

**CC** I wanted to start by asking about your use of non-Western texts and anime imagery, a relatively recent development in your work, along with the marbling technique. Your earlier paintings had employed decorative patterning atop modulated abstract fields, but they hovered just outside of any culturally-specific signage. In more recent paintings the overlay of appropriated imagery remains obscure in its specific meaning but is clearly extracted from a particular cultural lexicon. What prompted that shift, or, how did it come about?

**CM** I first came to this exploration of language and symbols through painting punctuation. It happened a few years ago during the TV writers' strike. Shows like *The Hills* were still on, and I kept picturing what the scripts were like. They're supposed to be reality shows, but I think most people realize that they're scripted. Yet the few times I tried to watch a show, I kept envisioning the script as punctuation only. The camera would zoom in and you'd be waiting for dialogue, but it was just a series of heavily loaded glances: a question mark, an equal sign, a disdainful comma or ampersand. It seemed both infuriating and so sad to think that the dialogue had actually disappeared from the way these girls interacted with the world. As either "real" people or as characters they were completely visual and void of all voice. So I was making these paintings of fairly decorative punctuation and I suppose that led to a more

serious examination of language. These days I've been working with a broader range of language images and images that stand in for language. I've tried to keep my sources open to a wide variety of communication modes that span various cultures and age groups. On the one hand I guess you could say the glass is half empty—that the work is often about the impossibility of communication. Some pieces have deteriorating, old documents that aren't readable anymore, the handwriting turned into an abstracted historical artifact. I did one painting of the death record of Pocahontas, known later in life as Rebecca Rolfe. To the viewer it's unintelligible, but it was interesting to me because she was seen in our (fictional) collective memory as someone who transcended language. She is remembered as a person who bridged the divides of New and Old World royalty, someone who was born on one continent and died on another, someone who purportedly had a secret language that only she and John Smith shared. Some of the other paintings overlay obscured languages from different countries and continents. Others explore the same symbol (an ampersand, for instance) as drawn by both boys and girls to study handwriting differences. And yet, via the process of becoming paintings, they are emptied of their context and transformed into abstraction, complicating or removing the original message. The anime and manga pieces are more recent explorations into the image-as-language





devices and their development by groups, specifically by pre-teens who aren't given much verbal agency. Historically, Japanese kids' responses to Disney cartoons lead to the development of manga, and for them it became a new mode of communication that was specific to their own culture and their place in it. It's an interesting reflection of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature and deterritorialization, or the

process of an under-represented group co-opting the language of their oppressor and altering it for their own purposes, which then becomes a source of power. To use a minor language is to take a major language, displace it, then re-place it. Instead of confronting something with opposition, you subvert it from within. For children this can be a safer and more advantageous mode of

exerting yourself. What's interesting about anime and manga is that they have become a sort of universal language among youth. What was once a specifically Japanese style is now super popular in Western cultures. I get a huge kick out of a Web site called deviantART, a place where kids and teens share their latest achievements in manga drawings. Sure the repeated, perfected styles and characters deteriorate the

individuality of the drawings, but what they lack in originality brings them closer to a new alphabet or a series of symbols that string together a form of communication. It also further breaks down divisions of origin such as nationality, race, class, and gender, and it reflects the globalization of current youth identity. I'm also interested in the popularity of this style as related to Julia Kristeva's concept of adolescence, or more specifically, the "adolescent novel"; how the concept of adolescence is a "crisis structure" because it represents the open borders "between differences of sex and identity, of reality and fantasy, of act and discourse." Our media tends to represent teens as being a threat because they're still developing, and that transient identity poses a threat to the norm. Their identity hangs in an undecided and fluid place that engenders more possibilities than the established and commodified system has to offer. Kristeva thinks that they cross between these borders so easily because they "easily mirror the free flow . . . of our mass-media society." Young people are finding modes of communication that suit the media they've grown up with and therefore manage to be both easily exchanged and still threatening, confusing, in their simplicity and juvenile nature. I find the communication systems of overlooked or underrepresented pockets of society provocative in their ability to survive and thrive despite having little validity in mainstream or more established eyes. The desire to exchange information is



innately human, yet having real communication has always been one of the hardest things to attain.

