



KELLEY WALKER

THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE

The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of the canvas as Melville's Ishmael took to the sea.

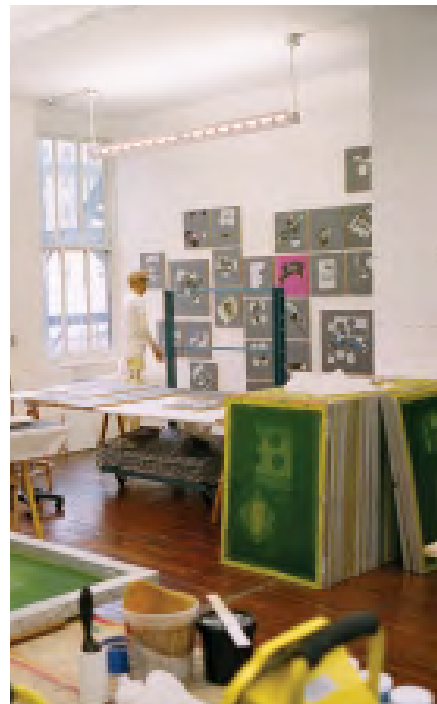
—Harold Rosenberg

Twentieth-century debates over the politics of representation, the autonomy of art, and art's capacity for critique still linger like disgruntled spirits on the hunt for living bodies to inhabit. At first, contemporary art seems like a suitable host: Appropriated/Pop imagery, collage, the monochrome, automatism, the aleatory, and so on are no less common now than they were when such ideas had an air of currency about them. But today the meanings of these strategies are less certain, less overt, as though much contemporary art beckons to these anachronisms only to misdirect them. How better to display indifference for such battles than to welcome them in, only to step gently to the side, behaving, in the terminology of language acquisition, like a *false friend*?

Rather than dismiss these evasions and layers of reference as cynical, it would serve us to remember that the key artistic subplot of the twentieth century was the development of an art that operates in spite of instrumentality rather than through it, a circumstance that has put both representation and the status of the image under constant scrutiny. Certainly, this is merited, for the peculiar instability of an image's meaning has led many on a fool's errand, leaving the history of art criticism and aesthetic theory littered with false ontologies and misplaced certainties, diverting



Page 150, above, and below: Kelley Walker's studio, New York. Photographs by Peter Sutherland



attention from the political implications of aesthetics to the phantasmagoric world of likenesses. Just consider how quickly the early 1980s obsession with a politics of representation led to the perversity that politics *is* representation, as though we had collectively transcended the world of objects and bodies, while images had become concrete. Subjected to these interpretive schemas, the critical or political dimensions of contemporary art were reduced to exercises in negation, with artists left to scavenge the world for false images to undermine, heaving metaphoric bricks at symbolic authorities while remaining complicit with the concrete institutional mechanisms that they depended on for support, and wielded for effect.

As works of art have increasingly embraced the polysemy of images—almost to the point where the question of what a particular image depicts has become irrelevant—critical writing continues to see art as primarily depictive, a compulsion that has made commonplace the absurd assertion that the absence of representational forms is in fact the representational act *par excellence*—as if aesthetics functioned exclusively by hermeneutic repression. Of course, this is only a symptom. The true culprit here seems to be the assumption that material and image are mutually exclusive, and rather than wasting any more time by tracking this phenomenon to its origins, one has to wonder if it is possible to simply ignore it and start anew. At the very least, when approaching a contemporary work, we would do well to avoid beginning with anachronistic questions pertaining to what an artwork might be “about” or “represent,” and instead start by trying to address what an artwork does—or more precisely, what we make it do, and what we do around it. In short, is it possible to simply let the art work?

