

SFAQ, Issue 16, May-July 2014

LIAM EVERETT

Interviewed by JEFF MCMILLAN

Liam Everett lives and works in San Francisco. He is currently represented by Altman Siegel and is also Visiting Faculty at San Francisco Art Institute. I met with him at his Headlands Center for the Arts studio in March 2014 to discuss his most recent paintings and a set of new prints he recently completed at Paulson Bott Press.

I wanted to start off with your painting practice. When I last visited your studio you were working on several large canvases that you said some people called 'sanding' paintings. Tell me about these paintings and how you create them?

This is a very primitive way of talking about them, but I keep doing this so I'll just say that they start out additive. Even before I'm adding paint on them, they're primed, which sets up essentially the tooth that I have to dig into when I'm subtracting. So after I have the three, four or five layers of primer, I'll start to add. If I just say I start adding paint, it's not really true—I'm adding it very intentionally. I'm drawing with the paint and I'm building up these grids that are between hot and cold color schemes—building up three or four columns of cold and then I'll intersperse those columns with warmer tones. In many ways, I feel more than ever that I'm building paintings rather than painting paintings. And eventually I begin to subtract but the reason why I mention that now is because I'm not adding just to have this surface to subtract. I'm trying to build a painting that is conclusive—that at some point arrives at this resolved state where I can recognize why it's doing what it's doing and I'm excited by it. It's really at that point when there's comfort that I begin to subtract the paint and that's why they get referred to as the "sanded" paintings because to subtract I sand. But I'll use many different ways—alcohol, salt, steel wool, a power sander. I use different gradations of the sanding paper, some are on blocks, some are wrapped around foam and the reason why I have several different ways of removing the paint is because some are much more aggressive than others and I don't want to strip more than one layer at a time. I want to take off one painting and then take off another because there are maybe fourteen to fifteen different paintings on each painting. So, as I'm subtracting, I don't want these to show up as expressive marks—they're more kind of excavation. And as you cut into a stone—I'm thinking geologically—I want to be able to cut into this landmass of paint and see what led to what. What I'm discovering when I finally exit these paintings is that they show up completely different than how I imagined them to be.

So previously you've mentioned the word 'foreign' when you are getting to the end of that subtractive process. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

It's probably the wrong word. The other word I was using was "otherly" but that just sounds too hokey. There's always this question—I think everyone who makes a painting at some point gets asked this question, "How do you know the work is finished?" It is actually a very strange question for me, because I don't think of these as finished. It's probably the reason—the motivation—that has sent me into this way of practicing—to avoid a finish or a problem of finishing. So it's a long way to say it but essentially "otherly" or "foreign" is what I'm looking for. I'm looking for this to appear. Not show up but to appear and I make a differentiation between showing up and appearing—for me to show up happens much faster. For a painting to appear is something that's very gradual. It's like this Greek term *aesthesis*—I'm butchering that but essentially it's "becoming," "arriving to." When the painting stands in front of me after all this addition and subtraction, if and when it arrives at this point, I literally don't recognize it. I can tell you I did this and this and this, but I can't make it happen again.

I think when many people look at your work they would call it abstraction. But you said in an interview with *Hunted Projects*, "I don't think of my paintings as abstraction. Inside the studio they are only work to me. I mean that literally. Work as labor." I was wondering if you could talk a little more about that?

Maybe this sounds like it's motivated by an idea or a concept, but it isn't. I would say none of this is born out of idea or concept. It's born out of practice and for lack of a better term, labor. How I do that, how I avoid the idea, is through these restrictions in the practice, in these limitations that I set up. For example, I don't allow myself to stand back from the painting while I'm working on it. I pull this table up about three feet away from the wall and then I put out the paint and start at the top and move to the bottom, always the same way. What I do is limit my art from autobiographical expression, emotion, or, for lack of a better word, self. And so in doing this, what is left is practice—put paint on surface, take paint off, put paint on—it's very primitive. For me, why these are not abstract is because they are very much of this reality—the studio. They are born out of this reality of practice and process and addition and subtraction. And so what they look like to me, if and when they appear, are that which they are—practice.

