

matthew OFFENBACHER

CAPTAIN OF A HUCKLEBERRY PARTY

September 27 - November 10, 2007

Opening reception: September 27, 2007, 6-8PM

Artist's talk: Noon, September 29, 2007



MATTHEW OFFENBACHER

EDUCATION

1995 Bachelor of Arts, Tufts University, Medford, MA

SELECTED SOLO AND GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 Captain of a Huckleberry Party, Howard House, Seattle, WA
Howard House, SCOPE Art Fair, New York, NY
- 2006 God, sex, the great outdoors, Howard House, Seattle, WA
Skid Row, Howard House, Aqua Art Miami, Miami, FL
- 2005 Beaver Painting, Quint Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
Incognito, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica, CA
Sculpture on the Floor, Wall & Ceiling, Quint Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
- 2004 New Paintings, Quint Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA
Singing My Song, ACME., Los Angeles, CA

COLLECTIONS

Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego



Matthew Offenbacher

Recognizing the diligence with which death approaches, and trying to recognize also the desirability of her arrival, and to take advantage of such recognition
oil and acrylic on canvas

52.5" x 32"

2007

There is something about the middle that bothers me. The concept of the middle path suggests a pandering to some homogenized mass of mediocrity. It creates a world in which romantic comedies always do better than grainy black and white art-house films; we can all supposedly identify with Julia Roberts trying to find love, but only a handful of bespectacled lefty intellectuals can be bothered to struggle through subtitles filled with existentialist angst. To me the middle has represented that which is boring, mediocre, un-passionate and, quite frankly, dangerous. It is politician-speak for passivity and evasion. It is the DaVinci Code and the Cheesecake Factory. It is call-in-shows on the radio and chardonnay with peach flavor. It is everything dumbed down and passively offensive. Enter Matthew Offenbacher, turning all my preconceived notions on their head with a body of work that is a celebration of the place where extremes meet. The middle, to Offenbacher, is where complexity happens, where subtlety reigns, where every step is taken with deliberation and intention. It is so easy to fall towards the left or the right, the high or the low, the religious or the secular. It is much harder to embrace complexity and nuance. For Offenbacher, the middle is far from passionless or mediocre, and I will do my very best to put my prejudices aside and follow him down that precarious path.

I think the ineffable is like a natural resource which is harvested, processed, and sold by artists and the institutions that support them. The myth and romance of painting, with its promise of entry into a transcendent realm, has a lot in common with that of the West.

Matthew Offenbacher

One of America's first experiences with images used as propaganda was during the Western expansion. As seductive images of pristine and untamed territories were finding their way East, the land itself was becoming increasingly industrialized, crisscrossed with mining towns, railroad tracks and factories. In these paintings and photographs, the terrible beauty of expansion, the attraction and the horror of the Western landscape, was carefully manipulated to emphasize the thrilling appeal of the sublime. The promise of a new beginning, of a landscape that could somehow save us, was being broken just as it was being expressed. Offenbacher masterfully relates this to the widely-held belief that painting can express the ineffable. The sublime experience of awe and elevation we feel when we're close to something of great power does not guarantee transcendence. On the contrary, Offenbacher argues, it is often the sign of its opposite: the expiration of that guarantee. The enormous optimism and promise of Manifest Destiny was too great to hold its own weight. The truth about the West, or about painting, is only found where the line between the wild and the tame, the absolute belief in the transcendent power of painting and the absolute skepticism of the same, intersect.

This theme can be seen in *Knowing the Work is imperfect but submitting oneself to it, with a great sadness*. Offenbacher employs an almost pointillist technique in the background, a sublime space that emanates outward, hinting at the vastness

of painting's potential for transcendence. The coyote, however, brings us back to earth. The creature is firmly planted on the ground, the materiality of its coat palpable and the mass of its body heavy as it lies in the middle of the painting. The dead bird in the foreground, freshly killed and about to be devoured, is the fertile middle ground. This is where Offenbacher wants us to pause; this is where worlds collide; this is where belief and skepticism push against each other.

Offenbacher's paintings are like distilled moments in time drawn out, sped up, and folded back onto themselves. Historical references blitz by, loaded symbols settle into the thick paint, art history is woven into the very fabric of the canvas. There is a tremendous visual richness in his paintings, an iconoclastic joy in his picking and choosing of paint techniques and handling; but he is never irreverent. He is not out to destroy or deny the past, but he also does not let the weight of history burden him. The time-consuming nature of his process is embraced rather than lamented, and perhaps this is the same kind of quiet rebellion that he so admires in Henry David Thoreau, whose ghost haunts this exhibition at Howard House. To willingly engage in slow work is to place oneself on the outskirts of a society that supremely values productiveness and capital. It is a gesture of resistance to an industrialized world obsessed with efficiency. Offenbacher stubbornly refuses a fast and simple reading of his work, and his transformation of the gallery space is part of this strategy. Domestic time moves at a slower pace than that of the art institution. By placing his work on burlap-covered walls, the white cube of the modernist gallery is interrupted. This is similar to the way that time and art-historical references continually interrupt and expand our viewing of his paintings.