One way to do this might be to imagine ourselves in a time when the divide between image and material was less expansive. We could then begin with flatness as an essential quality of painting, a mid-century argument that saw picture making and materiality cohere in the unity of “medium.” As Clement Greenberg noted, “flatness alone was unique and exclusive to that art,” a “limiting condition” that could “be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object.” Such a story begins (or ends) with the whiteness of the canvas, the point where a painting flirts with its own disappearance into the world of objects. Modifying the Greenbergian trajectory, Malevich’s *Suprematist Composition: White on White* could usher in this tradition, behind which follows Ryman’s caked surfaces, Rauschenberg’s “dust-breeding” blanks, and so on. In telling this story, one could mention Moholy-Nagy’s famous quote about Malevich: that the monochrome would be impossible without the open field of the cinema screen, a location for fleeting impressions and incidental effects. An ambitious contemporary painting would likely make this kind of lineage for itself,



KELLEY WALKER, *Untitled*, 2011
Four-color process silk screen with acrylic ink on canvas with *PIN-UP* (Spring/Summer 2011)
96 x 2 ½ in. (243.8 x 6.4 cm)
Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

as a descendant of those who first turned away from the picture window and the salon and toward flatness and the worker in the factory, then looked toward an objecthood, and finally posited the flatbed as a response to flatness, and with it embraced the slipperiness of images—a process that culminated in an art obsessed with the immateriality of images and the instability of meaning. We know the long version, there's no need to waste time lingering here. But knowing that all systems gravitate toward equilibrium, what might cause the pendulum to swing back?

“MARCEL, NO MORE PAINTING; GO GET A JOB”

Bricks offer us a tidy reminder of what all paintings require. Rather than airy and seamless, rather than denatured and ephemeral, we are instead presented with images made heavy, first as grounds, then as additive layers, and then as the tedious work of manually screening and rescreening, of cutting, pasting, and collaging. The paintings are as much depictions of labor as they are of bricks. From building material to optical image and back again, returning the digital to its analog origins as an accumulation of ink, back into the world of mortar, a layering of adhesive tars that stick to the image and fix it against time. So we have a Fordist version of the digital, then a handmade version of the industrial, until we find ourselves back with the artisanal—a wink, perhaps, to the collective anonymity of craft, rather than the anomic world of images.

But are these historical resonances a misdirection, a false path forward that the momentum of history seems to necessitate? Do we really need to think in terms of eternal returns, or is it possible to accept the work without a nod

View of “Kelley Walker,” Thomas Dane Gallery, London, 2010, Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



to its affiliations, shared attributes, and historical resonances? We have to entertain the thought that this ground of references may simply be flat, a picture we know, a history flimsy to the touch, just another empty apparition we need not contend with lest we allow ourselves to be distracted from the work in front of us by genealogies and taxonomies. It is a picture as much imported as any other appropriated image—slid across the Xerox machine, handed out to students, only to be Xeroxed over again until it is stained by an oddly brackish halo that only intensifies with each generation, or now, slid across the scanner and emailed as a PDF, to be printed out and subsequently marred by late-night studying: Does this history land with the stultifying thud of a textbook, or does it ring out with the enthusiastic chime of an e-mail successfully sent?

The PDF exemplifies an important turn in the course of our story. Unlike the Xerox, the PDF is no longer part of a chain of reproduction that takes on its own specific contours through a sequence of progressively degraded optical duplications. Rather, once disseminated, the PDF is a singular point from which all subsequent copies arise. It is a new original, and its progeny are stillborn: They are not passed from one set of hands to another but are simply reprinted anew for each reader. It's not so much that materiality has been lost but that we dispose of it freely, and so all things merge back into the earth as compost, only to return in new forms, as new things to be recycled. Painting itself has died several times, only to come back again in even more muscular forms.

Speaking of zombies, when staring up at the Marlboro Man one still feels the queasy thrill of an artistic gesture harnessing the power accrued by a pop image over time. The Marlboro Man slipped into the art world on the back of familiarity, and one can still feel echoes of the buzz that highjacking so large a system of resonances first offered. Now he has become more the icon for the Americanness of the appropriative act, exemplary of a certain robust and unapologetic Pop than for the cigarettes we no longer smoke. As for the gumption required to use such an image in the first place, certainly such an extreme wager could only have been made by a young artist toiling in obscurity (even better that this toiling was performed as just another deckhand in the flagship of Condé Nast). The stakes of his gamble came from how loaded the images were, and the possibility of refocusing them on some new purpose with their momentum intact. The payoff was clear, but the risk was that any semblance of an artistic voice would simply be subsumed within the image's powerful currents. It was an act of survival, perhaps; the young artist was already drowning, not in the image world, but in the “lottery of the sea” that is contemporary art. But for the artist appropriating now, there doesn't seem to be much of a gamble. Rather, appropriation has become something of a reliable convention, a way to get one's foot in the door, just raw enough to have presence, just commonplace enough that one needn't be worried about being misunderstood.