So when I was here last time you also mentioned that when you're done with the works you send off the canvases to the fabricator and then often times you don't actually see the stretched canvas until it's in the gallery. I was wondering if you could talk a bit more about your relationship to the work after it leaves your studio?

Almost 99% of the time I don't see the paintings until they arrive in the gallery. And this is the final restriction for me because if I stretch them myself I have control somehow. I have what I think of as "the finish." When you are stretching a painting, you are really cropping an image. By divorcing myself of this very conclusive act, I essentially pull the rug out from under myself. I essentially take away this control. And I create the possibility of being disturbed when I finally meet this painting in its stretched form.

Let's talk about your prints that you did at Paulson Bott Press. When were you there?

Maybe about three months ago. I've been there at two different short residencies and I'm actually going back in a few weeks to finish this group. I went in thinking we'd make one or two editions and we ended up making several. What's amazing about Renee and Pam is that they came out a few times to the studio—they tried to get a sense of the way I work—and basically we set up the same system at the press, an environment where everything is moving and there is a constant state of flux and possibilities. That was the atmosphere we created at Paulson.

So was the process that you went through—did it still entail an addition and subtraction like your paintings?

I'm probably abusing this term and misleading you because when I say "subtractive," for me it's actually very additive. As soon as you start to take away an area of paint you lose the paint but you gain many other things—you gain volume, you gain light source, you gain depth, you gain all these other kinds, and subtle modes of information. So you can erase an entire painting—*quote-unquote* "erase"—but what you have is content. If I was Zen, I would say something like this is the content of absence. But I'm not Zen so I can't say this. But this is essentially what it is. How they are similar is that everything I do in the creative process I find two points—you can call it between A and B. To establish this is a foundation. It's like two pillars that hold up a space or a support that holds a painting. When I have these two points then my job is just to move from one to the other, back and forth. And if you do this fast enough and for long enough with rigor and intention, then every now and then you have combustion. Viscosity makes sparks makes heat makes energy. And this is what I'm trying to hold in the work. The heat or whatever you want to call it—the energy that arrives because of this friction. So it's the same process—different tools, different environment, same process.

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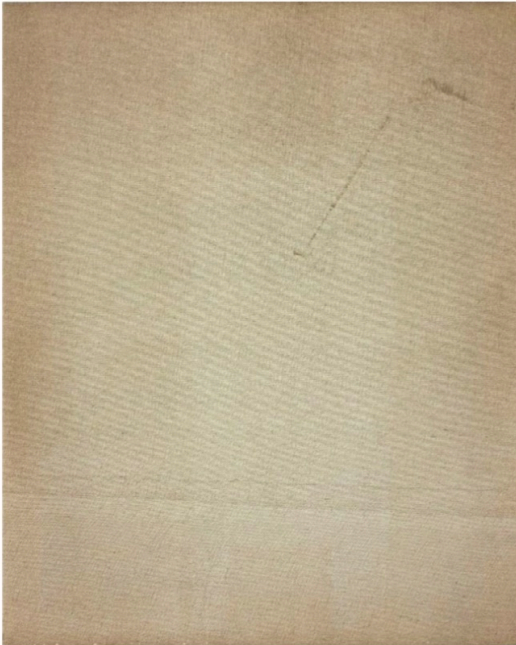
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Untitled (Khonsu), 2013. Edition of 35. Color flatbite, softground and aquatint etching with sanding. 26 X 21 inches. Courtesy of Paulson Bott Press.



Untitled (Montaleu), 2013. Edition of 35. Color flatbite, and aquatint etching with sanding. 26 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Paulson Bott Press.



Untitled (Net), 2013. Edition of 35. Color softground etching. 26 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Paulson Bott Press.



Untitled (Ahnur), 2013. Edition of 35. Color flatbite etching with sanding. 26 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Paulson Bott Press.