**CC** You mentioned that working on paintings for other people as a job roughly corresponded to your move away from the kind of brushwork and conventional applications of paint that show your “hand.” It’s clearly not a sharp split. Your earlier paintings employed spray applications, stencils, and references to graphic or decorative mark-making, which already puts your indexical touch at a remove. But that shift toward marbleizing and the inclusion of directly appropriated texts happened while you were being paid to make work for others using traditional paint application. This could be an entry point into the polemics of your process.

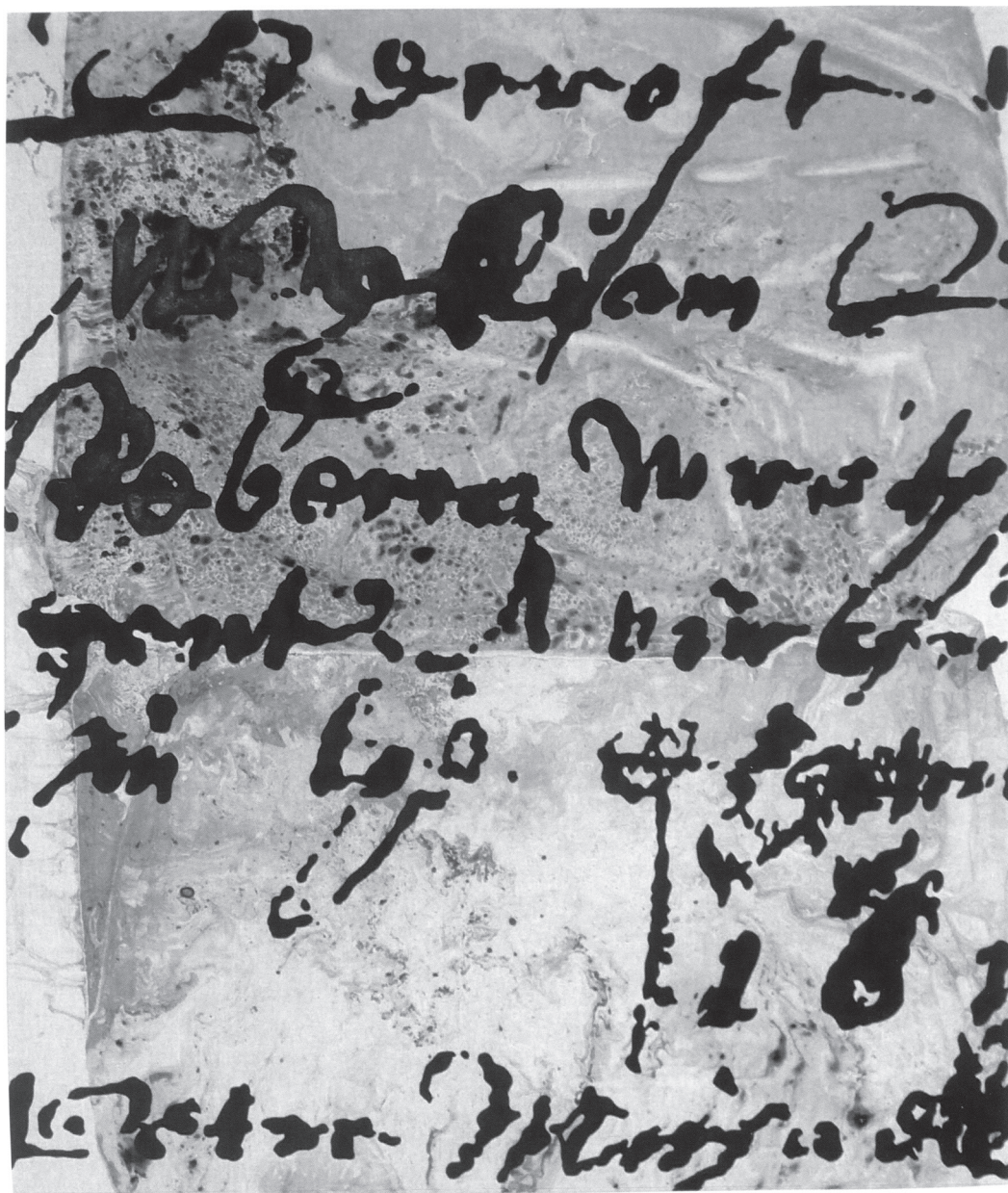
**CM** Well, early on I did use some found images, but overall the spray paint, the marbleizing techniques, and using more specific found images came after I’d begun working as an artist’s assistant. I had worked as one before, but I did not actually make the artist’s work. When I started painting as a job—spending forty hours a week making someone else’s work—that was when I started searching for new ways to paint. In some ways it was a relief because I’d been searching for a way to get out of my comfort zone and pursue other interpretations of painting. But on some levels it was also a bit frightening. At work I was painting super tight images that weren’t allowed to have