I have not yet talked much about the animals; they will be the first thing you notice, so I thought they could wait, but they are starting to screech, howl and scratch for our attention. Beavers, weasels, turkeys, moles, snakes, otters, and coyotes—it should come as no surprise they are North America natives—all loaded symbols that Offenbacher uses as stand-ins for painters and painting itself. They function as props: re-enacting themes, attitudes and theories from the history of painting and aesthetics. They are both pioneers expanding westward and the victims of that expansion. There is tremendous conceptual and visual complexity in Offenbacher's use of animals. What could possibly be a more apt symbol for the act of painting than the mole digging through the debris of old cut up paintings, painstakingly emptying a space for itself out of the history of discarded art? We watch the weasels tear apart the carcass of a large horse, drawn to the drama and savagery the way we are drawn to accidents on the highway. We are pulled in, and the more we look the more we start to mimic the animals—tearing apart, analyzing, and digging through the layers of meaning. It is as though the animals seduce us into analyzing the very act of seduction.

The animal and the civilized part of our beings are fighting for dominance, the visual and the verbal are battling it out. Offenbacher's titles are intricate and

poetic, and to me they function as subtle interruptions. It is as though Offenbacher is telling us: yes, I know that you will look at these animals and get all kinds of associations, and I know the paint is luscious, but I will not allow you to get comfortable there. Your other faculties need to participate, no part of you can be lazy—and I will push and pull you between your eyes and your brain, pull you apart like weasels pull apart a horse carcass.

The title of Offenbacher's exhibition, *Captain of a Huckleberry Party* is taken from a eulogy written by Ralph Waldo Emerson after the death of Henry Thoreau. The essay—mostly laudatory—contains this phrase: "Wanting this [ambition], instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party". Emerson may have intended this as a critique of Thoreau's lack of ambition, but Offenbacher enthusiastically embraces the insult and proudly joins Thoreau at the huckleberry party. Just as Thoreau chose a middle path between the wilderness and civilization, between anarchy and government, so Offenbacher chooses to tread the path which sits between "painting as religion" and "painting as base materialism". Offenbacher's middle is more fertile and complex than either of the extremes surrounding it. He engages in a tender yet savage critique of dogma and ideology, showing us the value of a place where being comfortable means that you are probably wrong.

Sara Callahan



Matthew Offenbacher
Captain of a huckleberry party
oil on canvas
2007
33.5" x 33.5"



Matthew Offenbacher
An index to the history of lust
oil and watercolor canvas
19" x 18"
2007



Matthew Offenbacher
Some Rothko problems
oil and acrylic on canvas
51" x 63"
2006

BILLY HOWARD INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW OFFENBACHER

Billy Howard: One of the first pictures I saw of yours was from your beaver series, and what intrigued me initially was the striking paint handling and the interesting color harmonies which helped create a sense of wood, sticks and fur. I wonder if you could talk a bit about how you choose your techniques to fit a particular subject?

Matthew Offenbacher: I just love playing with paint. I'm always trying out new techniques. Also, I am really literal minded. Before the beaver paintings I was making paintings that looked like animal pelts or slices of big tree trunks. For the pelts I used a spackled kind of furry method and for the bark around the trees I was using thick paint put on with a palette knife, trying to make it look more bark-like. So in that sense the different techniques came out of trying to approximate the materiality of what I was painting.

I am really interested in the history of painting and these paintings are talking about different moments in history. *Knowing the work is imperfect but submitting oneself to it, with a great sadness*, looks towards pointillism and some of the later variations on it in French painting at the end of the 19th century. Some Rothko problems refer to Abstract Expressionism in New York in the 1950s. Another painting in the show, *The freak in the state of total tokenism*, refers to futurism and Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The technique I chose in each one is very much related to what philosophies of painting I wanted to bring to mind. I think the history of painting is really available to painters now, in a way that it wasn't before. I think painters can use art history in a way that is not necessarily ironic or critical, but that recognizes it as the stuff we have to work with, and it is good stuff, you know, rich and beautiful.

