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The Book Forever: An Articulation of R.H. Quaytman's Spine

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"I use the name 'Book' metaphorically to describe the overarching system with which groups of paintings are generated," writes R.H. Quaytman in the cover essay of her new publication, Spine. "The Book began in 2001," when Quaytman decided to conceptualize her distinct exhibitions as chapters belonging to a larger overarching structure, a seriality which now seems intrinsic to the work itself. The metaphorical Book offered the artist two invaluable bulwarks against any painter's mid-career crisis: an ever growing index of touchstone images sourced from autobiographical, archival and situational material that grows in meaning with each depiction, and a reorientation away from fetishistic commodification in the commercial art world by privileging The Book over individual paintings. What results is a cohesive body of work astounding in its wide vocabulary and evolutionary consistency. Quaytman has resolved to continue generating work within this system unendingly, but what are the implications for The Book now that it has become *a book* (and an elegant one at that)? While queering the binary relationship of the signifier and the signified, Quaytman also layers reason on top of reason—a conceptual gesture that resurfaces chapter after chapter. Within the system of The Book it seems that everything is as it is not just for a reason, but for three or four reasons. This multiplicity only adds depth to Spine. It is an encyclopedia, autobiography, white cube gallery space, critical essay, narrative, and treatise. "On the other hand," she writes, "my project is essentially a calendar. Contingent on varying sets of social, geographical, and quantitative criteria, the chapters can be likened to the wandering contents of a datebook with appointments (history and time), addresses (places and architecture), and people (viewers and viewed) inserted as time moves forward." To follow the wandering and recurring contents of Quaytman's serial work, the viewer should know what has come earlier in the book. Spine "begins to address this obvious logic and, as such, corresponds in importance to the paintings themselves."

That is not to say that the paintings don't stand on their own; they do. Out of the context of The Book and out of context of the particular chapter to which they belong, Quaytman's paintings fall into a loose stylistic groups including photo-based silkscreens, op art, and small hand-painted works in oil.



The photo-based silkscreens draw figurative imagery from the circumstances of their primary exhibition location, reconfiguring notions of linear time and presence of the viewer. The lowresolution of the screen prints along with some manipulation of the original photographs and layering of optical patterns, abstracts the work from its source context and places it within an art historical discussion of painting and viewership. One part of this discussion is Quaytman's use of pictorial references to other artists and their work; Dan Graham and K8 Hardy make especially striking appearances in *iamb*, Chapter 12[1] and *Distracting Distance*, Chapter 16[2] respectively, the latter of which was included in the 2010 Whitney Biennial. In addition to their contemporary relevancy, each of these models engaged aesthetically with art historical iconography, building and building upon what can seem to be unending layers of significance in *Spine*. Artists whose work has influenced Quaytman are used as "allegorical decoys with which to conceive a conceptual/historical scaffolding."

Autobiographical and institutional narrative histories also act as jumping off points for Quaytman's photo-silkscreens. "My iconography is usually generated through a protracted process leading down labyrinthine contextual, historical, and social routes," artifacts are personal (as with the newspaper article detailing the accidental death of the artist's paternal grandfather and great-grandfather in *The Sun*, Chapter 1) and at times they



Courtesy Sequence Press

are indexical (such as photographs from the ICA records, complete with archival labels in *Exhibition Guide*, Chapter 15). Yet Quaytman refrains from sentimentalism, intimacy, or even vilification of figurative images. The iconography remains personal, but the posturing of it as a layer, within a work, within a chapter, loads the images with a greater situational meaning, at which point the preliminary understanding of the figuration (before or outside of *The Book*) is no longer primary. In addition to the rich contextual meanings of the source images, her treatment of them in the photo-silkscreen paintings expresses inquisitiveness in the way that we see—a sort of objectivity regarding the viewers' subjective engagement with the painting.

The painterly aspects of Quaytman's work are given room to breath in the varied abstract optical art pieces and hand-painted oil works that ground the viewer throughout *The Book*. These works help to set a pace for some of the larger chapters and act as a reminder that we are participating in a looking game. Quaytman paints closely shaped stripes that buzz and hum, concentric circles like quicksand, and scintillating grids. "I chose the scintillating grid as the primary op pattern," she explains, "Specifically because it was invented to address how neural vision works laterally in the

Simultaneously they reset our conception of understanding; there isn't anything we are supposed to *get*, to comprehend. The alienation that comes with being the butt of an optical joke is counteracted by Quaytman's abstract diamond dust paintings that draw us in with their shimmer.[3] The small hand-painted oil paintings punctuate the push/pull of the opticality and the inquisitive pondering of the figurative work. The artist refers to these oil works as "captions"; solitary arrows and letters are among the marks in these captions. They offer a breath and the recollection that we are in fact looking at paintings, at generated representations and images, at objects.



In their exhibition incarnation, at their most physical, these paintings are made on distinctive Finnish plywood panels with beveled edges. Viewed in profile, the edge of a Quaytman painting is a long trapezoidal strip of striped layers of wood, approximately an inch thick. This plywood edge profile literally comes to the forefront of the Quaytman's paintings as a reoccurring *trompe l'oeil* in which she hand paints the plywood strip, employing it as a framing mechanism, a linear bisection, or a presence echoing figuration. The *trompe l'oeil* edge is the view of a painting on a shelf—like a book on a shelf, but also like a retired work of art, unhung and put into storage.