visible brushstrokes, and that tendency began to infiltrate my own work. I guess it’s an occupational hazard of the artist assistant. At one point I took a month off from the job to go to a residency and I found myself fighting with my own hand. I’d spent over a thousand hours in this other style and I had to find a way to separate myself from it. It’s interesting to watch your own hand become commoditized. It’s been talked about quite a lot, the factory setup and market demand that so many artists

operate within. Yet for me, participating on that level as an assistant is what sparked the move away from the idea of a true image or a true mark that comes from a privileged, individual artist. Much of the work I’m doing now is a layering or interweaving of readymades. Both the marbleizing technique—using paint in water—and the use of found images remove the indexical touch and much of the brain-to-hand decision making. Yet images continue to exist, and painting continues to exist, and I

suppose I’m interested in exploring both of those while acknowledging the current state of art production.

**CC** That makes me think of the way that abstraction operates in your paintings; it’s somewhere between incident and motif. The element of incident is fairly obvious—these are chance operations. But I say motif because the way they act as a support for graphic imagery makes them seem like either craft or commercially-produced patterning—tie-





dye, the clothing patterns, the marbled paper and domestic surfaces, etc. The precarity of abstraction's cultural valuation—along with its gender assignment (masculine formalist painting vs. feminine domesticity and design)—in your work seems fluid in the sense of the adolescent novel with its exchangeability and threat to sexual stability. At your studio I remember saying that while there were no brushstrokes or real gestures in the work, somehow that postwar legacy of painting felt very present, like it was very much the context of your work. This could be because of a deconstructive tendency in which your work is picturing

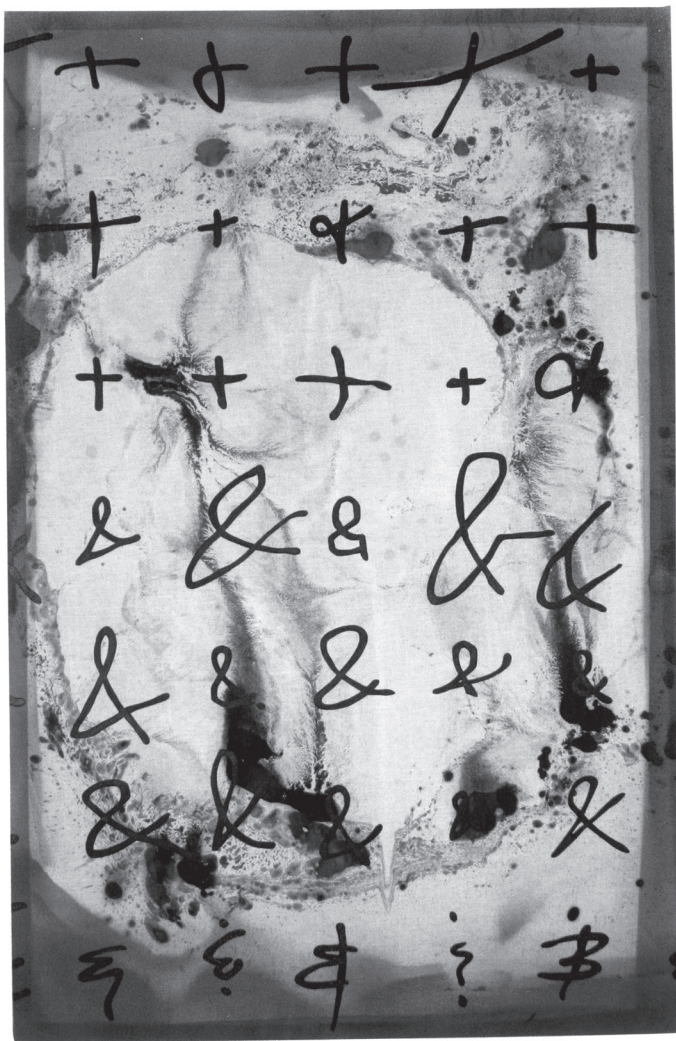
a plethora of repressed terms from that canon—language, gender, ethnic differences, commercialism, etc. (and I mean deconstruction here as the simple act of calling forth the subordinate of a binary pair in order to evidence the structure of meaning).