BH: One of the things that is interesting to me in *Knowing the work...* and also in *Some Rothko problems* is the sense that something is sublimated, and that we have to unpack the painting in some way in order to see it.

MO: I am so glad to hear you use the word 'sublimated'! The idea of the sublime is one of my main interests. It's that persistent belief—or disbelief—that looking at paintings can take you outside of yourself and put you in touch with something greater. Mark Rothko is a great example of a painter on the far end of that spectrum, the belief end. Frank Stella, or maybe a 1970s photorealist painter like Robert Bechtle, is examples of the skeptical end. But the painters I most admire choose a middle path, a middle space between this desire for transcendence and desire to keep things down to earth. Alice Neel, for instance. In *Knowing the work...* this plays out in the relationship between the ground and the figure. The background is this endless grid, expanding outward, suggesting infinity and all the transcendent ideas that come with that. But the coyote is painted in a way that is bounded and solid, grounded. In between, in the lower right where the dead bird has fallen—or in the case of *Some Rothko problems* where the dead horse is floating—is the place that I am most interested in.

BH: The title of the show *Captain of a huckleberry party* ties in with that line of thinking. Could you tell us a bit about where that came from?

MO: I stole that from something Ralph Waldo Emerson said about Henry Thoreau, from a eulogy he wrote after Thoreau died. The essay is mostly celebratory but there is one paragraph where Emerson is pretty harsh. He basically complains that Thoreau, with all his talents and intelligence, could have done anything. He could have been the general of a great army, or a great politician, or a captain of industry. But instead he chooses to be the captain of a huckleberry party. Thoreau walked this middle path, between a hugely idealistic vision of a better world and quiet observation of the actual, flawed world around him. He walked it with extraordinary fierceness. Emerson's criticism misses the point, I think. It is exactly Thoreau's modesty—retreating to his cabin by the pond, his civil disobedience, and his essays—that makes him so important. What Emerson saw as a lack of ambition was actually a different kind of ambition, a way of making things happen that obviously had an incredible impact on the world in the end.



Matthew Offenbacher
*Knowing the work is imperfect but submitting oneself to it,
with a great sadness*
oil on canvas
2006
29.5" x 40"

BH: If you weren't a painter what would you be?

MO: When I started college I thought I was going into social work. I guess that explains my obsession with whether I am doing any good in the world! I do think painting is an extremely privileged thing to pursue. Thoreau's way of working is the ideal I aim for, but, like most artists, I have these long stretches of total self-absorption. At my best moments, though, I hope to be someone who turns their attention to observing themselves and their surroundings, someone who looks at how things work and how things work together, and then can share some of that insight. This is of course very different from social work. It asserts a much more subtle pressure on the world.

BH: Could you tell us a bit about your use of animals in your work, the way the animal functions as a stand-in?

MO: This goes back to the animal pelt paintings I was telling you about earlier. Those actually came about because I was interested in economics. I was looking at

the pelts in terms of the fur trade, and I was trying to draw an analogy from that to the art trade. I had this idea that transcendence in painting was like a natural resource—harvested, processed, consumed by artists and the people and institutions that support them. One thing I was trying to bring out was that the resource—the animal, the transcendent aspirations of painting—has to be killed before it can circulate. After painting animal pelts for a while, I got more and more interested in the animals themselves and their relationship to humans. I love all the ways animals are used in folktales and myths, the universality of it, the way we so easily identify with animals in stories. The stories I tell are pretty straightforward. Like in the painting with the blind mole, *Recognizing the diligence with which death approaches, and trying to recognize also the desirability of her arrival, and to take advantage of such recognition*, this poor mole digging through all this stuff, literally digging through small pieces of other paintings, trying to clear a little space for itself. Or in *Exhibition*, where three turkeys are competing, seeing who can put on the most magnificent display.



