

non zero sum

Mariah Dekkenga

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Situations 127 Henry St. NYC, NY 10002

A Poem by Zoe Brezsny

Heart Megopolis

Surrounded by trends
I try to create magic on my computer
the checkered Alice and Wonderland playing board

the printed cherry

wearing it while sitting in institutions Tuesday 10-6pm
on the periphery of power

A view of empire,
penthouse sculptures and all this dirty water

One toe in, they'll let you dip

feel the coolness and the smoothness for a moment

A child puts a seashell to my ear I'm I'm disconnected
from my life,

The sea

they repeat over and over listen *listen*
you can hear the water

Craig is watching a live birth on Youtube during a
techno set

Dylan is telling me about Pangea theory

a collected longing and nostalgia

for being geographically connected

the greatest gift you can give someone is the
purity of your attention

Imagine what it would look like, the world transformed

I look up for the first time in months

I forgot about the sky I'm surprised every time

I look in

for the first time in months I forgot I'm alive

I'm surprised every time

Mariah Dekkenga interviewed by Ben Estes

Ben: It feels like this new group of paintings has a decidedly less acidic palette than the paintings I can remember from your previous show, something that feels almost autumnal: afternoon yellows and oranges alongside maroons and watery teals. I also know that you recorded close measurements of Situations Gallery's walls and took them back with you to your studio in Vermont before you began making any of these paintings. So, what's cooking?

Mariah: My sense of scale has changed since we got the church in Vermont and I wanted to try making some larger paintings. I also wanted to give myself more space. Dimensions and scale have always been important to me. I like thinking about how everything is going to fit together inside the picture plane. The impulse probably has something to do with working in advertising - having a limited amount of space and trying to economize the contents.

My interest in color is far less strategic. Working in photoshop allows me to change the color relationships in the entire composition all at once, and I'm usually trying to find some kind of harmonious combination that feels right at the time. I'm sure my physical environment is an influence, but I'm not interested in making that the subject of the painting in a literal way.

B: I've always felt that literalness is such a slippery thing in your work, the literal and the figurative flip back and forth constantly. Even when you were painting photorealistic landscapes way back in the school days, the paintings never actually functioned as landscape paintings, there was always something going on behind the scenes keeping them from being what they appeared to be on the surface. Would it be fair to say that you approach the act of painting, or the physical paintings themselves as metaphors, or symbols? Would painting a "literal image" even be of any interest to you?

M: I think of "literal" as having to do with language and meaning. Images and words function similarly in this regard. A word means something, an image depicts something, however vague or indiscernible. To "take something literally" is to put strict limitations on what it represents. I guess any image can be literal, if you perceive it in a literal way. I'm less interested in the signification process than how perception works; why a certain arrangement of color and shape is referential in one situation and not in another, when and how a flat field of color becomes a space, things like that.

B: I think about the M.C. Escher drawing where you can see a fish swimming *under* the surface of the lake, there are leaves floating *on* the surface of the lake, and then the cloudy sky above and behind us

reflected *above* the lake. It's basically a depiction of how the entire universe works using a casual everyday image. The work I've seen you make over the last decade or so often feels like you set up similarly conflicting situations within your imagery, and then you wave your magic wand and matter becomes air, air solidifies, the strong solid forms that hold the elaborate compositions together turn soft and jiggly, and fields of pure transparent color step up from the background and organize integral intersections. It also feels like there might be a kind of interior space in these new paintings that feels very fresh. Can you maybe talk to us a little bit about your thoughts on illusion in your work, or illusory space? (Does the game you are making fit into this question too somehow?)

M: I'm not sure what the difference between Illusion and visual representation is. Illusion for me implies some kind of falsehood or trickery, since you're seeing something that isn't actually there. But I feel like that happens in every painting. What you perceive is always more than the materials, whether it's a visual representation of something or some kind of sensibility. Perhaps illusion differs in that it's a purely visual experience that isn't dependent on meaning. In that sense I'm interested in it as a phenomenon, but not as a tool.

I've always thought of my compositions as spaces of some kind. In the past, I was attracted to two-dimensional, digital kinds of spaces because I spent a lot of time on a computer. Lately, I've been thinking about my life on opposite sides of the world; feeling dislocated, flipping back and forth and feeling like two different people. Bending and flipping space is a good way to describe what that experience feels like. I'm more interested in finding an adequate description than trying to figure out what any of it means.

