins featuring layered painterly textures are carefully folded over the rungs of geometric structures that resemble clothes drying racks, or informally hung on pegs such that they evoke the humble kitchen tea towel. In looking at these works there's a palpable sense of watching a material in an ongoing process of transformation. Look closely and you can see the pitted marks and contours that form as the paint skins dry. Look again and you'll see edges that begin to curl in on themselves, and the kinks or undulating waves that develop over time.

The painted surface textures we see here similarly gesture toward shifting states. Unlike earlier works that were often poured in one pure colour, these skins carry an array of marks, from the broad sweeps of a brush to a dappled, almost marbled effect. Calder's process of creating these surfaces is revealing. Thin layers of acrylic are painted onto sheets of mylar, and the paint responds according to its consistency and the method of its application. Having dried, a thick layer of paint can then be poured over the mylar so that the marks effectively transfer to the new paint skin. The result is a compelling layering of planes in which the lightness and transparency of the 'surface' contrasts with the opacity of the skin *as body* (because, of course, the skin has now become a support of sorts itself). Within this palimpsest, the chameleon-like quality of the paint medium emerges as an enlivening characteristic of the material.

In addition to these investigations into the state of matter in painting, Calder's work also addresses the contexts in which painting is produced and circulated. Her work is often site-specific or site-responsive, entering into a conversation with the space of display. In this sense, the architectures of the gallery – both physical and ideological – are a critical part of the work, not a neutral backdrop. Walls and floors can be deployed as extended surfaces upon which objects lean or paint oozes. High ceilings might provide the opportunity for suspended interventions that purposefully eschew the wall altogether, and light from windows can be exploited to animate paint skins in novel ways. These activations of the gallery draw into focus the ways in which the histories and conventions of painting have been constructed by these very institutions.

But the gallery is not the only space that painting inhabits, and Calder's practice reminds us that painting crosses a number of thresholds. Before making its way into the public arena of the white cube, the studio provides a more intimate home in which there is room for messy and speculative exploration. The myth of the private and sacred studio is somewhat undone by Calder, however, as she sets out to blur or complicate supposed demarcations between these domains. Take *Airing June 2023*: the rack, now covered in paint skins that have been cut into thin strips, was used in the studio to dry and organize the skins; its purpose about the practical management of work in progress. Presented within the gallery space, the drying rack very much becomes a formal object, but it also carries with it an understanding of the temporal nature of making. In traversing the spaces of both the studio and the gallery it asks us, I think, to

⁴ Helen Calder in conversation with Lucy Ryan on the occasion of the exhibition *Qualia 760-620λ* at Enjoy Gallery, Wellington, 2014. <https://vimeo.com/88722248>. Date accessed: 1 June 2023.

consider the works on display as being in a constant and ongoing process of coming into being; to consider that 'painting' might be made and re-made as it is redistributed across different sites.

David Joselit's term 'transitive painting' is perhaps useful here. In his text 'Painting Beside Itself', Joselit points to a significant trope in contemporary painting whereby the work self-consciously visualises or stages an awareness of its own place within 'networks of distribution and exhibition.'⁵ This is a way of conceptualising painting that no longer privileges the autonomous artwork and chooses, rather, to emphasise the social, economic, and cultural economies within which painting operates. Calder's interest in calling attention to her work's passage between studio and gallery (and vice versa), is one way in which the transitive nature of painting might be represented.

Another might be to reflect on how painting operates in relation to modes of digital reproduction. In writing this essay and looking at reference photos of Calder's painting, I began to wonder how her work – particularly with its concern for materiality – might be read differently in the context of a post-internet environment; a world in which the internet is no longer a radical new technology but instead has become a rather mundane part of everyday life. In this post-internet world, our lives are mediated by images that can be reproduced, altered, and circulated more easily than ever. Inasmuch as Calder's practice has sought to sever painting's reliance on the flat two-dimensional surface of the canvas, our current digital reality means that painting is, of course, frequently known as a flattened out image; a photograph reproduced in the pages of a book or accessed via a computer screen. These might not be primary concerns for Calder as she's working in the studio, but the life of her work nonetheless stretches out into these territories. I was intrigued, for example, by the way that the painted marks we see on the recent paint skins suggest not only an analogue act of applying pigment, but also seem to read in relation to forms of digital texture mapping wherein surface details, textures and colours are added to blank computer generated objects to enhance their realism. Both techniques rely on a level of mimicry, oscillating between illusion or representation, and the promise of a physical actuality.

You might also think about your experience of reading this catalogue. The design suggests more convergences of the digital and the physical. The columns of text, and details of paint that articulate the edges of the page, mirror – whether intentionally or not – the vertical orientation and scrolling gestures prescribed by handheld devices. And all the while, these digital references operate in relation to the material properties of printed matter: the grain of paper, the binding of pages, the smell of ink.

As a technology of documentation, the catalogue shares Calder's practice through reproduced images, providing access to the current exhibition outside of both the gallery space and the period of the show. The catalogue thus takes on the important role of archiving, while perhaps also offering something like a democratisation of viewing. Circulating in this way, the works live differently. They are dislocated from the 'here and now' of their exhibition and float in the atemporality of digitally oriented networks. In this publication, images of both past and present works sit alongside one another. The time between them is indicated by a shift from colour to black and white printing, but even so, our experience within the pages of the catalogue is to encounter the works simultaneously. What results is a keen awareness that the physicality of

⁵ David Joselit, 'Painting Beside Itself', *October*, 130 (Fall 2009), 125.

paint and the acts of making that drive Calder's practice exist in an enmeshed relation with the systems of their circulation. To use Suzanne Hudson's pithy assessment, 'production anticipates distribution'.⁶

The process of imaging Calder's works might mute some of the tactile or sensory aspects of paint that are so central to her practice, but the alternate networks and materialities that emerge can also enrich and further expand the possibilities of painting in its contemporary context.

Barbara Garrie, June 2023

⁶ Suzanne Hudson, 'Production and Distribution' in *Contemporary Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 116.