The original problem of appropriation must have been akin to the weight a painter feels in front of a blank canvas, the heft of the medium and its long and furrowed history bearing down. Whereas appropriation now only runs the risk of glib cheapness, jumping into the morass of painting can result in pretension and boredom, or worse, bland tastefulness. The canvas is no less a cheat than was appropriation, but this time in the opposite direction, for painting is, itself, quintessentially art: It already has a place reserved above the fray, its history deflecting any concern that a gesture upon its surface might not aspire to seriousness. Once the decision to make a painting is committed to, this history floods into the room. Whatever graces the canvas's surface appears as a foregone conclusion, good or bad. It is hard to imagine an appropriated image that makes such demands, that sets in motion such headiness, threatening to smother any gesture in the weight of history. The canvas is a force both too easy to exploit and too difficult to improve upon. What found image has this sort of momentum behind it? What could provide an equally potent threat of unearned self-importance?

From the brick-filled windows of urban renewal to the Castello di Rivoli's planked-up alcoves of missing frescoes, or the gaps left in the Isabella Stuart Gardner Museum by the theft of its Vermeers, Rembrandts, and Degas—another

act of appropriation, another homeless picture drifting in the flow of the black market.... As many like to comment, art is an unregulated market, a Wild West of handshake deals and precocious speculation subject to extreme bubbles and total implosions. Or instead, we could think more art historically, of Alberti's *finestra aperta* filled not by real bricks but by the industrial screen, itself based upon Alberti's veil—that intermediary scrim that was, for Alberti, painting's limiting condition, which reminds us that the flatness and the flatbedness of painting had already arrived by the fifteenth century. As soon as the painterly window had been imagined, something was needed to stand in its way, to buttress the flood of light, to make a picture possible. Perhaps we ought to think of painting as a ghetto waiting to be gentrified. Boarded up or bricked over for a new purpose, its past offering little more than atmosphere for new inhabitants, historical gaps and false starts smoothed out and papered over, like the pages of the periodical that wrap the canvas as they otherwise would a dead fish. Bricks printed as though dollar bills, canvases wrapped in hard currency. Yet nothing is really being obscured. Nothing is missing from behind these frames or lurking within them, except the displaced cover of the periodical itself, a footnote that threatens to unsettle the abrupt stop of the work's *Untitled* by pointing toward an outside source.¹ Negation would seem an easy route to making these works fit in an evolutionary narrative, but they present themselves as more of a palimpsest than as a covering up or crossing out. Perhaps they signify just another round of aesthetic renovation, the bricking over of the towering windows of the industrial warehouse of painting to make way for shiny new condos, to be cloaked in white and occupied by new tenants (and tenets) who care little for materialist painting's ideology of factories and smokestacks, or the anomic graffiti of a certain early '80s critique of pictures through the assertion of slick surface and disjointed narrative, but who are instead concerned with the ambiance both provide as a backdrop, as accoutrements of the contemporary life. And on the coffee table, no doubt, there would be a tastefully placed magazine for visitors to flip through.² "Would you care for *Domus* or *Interview*?" This is loft living.

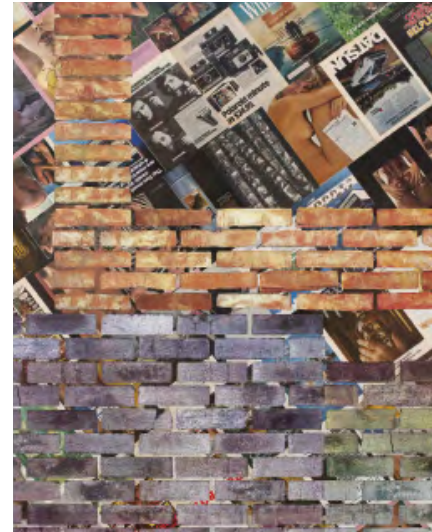
"By the way, did you know they used to make things here?"