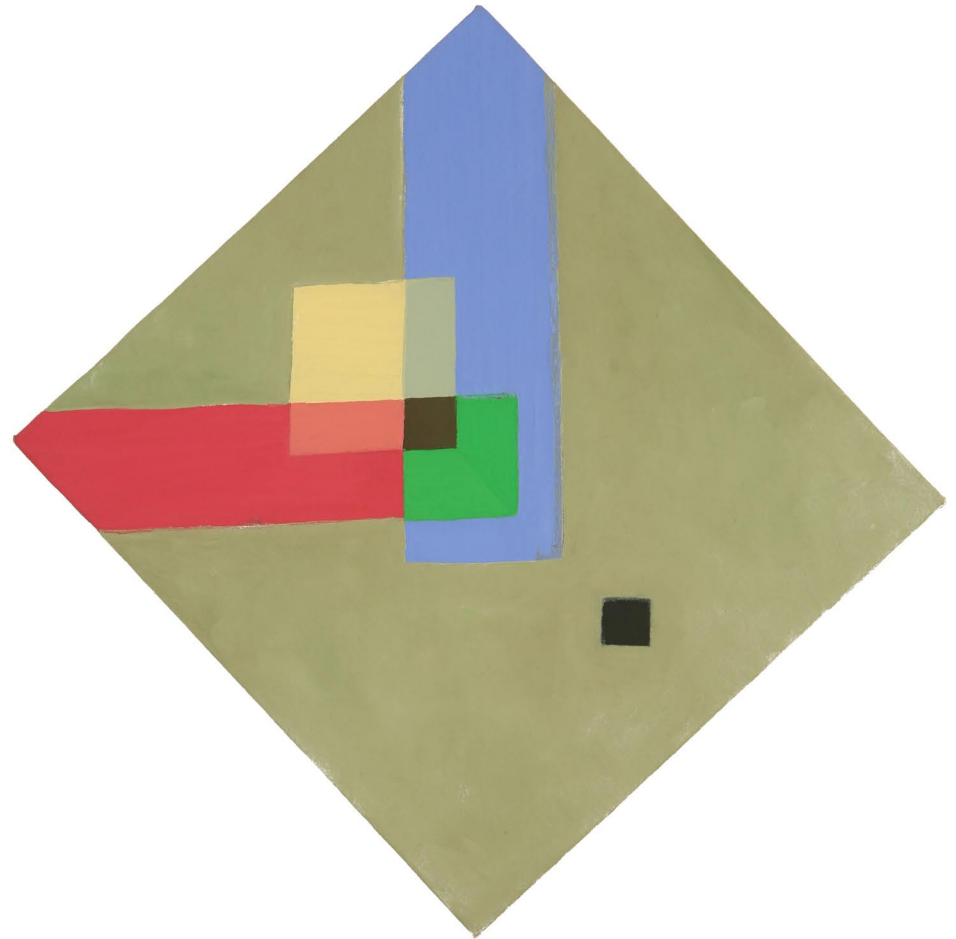
Matthew Offenbacher
Exhibition
oil and acrylic on canvas
43" x 63"
2007

BH: It is a very interesting time to be making work that deals with the sublime. We hear stories of wolves walking through Bellevue, or mountain lions killing domestic animals in Issaquah, and there is this sense of nature pushing back. A book came out recently titled *The World Without Us* which explores what the world would be like if humans suddenly disappeared. For example the NY subway would be filled with water in a matter of hours because currently millions of gallons of water is being pumped out of the tunnels daily. The sense of security that we have, our notion that we can control nature is very prevalent, but then natural disasters happen and we are confronted by our weakness in a very dramatic way.

MO: That's it! That's a great description! You are standing there safe on the civilized side of the line, contemplating the awesome force of nature ranging on the other side, and it's oddly fun. It's weirdly satisfying. Why is that? It's like when people on the East coast were getting these beautiful romantic ideas about the West from Albert Bierstadt paintings. And that line itself, that threshold, that extraordinarily narrow border that divides the pleasure of a Bierstadt painting from the tragedy and suffering the western expansion actually caused—or that divides the pleasure of reading *The World Without Us* from the actual horror of a natural disaster—that's what I am super interested in.

BH: How would you feel if you just worked in obscurity, if you never achieved fame as a painter?

MO: To have an audience is really important to me. I don't need to be an international art star, and in a sense I am most happy when other artists connect with my work. But it has always been important for me to get my work out there. Both for my own mental health and sanity—it makes me feel like I am doing something in the world—but there are also philosophical reasons. I don't believe in the idea of the suffering tormented genius, compelled to make work in solitude. Paintings are supposed to get out there and do things in the world. In fact, I believe that paintings really belong in homes where people have a long-term experience looking at them, both engaging with the work intensely, but also incidentally when walking by a painting on their way to the kitchen. I think it is in that way my paintings can do their best work.



Matthew Offenbacher
To age its art, to art its freedom
oil on canvas
21" x 20.5"
2006



Matthew Offenbacher
The freak in a state of total tokenism
oil on canvas
2007
49" x 29"



604 SECOND AVE, SEATTLE WA 98104 T: 206.256.6399 F: 206.256.6399 WWW.HOWARDHOUSE.NET INFO@HOWARDHOUSE.COM HOURS: TUESDAY-SATURDAY 10:30 - 5:00