

A Translucence Program

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Blake Rayne's work emerged in the mid-1990s, a moment of historical acceleration in which intensified consumerism and ever-expanding strategies of control and surveillance transformed our experience of everyday life. High capitalism modified in turn the conditions of cultural production through the implementation of an economy based on information and flexible, self-managerial forms of labor. In an attempt to confront these new social models of self-organization, Rayne and other artists working on the Lower East Side of Manhattan began focusing on a set of concerns related to painting, specifically, on its existence within a network of forces both internal and external to its material contours.

It was during this same time period that painting, as a consequence of its economic and symbolic boom, began to be considered an unproblematic medium, released from any pressure for theoretical justification. According to Isabelle Graw, if in previous decades artists deemed it necessary to call painting's belief system into question through either intrinsic or extrinsic means, today, painting has become naturalized; what's more, it has been mythically rehabilitated as a medium.¹ The naturalization of contemporary painting can be understood as a counterpart to the modernist project of transparent structures that is present in both institutional critique and relational aesthetics. In the first case, meaning and materiality are conceived as unproblematic; in the second, institutions and social relations are rendered transparent through self-reflection and exposure. Historically, this logic of clarity and its inherent effects within art practices replicates the structures of permanent surveillance set in motion by so-called societies of control.²

One could pit Blake Rayne's insistence on zones of resistance against this promise of transparency. For more than a decade, Rayne's practice has focused on the underside of artistic communication: noise, distortion, loss and disorder. By basing himself in all those facets of experience, he has implemented a series of strategies and tactics of obfuscation that could be referred to as a "translucence program." The aim of Rayne's program is not so much to privilege or fetishize any form of darkness—translucence is the capacity of a substance to transmit and diffuse light so that objects beyond it cannot be seen clearly—but rather to destabilize the aim of total clarity. Rayne's program of translucence goes beyond the realm of the visual, encompassing forms of resistance that operate at different levels. Might it be a paradox then that in Rayne's work resistance to structures of financialization and societies of control takes the form of painting? If the fundamental shift initiated by the avant-garde was the subsumption of art under the logic of post-disciplinary, conceptual practices that opened up the possibility of social techniques of intervention, painting, perhaps, was ill-suited for the task. However, since the historical avant-gardes, painting has undergone a series of massive transformations that made its borders permeable to other media and discourses, a modality Peter Osborne describes as "postconceptual painting."³

Postconceptual painting is defined as art because of its critical relation to the historical transformations of the *concept* of painting, rather than because of its continuation of painterly practice defined by craft and medium. Following this lineage, Rayne's practice assimilates the consciousness of the crisis of painting into its multiple constitutive procedures, which, in turn, derive their logic from their critical engagement with the concept of painting itself. Enacting a semiotic understanding of media through the consideration of *painter* and *painting* as signs and of the *medium* of painting as site—that is, as "fiction"—Rayne's work has evolved as a series of episodic exhibitions that evoke the organization of serial literature, in which a single work is published in sequential installments. Puns and word plays are at the core of his practice, obliterating language and information and rendering them illegible. His is a generative discipline consisting in an expanding catalogue of processes based on the creation of "scripts"

or “scenographic arrangements.” Exhibitions are organized not as networks but as orchestrated constellations in which context, space and sign come into contact with one another in an oblique manner. Rayne’s constellational painting becomes a montage of heterogeneous moments, zones and densities, in which the concept of painting is submitted to a perpetual revision. As such, his idea of a translucence program of painting is able to incorporate, through the openness of its syntax, a critical relationship with the extra-artistic real. This way, painting becomes a form of spatial thought that intervenes in the public sphere without excluding opacity, inertia, friction or physicality.

If the nature of Rayne’s practice is to resist the possibilities of a holistic apprehension, how would it be possible to present an overview of his work without submitting it to the logic against which it struggles? How could one conceive a survey without surveillance? How would it be possible to present his translucence program within the transparent machine of the museum? With those questions in mind, in 2015 I started working with Rayne on this exhibition for the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. As the first survey of his practice, it would span more than a decade, focusing on his career from 2003 to the present. Comprised of thirty works that showcase the breadth of the various media he employs, including painting, sculpture, printmaking and installation, *Cabin of the Accused* aimed neither to reconstruct nor to present a chronological, thematic, or formal selection, but, rather, to create a density machine that rearticulates elements from previous exhibitions, organizational attitudes and pictorial operations.

The exhibition title itself, *Cabin of the Accused*, combines two words associated with opposite implications, describing a paradoxical architecture that sets into relation recreation and detention. Rayne is fascinated with bureaucracy and its endless assemblages of power in which, as Deleuze and Guattari wrote, “the division of oppressors and oppressed, repressors and repressed flow out of each stage of the machine.”⁴ In order to counter the bureaucratic structure of control of the survey, Rayne produced a project with students at the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Houston. The project aimed to dismantle the conventions of the installation shot by substituting the subject position of the photographer and its aim of encapsulating the exhibition with twenty-nine drifting, teenage eyes. The outcomes of the project were two collectively-produced assemblages, intended for this publication and the galleries respectively: a multitude of pictures that traced the non-scripted performance of the students within the galleries, and a formless black blob produced by melting the students’ disposable cameras.

In its resistance to the demand of clarity by museological conventions, the translucence program enacted by Rayne in *Cabin of the Accused* operates within the realm of an expanded concept of painting. The exhibition rearticulates specific elements, organizational attitudes, and pictorial procedures of Rayne’s work that are central to questioning and testing contemporary beliefs regarding painting, and performing the ongoing act of revision that is consistent with his practice. This act of revision creates a catalogue of processes and operations, and through this constantly evolving catalogue, Rayne produces a discursive and material strategy that creates a plastic interplay between art and the social.

¹ See Isabelle Graw, "The Value of Painting: Notes on Unspecificity, Indexicality, and Highly Valuable Quasi-Persons," in *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas*, eds. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Frankfurt am Main: Sternberg Press, 2012), 45.

² See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations, 1972–1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

³ Peter Osborne, "Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives," *October* 62 (Fall 1992): 110. The category of the postconceptual, Osborne writes, "denotes an art premised on the complex historical experience and critical legacy of conceptual art, broadly construed in such a way as to register the fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork carried by that legacy." In Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today," *Radical Philosophy* 184 (March/April 2014): 25.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 56.