

Nuances Matter

Barry Schwabsky

It's been more than a century since the "pasted-paper revolution" of Cubist collage. What was once new and disconcerting has become normal. In part that's because some of the consequential developments of this revolution seem so much more dramatic—for instance, the development of constructed sculpture, what Clement Greenberg described as "the new art of joining two-dimensional forms in three-dimensional space."

What Gelah Penn calls her works on paper are neither exactly collages nor sculptures, nor do they seem bent on revolutionizing art, but they would not exist without the example set by Braque and Picasso and their collages even as they evade the sculptural option of overt three-dimensionality, of which Penn has also availed herself in site-specific works that she refers to as installations—works that I will only mention glancingly, since I've not had the opportunity to see many in person. They're not collages because, well, look at the word: In French it means "gluing" or "pasting," and it implies a neutral surface, a support onto which other things are glued; but in Penn's work there's no glue—all the joining elements are part of the overt construction of the pieces, rather than invisibly binding the verso of one element to the recto of another. Typical of this are staples that sometimes seem to crawl across the works' surfaces like black or red ants. Likewise, there is no neutral support, since what supports another element is always a formal component in its own right. They're not sculptures (even relief sculptures) because their distinct dimensionality is nonetheless still so closely tied to the plane (their own and that of the wall)—they are sculptural only in the way that, say, an oil painting with heavy impasto (for instance by Larry Poons) might seem sculptural relative to a painting with a completely flat surface (perhaps by Ellsworth Kelly).

In any case, this quality of in-betweenness is an aspect of Penn's work that was already identified in 2010 by Patricia Rosoff in what remains the fullest discussion of the artist's oeuvre: "Defined less by what it is than by what it is not, her work treads a middle ground (neither here nor there) that keeps her

attentive to nuance by denying any kind of well-worn path.” I would only add that this approach puts an onus on the viewer equally: Our enjoyment of these works depends on our own attention to nuances.

Rosoff described Penn’s sculptural work as “three-dimensional drawing,” a clear echo of Julio Gonzalez’s description of his constructed metal sculpture: “drawing in space.” In either articulation, the evocation of drawing points to a predominance of line—and thus (in accordance with the mainstream of aesthetic thought since the Renaissance) to the intellectual dimension of art as a capacity for defining form and revealing the essential character of whatever it describes, as opposed to color, supposedly the emotional, decorative, and fundamentally irrational power that seduces. In fact, compared to her works on paper, Penn’s installations demonstrate the salience of both line *and* color (predominantly red, in the examples I’ve seen either in person or in photographs—the “hottest,” most emotionally demonstrative of hues, but also, when it is bright, the one that makes the silhouette of a form most perspicuous, that gives it the most “edge,” and therefore also the closest in function to drawing). The works on paper instead push deeper into the terrain of the “neither here nor there,” a realm of indefinability or indistinguishability that is characterized by colorlessness as well as blurring.

These works deal with tones that are not exactly colors but, so to speak, nuances of non-color, of what Piero Manzoni called the “achrome.” There are usually episodes of apparently distinct contrast, in which elements in black or dark gray flare up against a generally whitish field—the black can be acrylic paint or a torn bit of plastic garbage bag—but these moments of contrast turn out to be something other than they might seem.

But to explain how these contrasts turn into something other than that—how oppositions turn into differences or into what I’ve called, following Rosoff, *nuances*—I have to backtrack a bit, because it is important to point out here that, although (as I’ve said) the artist refers to these pieces generically as “works on paper,” it is more complicated than that, and for two reasons. One reason is that while the materials employed include paper, there are others that are used in a similar manner—notably Mylar and lenticular plastic; besides, even the paper is often not exactly paper but rather a form of papery plastic, for YUPO is (as its manufacturer’s website explains) “extruded from polypropylene pellets.” What’s notable

about this is that the materials are artificial, industrial products and that each one has a distinct relation to light—to translucency and opacity, to mattiness and reflectivity—and that in every case this relation is somewhat different from anything found in the standard range of artists’ papers.

The second reason why “works on paper” might be a misleading designation is perhaps even more important. Here, my quibble is not with the word “paper”—in the end I’d be willing to grant, albeit with all due hemming and hawing, that the various synthetic materials of which Penn avails herself could be classified as forms of or at least plausible substitutes for paper—but rather with the word “on.” The fact is that, even though prepositions are notoriously among the slipperiest and most indefinable words in the language, the word “on” barely touches how these works relate to the “papers” that are their predominant materials. Yes, sometimes something happens “on” the surface, but just as often something is going on *beneath* it (through a translucent material one sees, in a shadowy way, another), *through* it (thanks to a cut in the “paper” another material is able to make its appearance on both sides, that is, both veiled and exposed), *into* it (the staples that pierce the surface but only show on the front, though they may be functional in invisible ways by holding two or more layers together), or simply *with* it (the folding that creates a permanent line or crease, which thereby becomes *part* of the paper).

It’s all these prepositional nuances that give Penn’s works on paper—there, I’ve stopped trying to hem the phrase in with quotation marks, despite my reservations—their substance. And yet on the other hand, no: It’s really the substances of which the works are made, the sheer physical stuff, which all these nuances are merely there to make evident, that give the works their affect. Or rather, once again, no: It’s not either one or the other, or after all neither one nor the other, but both: the nuances that show the matter *and* the matter that shows the nuances.

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