... And what to do with the oddness of their shape, their rejection of more conventional painting ratios for the narrowness of beams and the dumbness of planks? Not windows but ten-by-eights? Is it McCracken and his UFOs, or a one-ton prop held up by drywall screws? Weiner's wall removal made portable? Lifted from a moment when being in situ was like moral armor, a defense against the vulgar opulence of painting, like shooting grainy bohemian porn in a SoHo loft that was itself once a warehouse, only to have it refurbished, swabbed clean, and turned into a design studio that churns out digital pictures by the score, digital pictures freed from the weight of printing presses and copy film, free from bricks and mortar, images that caress so many screens and were born from the slow crawl of the scanner's lens, or better, from algorithms alone. Pictures that slip around the world like financial transfers, just another sequence of numerals beamed from one place to another. Colorless, odorless, like rays of light. Frictionless horrors repeated, reprinted, rotated, and disseminated.

Our images are no longer tied to just one event but seem to resonate as eternal, and the arrangement of bodies presented here seems academic, a Caravaggian knot of tensed muscles, both energetic and formally balanced. Is the original photograph from Birmingham still affecting, or is it so distant from our lived experience that it is only available as an allegory? Maybe it is nothing more than numb shapes, as chillingly blank as the riot cop's Aviators. For its violence is less surprising than its tastefulness—the black, white, and red, the milky browns and yellowing creams, the faint sweet smell that still lingers even after the chocolate has gone chalky.³ That ghastly whiteness it is which imparts such an abhorrent mildness, even more loathsome than terrific, the discreet tastes of the bourgeoisie reproduced in the modernity of our lofts and lobbies, in the contemplative solitude of our museums and airports. From the whiteness of things, to the horrible thingness of whiteness. Warhol, perhaps, was the first to make this horror vacui

tangible. Blankness, alienation, boredom, disembodiment: White people love this shit.

This is still not the end of the story. We still have the press, we have the book, the magazine, the painting, and the poster as hard currency; the scanner itself hums with the factories that delivered it. All those hands: the trucks, the labor, the oil derricks that give us the plastics, the store clerks who shelve and reshelve the units in the networks of chain stores. Then it arrives here, its glass creaking under the weight of brick, its ephemeral output brought back down to earth by the weight of the screen print, the inking, the layering, the buildup, the stench of turpentine, the high-pressure washers, the emulsion. We still print out the PDF we fancy for its portability; we still must contend with the bodies we fantasize about abandoning in the age of the digital. And so, the painting crawls slowly around the room, caught between these worlds, hung and rehung with sweat, drills, plaster, and screws; it doesn't move with the ease we might expect of the digital, it's not just drag and drop.⁴ It is a canvas made heavy, not from the stories we tell about it, or the context from which it has been wrenched, but from the hands it has passed through. A picture as heavy as the bricks it contains are light.



KELLEY WALKER, *Untitled*, 2009
Four-color process silk screen on canvas with
Playboy (June 1974)
48 x 60 in. (121.9 x 152.4 cm)
Private collection, Italy.

¹ All of Walker's "brick paintings" make use of a periodical as a ground for the screen print, and all but the works that include *Interview* include the cover of the magazine on the painting's verso. (The paintings with *Interview* include the cover on the front surface of the painting.)

² Although Walker makes use of many different magazines, most have an urban, liberal, upper-middle-class audience (or, in the case of *Playboy*, once did).

³ Walker's various *Black Star Press* canvases feature a photograph of a white riot police officer and dog attacking a young black man. The image is of the 1963 Birmingham riots, which also formed the subject of Andy Warhol's "Race Riot" paintings. In Walker's work, layers of white, milk, and dark chocolate are screen-printed over the image. The artist begins by scanning drips and smears of chocolate on his scanner, turning those scans into silk screens, and then using actual chocolate to print the enlarged chocolate splatters onto the paintings: In short, they are paintings of chocolate in chocolate. Over the course of the series, the orientation and colors of the photographs and the configuration of the chocolate drips change.

⁴ Many (but not all) of Walker's "brick paintings" have no natural orientation and thus can be hung in any direction. For the 2011 exhibition "Kelley Walker: *Untitled*, 2011" at Redling Fine Art, Los Angeles, the title work was moved periodically throughout the gallery space.