B: I guess what I'm trying to say, but not very well, is that you are not painting flowers. You are not painting studio still life paintings. You would never have any interest in painting a portrait of me, with me coming and sitting in your studio for hours at a time, to paint a portrait of me, literal in terms of both language and meaning. A subject, set up in your studio for the sole purpose for you to look at and depict on a canvas. But are you even making abstract paintings, either? I guess that's what I'm trying to get at.

Now, we both know that you DO in fact have a setup in your studio that you are looking at and trying to depict on your canvas. It actually IS what you do. And that is something that I find so interesting about your paintings. Ostensibly, they are non-representational "abstract" paintings, but they actually are depictions of an image from your computer screen, that you are in your studio looking at and painting onto a canvas.

They *are* almost still-life paintings in that regard - but I think your flip-flopping from location to location, your interest in material that is immaterial, the perception of space that bends and flips and vanishes and appears..... is also all right here in the work you're making. Both literally and metaphorically. Something that is so magical in your paintings is that those two terms somehow end up pointing to the exact same things. That when all of these things are combined, they end up making the "literal" metaphoric, and the "metaphoric" literal.

M: I think it's hard to discuss these things because the language we learned in school is problematic. I feel like I'm fighting the urge to render concrete thoughts and impulses that are very ambiguous to me, that are interesting specifically because I don't have clear answers.

In one sense I'm just using the computer as a drawing tool. I would never consider what I do on the computer to be a final product or a complete entity - the way a photo is in a photorealist painting, or a still life object. It's always in service and anticipation of what comes next. I am, however, interested in retaining the virtual quality of "imageness" throughout the process. For me that starts with the physical surface of the painting. By applying a (somewhat random) painted texture at the

outset, I'm making assertions about the nature of whatever I paint on top. I think of the presence of the image as being somehow separate and yet dependent upon that texture. Perhaps it needs that texture in order to be an "image". Maybe I'm just interested in the paradox of images - that they are physical things that transcend their materiality.

B: The surfaces of these paintings are incredible, and it's so interesting as it does almost set up the image on top of the surface as a virtual thing. As if it is being projected onto the canvas, made of light, or existing elsewhere. Two sounds harmonizing. For me, it seems like a very short leap to take where I could maybe start aligning your interest in creating paintings with these characteristics, these harmonizing qualities, with the fact that you live back and forth between two very different cultures. The busy city of Doha, Qatar and the little village of Randolph, Vermont. Do you see this making its way into the work in some way?

M: I started working with the underlying texture after grad school, before moving to New York. I wanted to work with color and move through simple compositions quickly so I picked a bunch of discarded paintings out of the dumpster at school and painted over them. Over time it evolved into what it is now. For a long time I was happy with the image being entirely separate from the underlying texture. It's only in the

last couple years that I've experimented with pulling the texture back into the image by rubbing out certain areas. That impulse might have something to do with reconciling the constant back and forth between Doha and Randolph, but it might also be a way of balancing what became an increasingly complicated image with the texture underneath; giving the texture something else to do. It could also be that I'm just attracted to extremes, which is probably why I ended up in Doha and Randolph to begin with.

B: I hear that. We've been close friends for a long time now, and we both know some extreme things about each other's past. For instance, you were raised in a log home that your father built in the middle of the woods. It was so remote that you hadn't really even seen other children until you started school, right? This is something I've been thinking about a lot recently in regards to things I'm making - how one carries their past with them, and how it fits into the things one makes.

Do you ever notice things from your past influencing elements of your work, or ways that you find yourself working?

M: My parents were back to the land types. My father and grandfather built the house that I grew up in, which was off the grid until right before we sold it when I was 8. It was a log house with a wood stove

and an outdoor water pump. There were no children nearby and spent a lot of time by myself. My father and mother were always making things. In addition to the house, much of the furniture and cabinetry was made by them. Growing up around craftspeople definitely influenced how I think about making objects and I've always been naturally fluent with tools and materials. Everything I grew up around was made with integrity, because ultimately it had to function. I definitely have an interest in craftsmanship and materials, and I'd like to think I bring that kind of integrity to my painting process also.