Abstract painting is clearly more than just a politicized rhetorical punching bag in your work, though. I get frustrated at the way the polarized attitudes for abstraction today often become really over-simplified. I'm thinking of, say, Amy Sillman's assertion that abstraction has been effectively queered and is therefore still a relevant

form of unquestioned self-expression versus David Joselit's idea of "painting beside itself," where reification is handily defeated by simply referring to a discursive apparatus beyond the canvas. Can you talk more about the formal aspect of your practice and your process as an abstract painter today?

**CM** Well, I guess I don't see the Sillman and Joselit assertions as being totally in opposition to each other. With Sillman's text I see much of the AbEx history as always having been a bit queer, or in some way coming from the experience of being "the other"—being an immigrant, a female, Jewish, Communist—and all the men tapping into their most intuitive natural expressions. The artists themselves were far from John Wayne, yet it's been historicized and commodified into a macho, hetero-normative bastion of American pride. It was interesting talking with people about that article because I knew a lot of girls who were really into it and a lot of straight white guys who hated it. Personally I've found a lot of freedom in disco. It seems that lost history was a bit similar to how I think of the Surrealists' history. There were so many amazing female Surrealist painters—some of my favorite artists are women who worked in that period. And they exhibited a lot at the time, yet history always writes them out of the story. They just turn up as entertaining footnotes, mentioned like some underground band you think only you know about. In reality they were right

there, showing with the men. There's a lot of strength in knowing that history. Yet unless we figure out new structures for creating history, the pattern will continue to exclude or ghettoize people who are different. I've been thinking about all of this in relation to the system of "painting beside itself." I wonder where to fit into that dialogue as someone who does feel like the "other." First of all the whole idea is very intertwined with what social network you're working within, which can set up a system of alienation for many. This may be more impenetrable based on class and education systems than on gender or place of origin. Sometimes I find it to be an odd way of relating to painting when you are young and just starting out. You have to assume that you have a dialogue or social circle or even a place to show in order to be working with this framework. Sure you can create your own space or group, but then you're just being critical of a structure you designed yourself. Additionally, so much of this work is intertwined with systems of commerce and in denying reification in order to participate in this transitive system. While I'm interested in transitivity and the expanding possibilities for painting, I find—as a young person and someone who comes from a fairly working-class background—that it is difficult to effectively challenge a system I've hardly been allowed to participate in. Obviously it's natural on some level—the flaws of the system are in your face every day—but without that bit





