

PARKETT

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MICHAEL RAEDECKER, RADIATE, 2000, acrylic, wool, and thread on canvas, 70¼ x 50¾"

No Place Like Homeless

No doubt these paintings are unlivable. But there is a lot of there there, in the form of rather weird things or substances that obviously have found a supportive, fecund home. This is a contradiction, but it is more specifically a productive discrepancy that initiates what appears to be an almost natural offsetting of terms rather than a gratuitous gesture of altercation (e.g. a sign of painting as a “struggle”). The overwhelming sense of calm that emerges from this balancing act is the primary reason why the resulting bleakness is so satisfying, filling, and even funny. All of the paint and all of the other materials that have been distributed across or planted in the surface of these canvases look as if they have been able to take root and take up all available space due to some type of fermentation or fertilization process. The implied growth potential of this abundance is poignantly negotiated by a visual barrenness that has been very specifically distributed (rationed?) amongst the necessary components of image: line, shape, and color. The illusion is that these abandoned rural or suburban homes, rooms, and landscapes pictured in these paintings do not have what is necessary for our survival only because all of the “home improvement” stuff—paint, yarn, thread, veneer, wood stain, etc.—has moved in and taken over the place. And why not? After all, this is painting, not a house.

But, of course, painting is often a home, albeit one that is rarely comfortable. There is compelling evidence that Michael Raedecker believes this to a certain degree, especially since he also makes it clear that he has productively invested (like all interesting painters) in the alienating aspects of his chosen activity, most of which have to do with an inability to leave the material as it is. In other words, it has never been easy to keep paint going for very long as paint, to maintain “painting” as “just painting.” In 1962, even Clement Greenberg had to admit something like this, if somewhat begrudgingly: “as the fifties wore on, a good deal in Abstract Expressionist painting began fairly to cry out for a more coherent illusion of three-dimensional space, and to the extent that it did this it cried out for representation, since such coherence can be created only through the tangible representation of three-dimensional objects.”¹) Identifying de Kooning’s *Women* paintings

of 1952-1955 as a watershed moment, the critic went on to coin the phrase “homeless representation,” which he defined as “a plastic and descriptive painterliness that is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones.” With this definition on hand (and keeping Raedecker’s paintings in mind), it makes perfect sense that for Greenberg an artist like Richard Diebenkorn “found a home for de Kooning’s touch,” when he returned to representation via Matisse. For “homeless representation,” however, there was a need for some visible (and tangible) tension, a “dialectical” pressure that would transpose the ways and means of abstraction and representation. Enter the early work of Jasper Johns, who, for Greenberg, sang “the swan song of ‘homeless representation,’” in his bait-and-switch approach to painting.

Forty years later, this song is still being sung provocatively in painting, even if today it is much more about sampling, or even—particularly in Raedecker’s case—the sampler. Like music, painting has been completely rescued by sampling and its hands-on (even craft-like) approach—much of painting’s history is now available without the baggage of nostalgia or the antagonism of appropriation. Raedecker gets it, and not only because he used to be a DJ. His paintings remind us that the only home any image has anymore is the one we make for it using things like the movies we will never forget or the songs we will never stop loving. Titling some of his paintings after songs by the likes of, for example, Elvis Presley or Spandau Ballet, Raedecker gives clues that everything in his paintings is directly tapping into the kind of collective memories that never leave us since they are perpetually re-woven into our brains because we want them to be. This is the part of painting that is very much not alienating.

Speaking of weaving, Raedecker’s move from fashion to painting has been sufficiently written into his back-story, despite his assurances that his experiences in the former industry are not directly responsible for his use of some of its materials and techniques in the latter. In his early work embroidery was a practical and efficient way in which to make it clear that he considered painting to be most valid as a pastime (his early paintings were



MICHAEL RAEDECKER, *KISMET*, 1999, acrylic and thread on canvas, 80⁷/₈ x 98⁷/₁₆ ”

a sort of deconstruction of the paintings of Winston Churchill via photomechanical reproduction and thread that was used to “write” their context on their surfaces): “I wanted to use a technique which let me enjoy what I was doing, maybe listening to some music, and let my mind drift away.”²) Regardless of the explanation behind it (don’t forget, after all, that Jasper Johns claims he had a dream in which he made a painting of an American flag), at the very least Raedecker’s sewing technique literally grounds what comes across as his complete comfort with exploring and analyzing the relationship between materiality and “look” in his paintings. It could be said that all of the fibers in his work give him and us something to come home to, loose threads that actually anchor our shared experience of what should remain an impermeable painting.