This *trompe l'oeil* sign of a painting in storage (or being passed by) exemplifies the artist's lingering fear of obscurity that persists throughout Spine. In an effort to preempt the relegation of her work to storage shelves she represents the object of a painting in profile on the very face of the painting itself. Similarly, Quaytman's studies on perspective and viewership (involving long exposures, dynamic op art, hand-painted arrows directing view, color separation, and angles) confront the idea of paintings being walked passed or paid little attention. She writes, "I assume the distraction of my audience, and thus paint towards the movement away from the painting's face to its profile."

A collaboration of the personal and the uniform is fitting in Quaytman's system where the mediums, styles, and content overlap. For this artist, the autobiographical is the art historical is the family narrative is the institutional archive is the social commentary. The history is the present in passing. I can't help but wonder what is on the face of those paintings depicted in profile, oriented to our passing them by. Perhaps the *trompe l'oeil* pieces are multiple overlaid views of the same painting, but we cannot be sure that we aren't missing out on pieces hidden from us on the shelf. I am curious to know how future chapters would look if Quaytman were to hypothetically step aside from assuming our distraction and shelving her work while it is still on the wall.

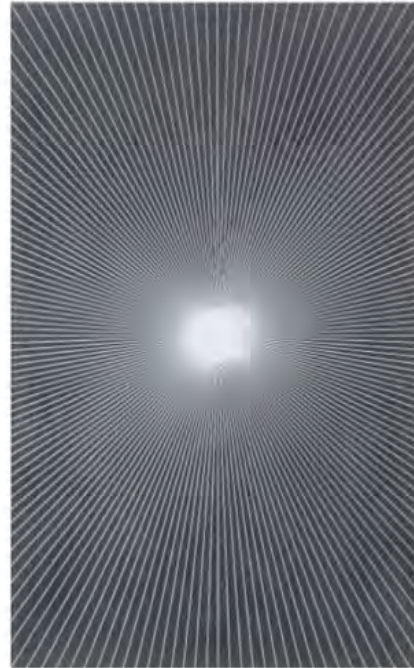
On the cover of *Spine* Quaytman writes, "I realized that the paintings I had been making up until that point [before beginning *The Book* in 2001] were not going to radically change, and that the only way to get their attention and have them develop despite their demands was to establish consistent dimensions, and insert them within an overarching serial structure." This cumulative book, the eponymous final chapter, and its retrospective exhibition at the Neuberger Museum, are evidence that Quaytman has gotten the attention of her paintings. The attentive paintings have gotten the attention of the Whitney Museum, the Venice Biennale, MoMA's acquisitions committee, in the past year alone.

Quaytman is on the cover of *Artforum's* September 2011 issue. Actually, a new piece of *her work* is on the cover of *Artforum*, not the artist herself. The image shows an androgynous older person with white hair, in profile, from the shoulders up. This could be a bit confusing since Quaytman uses her ambiguous initials as her professional name and requests that public institutions exclude pronouns^[4] in wall signage about her paintings. Quaytman explains that she does this "in order to distance [her] personhood from [her] paintings." While the artist effectively leaves some categorical aspects of identity absent (e.g. name and gender), her paintings still address true personhood. In studying Quaytman's body of work one finds a world generated by a distinct creator with specific figures, memorials, and concerns.

The paintings in the penultimate chapter of *Spine*, *Beard, Chapter 19*, were shown "in an exhibition of three men and one woman, all assumed to be heterosexual." The first seven of the eleven paintings depict a nude back, legs, and rear of a male figure. It is a retrospective gaze, but also "given the hetero-normative masculine sexual biases of the exhibit, this led [Quaytman] to perform a further reversal and use the image of a homosexual's rear end." Two of these paintings have a drawn slice made by scraping wet Polaroid emulsion. This bold white mark is strikingly vaginal in shape and in this way Quaytman queers her queering of the hetero-normative masculine context. I argue that this gesture, this move of subversion and conflation, tells us more about the existential personhood of the artist than would their first name or gender. In all its fears and desires it is a personhood that we are privileged to view.



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The final painting in *Beard, Chapter 19* is an oil piece painted by hand and square in dimensions. Centered within a square is a rendering of a disc-like shape fitted into a hole. In the multi-dimensional vocabulary of Quaytman we would be unwise to miss the pun of wholeness. Indeed hers is a body of work derived from a wholeness and entirety that only becomes more full. In her previous artist's book, *Allegorical Decoys*, Quaytman wrote that early in her career she studied abstract perspective by placing a mirror in a shallow white box and photographing it. With its silver reflective hardcover wrapped in a contemplative manifesto of a slipcover, Spine is a new perspectival study on the mirror in the white box. We'll soon see what this exploration yields; Quaytman has already exhibited *Cherchez Holopherne, Chapter 21* in Berlin. While R.H. Quaytman has made the metaphorical system of *The Book* manifest with Spine, we are lucky that it is the back-story for many chapters to come.

R.H. Quaytman

Spine