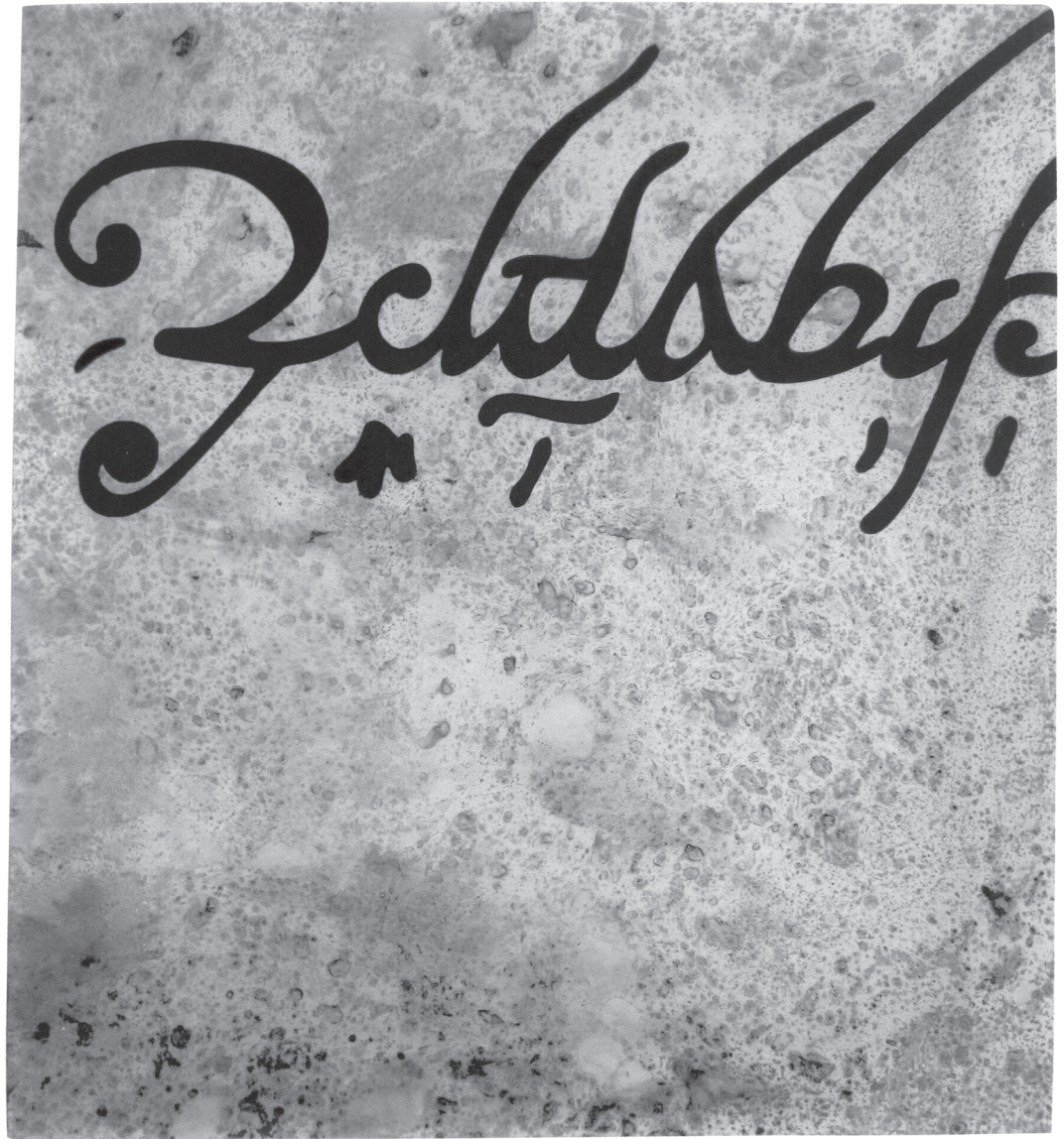
of entitlement or financial freedom, it can be difficult to challenge that system.

I think many of the painters working with abstraction today use it more as a sign system than a mode of expression. The drip, the stain, the swooping gesture have a lot more to do with the construction of painting as a symbol than with expelling inner demons. While it might be about claiming the right to form new arrangements of these painterly codes, I think it's hard to deny the power of the physicality involved in creation and in claiming the right to that creation.

I don't consider my work to be total abstraction or totally representational. It's more about having some sort of dialectical relationship in the space between the two, of finding a place to work within the freedom of both.

Of accepting that there are times when the painting will be placed beside itself—without denying that the creation of the painting itself is why I'm invested in the first place.