It is just as likely that Raedecker’s use of embroidery gives him an effectual way to get started or get something in or on the painting quickly during any moment of its making. It surely also makes it easier for him to rip or unravel something out of the picture if it isn’t working.³) The flexibility of Raedecker’s needlework is what gives many of the images in his paintings the appearance of something that could easily be changed, particularly in works from a few years ago like REVERB (1998). In this painting (made with very little paint) “lines” of white thread dart like streaks of light or scratches across the surface of a schematic image of a living room that seems to have a floor made of water (or is the room slightly flooded?) that “reflects” the ceiling, walls, a window with a view of distant mountains, and—most boldly—an open curtain made with a dense stitching of yellow and brown embroidery thread that is the most physical thing in the work. (It is much more “present” in both material and color than the scattering of loose, frayed threads that hug the perimeter of the room like dust bunnies.) Since 1998, Raedecker’s paintings have become much denser, creating a slowness in both image and material that has guaranteed that the work is seen fundamentally as painting instead of drawing or craft.

Of course, craft in the “handicraft” sense of the term (rather than, for example, the “Dutch landscape painting” sense of the term) is a relatively new issue in painting, and I’d imagine that if I were to only have Raedecker’s paintings described to me that I might jump to some conclusion about their having a problematic relationship to the well-rehearsed ideological battles of art versus craft in gender or class terms. In his most recent paintings, Raedecker has successfully side-stepped this issue by conceptually opening up his use of fiber, not only by moving beyond a more “conventional” application of stitching and sewing, but also by enabling more of it to act like paint while remaining very much not paint. For example, in a painting like RADIATE (2000), the fibers on the floor of the depicted room are like tiny worms of paint. Other parts of this painting contain paint that has a lot more body than in other works: often the depleted paint in Raedecker’s paintings looks like the residue left behind after a flood; in this instance, it has impossibly been able to wet through the window of another empty-yet-very-full room. Maybe

a rather liquid avalanche has buried this house? A window in a similar painting, BLOCK (2001) has literally been boarded up with veneer. In its conceptual and physical melding of fiber and paint, Raedecker’s work has much in common with the mid-seventies paintings of Joe Zucker. Well-known for his “cottonball” paintings from the late sixties, in which each puff was dipped in a different color of paint and placed on the painting in even rows, Zucker went on to produce a series that he called the Reconstruction paintings which grandly depicted the history of cotton production in the United States in cotton and paint. Rather than simply coating cotton balls with paint, in this series Zucker employed something akin to Greenberg’s “descriptive and plastic painterliness”: the fibers became part of the paint, fusing art and craft inextricably together. Zucker’s statement at the time works nicely for Raedecker: “My selection of subject matter in relation to kinds of surfaces is important. Pictorial content becomes an iconography to discuss the topography of the painting.”⁴)

I would argue that it has been Raedecker’s increasing attention to the topography of his paintings as paintings that has allowed him to open up the iconography of this work in terms of its content as well as its orientation. Exploring a considerable reorientation first in major paintings like KISMET (1999) and UP (1999), and extending it in paintings like JOURNEYS TO GLORY (2001/2002) and EXPOSURE (2001/2002), Raedecker has demonstrated his willingness to move beyond the conventional spatial relationship between an image and the painting it inhabits, to make representation “homeless” in more ways than one. Now he has us flat on our backs looking up into the sky or who knows where, rather than standing upright gazing out of a window or across a field. Disoriented and more than a little dazed, we are definitely not in Kansas any more, and it’s very likely that we never were.

1) This quote from Clement Greenberg and all that follow are taken from his essay “After Abstract Expressionism” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 124-125. First published in *Art International*, October 25, 1962.

2) Louisa Buck, “UK artist Q&A: Michael Raedecker,” *The Art Newspaper*, no. 104 (June 2000), p. 67.

3) The beginning of Johns’s first FLAG painting was a disaster: starting with enamel paint on a bed sheet he made a mess so he switched to encaustic. Rauschenberg then asked if he could paint one of the stripes and used red encaustic where he should have used white, and several of its collage elements needed to be stitched on to hold them in place. In fact, the entire painting is rather desperately stapled to at least one edge of its plywood support because the sheet was barely large enough to cover it. Moreover, the painting is awkwardly dated 1954-55 not because it took that long to complete it but because it was damaged at a party and had to be repaired. My point here in direct relationship to Raedecker’s work is that interesting paintings are usually put through hell.

4) Joe Zucker, artist’s statement in Richard Marshall, *New Image Painting* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978), p.68.



MICHAEL RAEDECKER, UP, 1999, acrylic, oil, and thread on canvas, 67 x 98¼”