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ABOLISHED STILL LIFE

Someone who hadn't seen it asked me what Lesley Vance's work is like and I explained that she makes dense, dark paintings that in one way might remind you of analytic cubism and in another way might remind you of seventeenth-century Spanish still life—the *bodegones* of Juan Sánchez Cotán, Francisco de Zurbarán, artists she refers to often—only abstract. But while it's nice to be able to give a concise explanation of what someone's paintings look like, that doesn't necessarily explain what they are. Usually, what they are tends to be a bit harder to articulate than what they look like, despite or perhaps because of the fact that in painting, essence and appearance are so intertwined. What paintings are has a lot to do with matters of but not on the surface—with how and why the paintings came to appear as they do, and with the kinds of feelings those appearances evoke in someone who gives time to look and think about them. A paradox: paintings are all about the surface, but the surface points somewhere else beyond itself.

In any case, despite being separated by 300 years of art history, Cubism and *bodegones* hardly make an unlikely pair. Although there are Cubist portraits and landscapes, still life is the prototypical subject matter of analytic cubism; it's often said of cubist portraits that the artist has treated the person with the same cool neutrality that he'd approach a wine bottle or a guitar. And both kinds of painting downplay color, treating it austerely, as something to be used only with caution and the utmost seriousness. But they do this in different ways; early cubist paintings tend toward an all-over evenness of chromatic intensity—they don't typically reach the dramatic extremes of dark and light that seventeenth-century Spanish painting cultivates. In this, then, Vance reaches back beyond her Parisian precursors to her sources in the Baroque. On the other hand, she renounces the volumetric plenitude of the *bodegones*, the way in which simple, unassuming objects such as fruits, vegetables, pottery, and slaughtered game could stand out with such preternatural intensity and concreteness amidst dark, featureless backgrounds. In Vance's paintings, there are no objects—or anyway, no whole objects. As in cubist paintings where fragmentary signs conjure objects that never quite complete themselves—the painting must manifest its own concrete presence, not that of whatever it happens to picture; there are edges of things, aspects and facets, but never or rarely any closure. At best, the viewer must reconstruct the object on a speculative basis.

Given these resonances with the history of still life painting, it may seem paradoxical to say that it came as a surprise to me to learn that Vance actually does work from still life set-ups that she constructs in her studio. (She photographs them, then uses the photos as starting points for her painting process.) I found it surprising because, in effect, Vance seems so profoundly immersed in the history of still life painting that she would hardly need to bother setting up an actual still life; you'd think it was just a matter of riffling through her memory to find the right launch pad. And then, of course, there's the matter of that crucial little proviso that I appended to my very first sentence: "only abstract." In the end, these are not still lifes, even abstracted still lifes, but abstract paintings that might remind you of still life. In other words, no matter what the nature of the original set-ups, or of the photographs the artist makes of them, once she starts pushing the paint around, anything goes, and the objects, whatever they are, become little more than a memory.

Probably this is precisely the function of the photograph—to put the object at a distance. But that still begs the question: why does this artist need the object if it is only there to be effaced? If she wants to make an abstract painting, why all that preparation? Why not just start painting freely, albeit with the idea of still life in mind? I think the answer has something to do with this: that painting is not only about making but unmaking. It is about hiding as much as showing. Picasso himself famously defined his art as "a sum of destructions." In Vance's case, it seems she requires of herself a very concrete acquaintance with what it is that she is going to expunge or take apart. But it is not incumbent on the viewer to imagine what this might have been. The painting stands or falls on its own without reference to this hidden something—the painting's MacGuffin, to borrow Alfred Hitchcock's term for the finally irrelevant object around which the constellation of a plot may form, though one could also advert to Mallarmé and call this object a *ptyx*, "*aboli bibelot d'inanité sonore... ce seul objet dont le Néant s'honore*" (abolished knickknack of resonant vacancy... the sole object through which Nothing praises itself). It is at most as a sort of ghostly remainder, perhaps an aroma, like that whiff of sulfur that is supposed to linger in the air when a supernatural visitor has passed by. For the viewer, there is simply the feeling that something else must once have been there.

In a way, it might be better not to know what the starting point for these paintings is. And because Vance has not spoken in detail about what happens before she actually starts painting—"there are some objects I really enjoy painting," she has said, "and I will pick these out to become part of new still lifes over and over," without indicating what those objects might be—and she has not, to my knowledge, exhibited or published any of the photographs that are the intermediate stage in the process. We pretty much don't know. We're in the dark. And no wonder. The manifold guises of darkness in these paintings could be the subject of a separate

essay. How can darkness become translucent? I don't know, but Vance makes it so. And like quarks and ice cream, her darkness comes in different flavors. In any case, the darkness that envelops Vance's abstract used-to-be-still-lives is not just a stylistic choice. It communicates something of how the paintings work. This darkness tells us that whatever it is that the paintings present to us is not a thing seen clearly. Rather, it is something glimpsed in flashes but otherwise taken in, not as a whole gestalt as it typically happens through the sense of sight, but rather in separate bits and pieces only painstakingly and in afterthought synthesized in the mind, as would be the case with an object one had explored primarily through the sense of touch. (Remember the perennial parable of the blind men and the elephant.) Vance's paintings evoke haptic sensations as much as they do visual ones.

In any of them, one will perceive a multiplicity of planes, but they keep changing places or torquing around each other. What seemed to be in front will suddenly shift back, and vice versa. She seems at times to build forms by wiping them away and to break shapes up by adding to them. There is a degree of illusionism, but the illusion tends to deconstruct itself. Yet the end of one illusion is always the beginning of another, so that the paintings, for all their intense stillness and inwardness, are always also in movement and therefore full of energy and life. Everything's in transition. And there's always a sort of enlivening awkwardness about how the various forms support and at the same time undermine each other; the paint surface itself is so suave, so "cool" that you could almost overlook the searching quality of Vance's art were it not for this strange way the various mercurial fragments of form have of falling over and under each other — almost getting in their own way yet finally lending each other mutual support.

Finally, a word should be said about Vance's watercolors. They don't look like other people's watercolors; she doesn't handle the medium the way other artists do. She has remarked that the watercolors are endlessly reworkable, in contrast to the oil colors which she must resolve in a day or at most two because her technique is based on painting wet into wet. (This need to finish a painting in a single day is something she shares with colleagues as different from one another and from her as Alex Katz and Luc Tuymans.) There is an unusual density to Vance's watercolors — similar to the density of her paintings but achieved in a different way. Here she eschews the dramatic contrasts of light and dark in favor of a more even overall luminosity, a sort of intangible smoldering glow. Compositionally, they can sometimes be more complex — or rather, more intricate — than the paintings, because the velvety darkness of the surrounds in the paintings can take on so many roles, so many guises, that need to be shared out among distinct elements in the watercolors. But the two groups of work are instantly recognizable as products of the same intensified intuition of space and form: mundane reality (which is, I think, what the "abolished" still life referent is always about) in a state of rapture.