**CC** I'm a bit loath to invoke Benjamin Buchloh here because he's become such a ubiquitous authority figure but . . . he made an observation in "Spero's Other Traditions" that I would not have caught otherwise—that Nancy Spero's use of standard typewriter font in *Codex Artaud* was a critique of the way that "look" had become codified by the Conceptualists. They used it to signify rational objectivity, etc., but fetishized the aesthetic nonetheless (like industrial facture for the Minimalists against which Buchloh notes a similar critique levied by



both Dan Graham and Marcel Broodthaers). The notion of an anti-aesthetic seems pretty distant in our current context, where fashion (even in academia) reigns with an iron fist. Your juxtaposition of mostly illegible blotches of handwritten ink with pooling, frozen patterns of paint seems to work differently than something like Spero's political agenda involving the materialization of language. How do you think about the formal rhythm between text and abstraction?

**CM** I'm definitely after a formal rhythm between text

and abstraction—as you seem to imply by mentioning Spero's work—and seek to find a formal space between the painterly mark and its industrialized other. I'm interested in exploring the tension that is created when a standardized typeface, graphic border, or handwritten mark is enlarged to the point of obscurity—when it no longer promotes the message that it was designed to communicate. I like the idea of the text and the painted abstraction being avatars for one another. In place of having these expressive, painterly gestures of abstraction,

there are enlarged marks of penmanship and ideographic symbols. Instead of using a drip or a brushstroke to reference the composites of a painting, it's in fact language that is used. There is a very specific language of painting, as we discussed, where an AbEx mark can be loaded with meaning and perhaps convey more history or identity than a written language could. There is also a rhythm and tension in the work between the uncontrolled and more mechanized layers. At times the paint decides its own forms through a loose marbling technique;





other times it's applied with rigid, formulaic hand painting. Both techniques are fairly methodical, but one allows for lazy irreverence and natural irregularities and the other has no room for mistakes. They rely on one another to sustain the rhythm and dialogue of what painting is and what we understand to be communication.

**CC** So in a sense there's an equivalence with the loaded history of an abstract mark or stain and the cultural inflections of your appropriation sources. The opacity of these texts and images, this issue of communication, seems to be an important vector for young painters.

One of my concerns about networked abstraction is that the play or critique that goes on "beside" the object is seen as somehow less susceptible to commodification than the object itself. This is a fairly dangerous underestimation of capital's ability to extract surplus from "new labor" or "general performance" within the culturalized, post-Fordist economy. The image-world from which your appropriations derive never quite gels into a coherent supplement, the motivation and decision suspended in obscurity and intuition. I sometimes feel a real pressure to develop a more consistent narrative throughout my work. I get conflicted

about this: the benefits of structure and a degree of clarity weighed against a real resistance to making things easier for myself or the viewer. Not wanting to offer a digestible schtick beside the work. Do you see yourself consolidating or focusing your conceptual framework, or are you still in a place of experimentation and expansion?

**CM** A bit of both, I'd say. I can't imagine not continuing to experiment, but I am still working on focusing the framework that surrounds the paintings as objects. I think what you're saying about the conceptual environment of the work becoming commodified is only growing more true

via the role of the Internet in sharing and contextualizing art. Obviously it's really great that we're opening up the possibilities for faster and more substantial conversations between different art communities in various countries, age groups, social networks, etc. Yet the format lends itself so directly to branding and constructing products. It can be a valuable network for connecting people, but sometimes at the cost of boiling experience down into pure aesthetics. It's funny to see works by artists who try to work in a space beside painting become immediately co-opted into the enticing graveyard that is the Tumblr art world.

A lot of my content does come from Internet searches though, and I think it's pretty noteworthy that our generation is the first one functioning with that amount of information exchange and availability. Yet when you're working with painting, it's hard to deny the romance of how old the practice is or the fact that it's primarily a solitary endeavor in your studio. I can totally identify with what you're saying about being torn between clarity and structure and the desire not to make things easy for yourself. That's partly why I'm interested in finding places of attempted dialogue but I never want to let the work get too direct. For me it's more interesting to experience a work with appropriations whose end result is an *attempt* at communication; it perhaps can say more in suspended ambiguity and confusion than with straightforward methods of language or image.



