

I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at look like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description.

Gertrude Stein

What moves plants, people, stones, and animals listening to Orphic songs?¹ Is it meaning or material? The mechanics of enchantment, or madness, in the myth, are never made clear. Still, we implicitly know that the seduction of Orpheus' music came not by the lyrics or clear discourse but by sound. Sound alone should suffice, not exactly what the sound is saying. An oak is emotionally moved listening to Orpheus' song, and this song, like all instrumental music, is necessarily abstract.

In *Até Um Carvalho Enlouqueceu* [Even an Oak Went Mad], four abstract painters, Bruno Dunley, Marina Rheingantz, Lais Amaral and Richard Aldrich present works that attest to abstraction's capacity to trace connections between felt qualities and material evidence and lure us into states of attention according to each of their pictorial logics. Through markings that evade identifiable referents and point toward nothing we know specifically: to "construct apparitions," as Waltérlio Caldas would have it.

Maybe the stones hear something in the pure sound waves that reminds them of water brushing along their mineral volumes, the birds confuse music for their own calls, and people go along injecting their own meaning into materials that do not ask for it. These are ways of fitting matter and physical processes into form in a world made of substances and perceptions. The oak going mad through its enchantment with song goes to show that nothing out there is inert, all things are there for feeling.

Bruno Dunley's paintings, though strictly made from elementary contours, synthetic shapes and skewed geometric motifs, form environments buzzing with their own atmospheric conditions. His involvement with Joules&Joules—an artisanal paint manufacturer he co-founded—reflects a granular understanding of the material properties of pigments, binders, and primers, a knowledge that emerges from direct engagement with the processes of their fabrication. He is interested in art history seen through a history of color, leading to an archaeological grasp of its workings. The luminous simplicity of his compositions, their

¹ The Orphic myth tells of Orpheus, whose music could charm gods, nature, and the dead, and who descended into the underworld to reclaim his lost love, Eurydice.

invitations and repellings of the gaze set up a community of visual elements conforming distinct frames of mind. A complicity with matter and the appetites of paint itself allows the artist crystalline and mineral finishes, depths and trajectories that echo the forms of thoughts: materialities coming into contact with the understanding.

Abstraction, then, can stand in for mental states transposed into matter without us in the picture, or mental states entirely not our own that ask us to join in, to follow along through lines and planes, stains, blots and scratches. These are not only paintings that make us, as spectators, behave in a certain way, but which present their own behavior, built through pigments that bleed or congeal, sections that seduce and others that repel, problem areas and patches of quiet. These material facts latch onto senses and forms of feeling, producing a concrete though not entirely legible event in time and space.

Lais Amaral's surfaces bask in a certain taciturn, nocturnal aridity, as if nightfall over a desert let ravines, cracked soil, and desiccated plants breathe anxiously in the dark. These analogies address the thermal tenor of the artist's paintings, but her markings are anxious and scratchy enough to dodge natural parallels. Behind obsessively incised meshes of fine blue, gray, white, and red lines, the canvas becomes an open expanse, a basin for erosion and flow. Amaral has referenced ecological collapse as a framework through which to view her approach to abstraction, and we might feel this parallel emerge as we follow the course of her gestures and see different regions of her compositions mutate, melt away, crack, and shift, releasing earlier strata and dormant sediments.

With these transitive paintings, actions pass over onto objects. The painters' actions stage what happens in the frame, these inner workings then pass outward, into the world again. Figurative echoes emerge in patterns, formal allusions spring from shapes, partial images fuse with matter. Like Orpheus' song, what moves here is not a message but a behavior, something material that listens as much as it is listened to.

Looking at paintings by Marina Rheingantz, we realize how her brushwork goes from staccato to sustained, how some layers of color seem to penetrate the canvas as if sucked in by a sponge, how others rest on the surface like a recently healed scab. These are musical and metabolic associations, illustrating through writing how Rheingantz's work, in turn, expresses a fundamental affinity between the world of the senses and the physical processes giving it structure. Investigating morphological parallels between abstract markings and objects in an environment — where Rheingantz's *Mistral*, in its centrifugal burst of damasked gestures, calls to mind a floral arrangement, that longstanding lightning

rod for painterly energies — means finding an undercurrent of congruities between living systems and pictorial procedures.

Richard Aldrich's work attracts musical references like a magnet. In curt, impasto strokes, paint acquires a percussive quality, over chord beds of white space, defiantly appearing beneath — or caked on top of — surfaces stirred by hectic visual incidents. We feel that the disorienting simultaneity of gestures suggests an underlying order. In fact, the shorter brushstrokes might be rhythmic units while more elongated, stretched-out elements stand for bursts of melody. The paintings also draw in the outside world. Texts on Aldrich's work stress his interest in recorded and live music — not only the sounds themselves but album art, liner notes, the physical dimension orbiting our experiences of listening. This coupling of the auditory, the visual and the tactile mirrors the materiality of the works. Like an ear, which never closes from birth to death,² the paintings might hear all that the artist hears and associates with hearing, drawing in and mangling the outside like a vortex ending in a surface. If Walter Pater wrote that "all art aspires to the condition of music,"³ these paintings ask what might happen if music aspired to the condition of painting.

Back to Orpheus: to produce a sound that is like a heartbeat, or a copy of birdsong, might be one way toward eliciting an emotional response with wordless music. This is an analogical mode of sensemaking. In writing about abstract painting, it is somewhat vulgar to point out analogies between markings and identifiable referents — in Aldrich's *Untitled (green af)* (2025), white and red striped lines recall candy-canies or plastic straws, but that isn't saying much. Or, rather, that is saying too much. What these paintings ask of us is that we see them "feelingly," like the blind Gloucester in *King Lear*. Image loses its relational force if its occurrence is transference to allegory. The distance that visual imagery keeps from verbal discourse is one of painting's reserves of infinite potential. We must, however, ask language to analogize material substance for us, and hopefully, from the merely partial adjustments of one semiotic system to another, productive frictions can spring up and promote different environments, each calling for adjustments in our ways of knowing and perceiving phenomena.

² The ever-openness of the ear is an idea taken from Seth Kim-Cohen's *In The Blink of an Ear: Toward a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art*.

³ Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1912), 135.