

An Interview with Michael Rey

Philip Martin: How would you describe your work?

Michael Rey: I would describe my work as drawing and sculptural wall works. The work comes first out of drawing. It is a very intuitive process for me, I usually try to conjure up a shape from a blank page in my sketchbook. Sometimes I'll draw different shapes on the same page to play one off another; I'll try to Frankenstein different parts of shapes on the same page. Sometimes I'll draw just one shape on a page and that's it. I make an effort to keep the process as spontaneous as possible, so I stick with first intuitions and try to avoid revision. I try not to get hung up on whether the shape looks like it is a reference to an object or something else. When I feel that I've accumulated a good number of promising shapes, I'll go back and pick the shapes I like best. From there I will refine the shapes by redrawing them on graph paper.

After that, it's a question of realizing these drawings as painted reliefs. Here too, I try to keep the process intuitive letting myself be guided by the tactility of the materials.

PM: In the past we have talked about Donald Judd and his essay, *Specific Objects* (1965). What do you think of his description of work that is "neither painting nor sculpture"? Does it relate to your work? Why or why not? Is this a relevant idea today?

MR: I still think the work has an affinity with this idea in Judd's essay, and in the past I've framed my work as an otherkin in respect to the categories of sculpture and painting. I am interested in the object-ness of painting just as much as in sculpture. However, I'm also interested in the limitations that define these categories. I just can't paint in a rectangle or square because I feel like I would have to commit to a specific way of thinking. That's why I define these painting-reliefs as wall works, I won't ascribe to a specific fidelity of thinking strictly as a painter or a sculptor. My work is a contradiction that is working within these two categories, which is generative for me. I feel like an anarchist who loves the law.

What I find most important in Judd's idea is that it goes back to the power of the artist to designate an object outside of traditional categories to make it their own. I'm also thinking of Robert Rauschenberg's combines or Bertrand Lavier's work. I love the idea that the artist defines the terms of his or her art object. I do think it is relevant today especially if artists continue to work in a sculpture or painting practice, because there will always be a discussion of terms and how they relate or don't relate. I think it is important for artists to have a fluidity of what defines an artwork and consider their own terms of the objects they create.

This is also where my interest in Judd's idea is reflected and correlates with my use of neologisms in the titles of my work. When I title a work, I try to push the limits of my own use of language by making my own words for the titles. I believe using these new words gives the object its own language. I have a title list that I keep to create new words and later I google these words to see if they exist in other languages. I am attempting to create words that are not tethered to a meaning outside of the work. I'm sure there is an AI program somewhere out there that will come up with every combination of letters in the alphabet to make every word, but for now this is how I push my own limits of language in creating my titles for the works.

PM: Another historical movement we have discussed is Surrealism. Is there a Surrealist impulse in your work? Is Surrealism relevant today?

MR: Yeah, surrealism is an interest in my work, but I would say its surrealism with a small "s". I wouldn't say that my work is a continuation of Surrealism or any other movement for that matter. I'm also not sure if there is a relevance of these movements nowadays. But I would say in regard to my art, I am more interested in the mechanisms of the unconscious and understanding the formation and drives of subjectivity. More specifically, my interest is in the psychoanalytic. This is a big part of my work. I think this is actually a major part of all object making in general. As an artist I'm both analyzing the studio process as well as anticipating how the viewer processes the work.

PM: How does that active analysis in the studio come out in the physical artwork?

MR: For me, the work comes from fluid or a flow state. When I start a piece, sometimes I get feeling of a color, a shape or something outside of the work. For example, with this new body of wall works I initially imagined the surfaces would resemble something like the early encaustic paintings of Brice Marden from the 70s, a concentrate of tactility. This inquiry led me to experiment with different encaustic formulas. After several weeks of trying different encaustic recipes, I was not satisfied with the surface of these new works. At certain point, I got so tired of applying and then scrapping off encaustic paint from panels that I just started applying oil with my hands. By then, it was clear that it disrupted this fantasy I had of making a Marden-like surface, but it allowed me to think of a way of painting that I would never had done prior. I was able to use this rupture in the process of the original imagined surface that lead to results I was more satisfied with in the end. Even though it wasn't an encaustic surface, in a weird way it was even closer to the imaginary tactile surface I wanted from the start.

PM: Why is tactility so important to the work?

MR: Tactility is important in my work because it has a mesmerizing quality and phenomenological allure that is demanding of the viewer's eye. The tactile requires sustained attention that is outside of the logic of language via the symbolic order. One of the reasons I was drawn to using plasticine in my earlier works was because it was the only material I found that could produce the fragility and impermanence of the surface quality I was going for. These newer works are painted solely with oil paint, and like the earlier works, I have applied the paint to the panel with my hands similarly to the way I applied the plasticine. I feel that the newer and older works come from the same place from my interest in tactility.