Questions and Acts of Faith

by

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My education in art has been a long series of unanswerable questions. What do you believe? Why oil paint? What do you want us to see? Is this relevant? If I have learned anything in these eight years, it is that questioning is more important than answering. My thesis paintings are a series of questions - questions about spirituality, about sex and power, and about the visual experience called "realism." Since good answers need good questions, I decided to record a conversation that took place at my studio between Joey Orr, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Georgia and myself in December 2003. Joey's questions and my answers presented some good insight into my paintings.

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**Joey Orr:** Let's start with your own history of art making. What were you doing when you first started making art?

**Paul Galloway:** I wanted to be a cartoonist when I was young. I studied cartoonists like Bill Watterson and Gary Larson. My interest evolved into comic books. It was never a passing hobby; I seriously studied the art of comics. I don't think I ever really outgrew the love of comics; that interest evolved and became a part of what I do now.

**JO:** Why would you say that?

**PG:** The graphic immediacy of comic illustration, the ability to relate a narrative in the most economical means, is a quality I want in my paintings. The vibrant colors, multiple panels, and dynamic compositions in my paintings all have corollaries in comics. But while comics by nature are linear narratives I go for more of a broken narrative: a story is suggested rather than dictated.

**JO:** What are your intentions for the viewers regarding the multiple panels and broken narrative? Is there something specific you want them to come away with?

**PG:** I try not to give away too much about my intentions regarding interpretation; to do so would close the book, leaving nothing for the viewer to add. I want a certain amount of incoherence and contradiction. In *Mourning Would*, for example, the bottom left panel depicts a communion tray I used growing up. Most people I've spoken to don't recognize it as such, which creates a completely different interpretation. But I'm okay with that; I think the artist cedes control of the piece when it leaves the studio.

**JO:** While we're on that piece, how important is the placement of the panels relative to the scenes depicted within them? For example the figure's hand becomes the bottle of water.

**PG:** The points of contact between the panels are crucial to the piece as a whole. The hand of the top figure crosses over into the bottle of water – which is poured into the communion tray to be transubstantiated into the blood of Christ. The prone figure in the top panel also functions as a Christ figure. The communion tray then crosses over into a water faucet in the bottom right panel, so in a way the communion water becomes a
cleansing medium — an idea certainly at peace with Christianity. But then the washing of hands also suggests Pilate, who washed his hands of Christ’s fate and, symbolically, an entire religion. I’ve combined all this religious content with sexuality; the prone figure in the top panel has an erection. But is the erection sexual in origin or merely a biological response — a function of the prostate keeping him from wetting the bed? I want to juxtapose not only form and color, but also ideas, in this case religion and sexuality. Even the pun title suggests multiple agendas.

JO: What about the fact that we never get to see your subjects’ faces?

PG: This is one of the most universal themes in my work. When you include a face it becomes, to me, a depiction of a specific person. When that identifier is removed the figures become anonymous. Anonymity is crucial. It allows the figures to become metaphors for human characteristics instead of cast members in a narrative. I’m also interested in how hands and feet can convey the same level of emotional intensity as a face.

JO: When I was thinking about which artists had influenced you, I expected you to talk about artists who had similar technique as you, painters. But first off you mentioned photographers.

PG: Yeah, I think I said Larry Clark and Tina Barney. There was a time a few years ago when I took a break from painting and studied photography. Larry Clark’s *Teenage Lust* really fascinated me with its combination of perverse humor and tragedy. His and other artists’ work compelled me to push the stories in my work. Technique is the language I’m speaking in, not the message. It’s the context. But that’s not to say I haven’t been strongly influenced by someone like Jim Rosenquist. He expressed a desire to make images that came off of the canvas instead of the traditional illusionist window. His paintings strike me as abstract compositions first, realistic images second. I love that approach.

JO: It seems you don’t really stray from the photograph. Do you take many liberties in the painting process?

PG: Not very many. Sometimes I’ll edit an object out or change the color of a figure’s shirt. But aside from a few color alterations and the occasional over-delineation of a shape I try to stay faithful to the photograph. That’s not to say that the image doesn’t change when I paint; there’s always a bias. It’s a painting, not a photograph. The changes that are a result of me translating an image from one format to another are crucial to my work.

JO: So in the photography stage you’re capturing the subject. What happens between the photographing and the painting?

PG: Quite a lot happens before I even begin painting. These are digital photographs that are heavily edited in Photoshop. There is a continual transmission of image: from reality
the image enters the camera, then the computer, then is transmitted over the internet to be printed and mailed back to me where I paint it. Every one of these steps is a filter that the image has to pass through.

**JO:** Do you ever show your photography?

**PG:** I've considered it. I have a lot of great photographs that wouldn't make good paintings.

**JO:** Explain why that is.

**PG:** I'm still figuring that one out. A big transformation takes place when a photo is translated into painting: another mediating layer is placed between the viewer and the event. Every time the image is transmitted, from camera to computer to printer to painter, it is altered. I believe our understanding of the event is altered as well. For example, if all we knew of love and relationships was learned by watching reality dating shows, the love seen on television would be real love as we knew it. When I combine gyrating sorority girls with bare-chested men I am seeking the same context; a reality so removed from reality that meaning is no longer discernable. All these things happen because a photograph has been translated into a painting. Some images, and this is a purely intuitive judgment by me, need to be received as photographs rather than paintings. If I were to show my photographs, it would probably be separately from the paintings; they're two divergent bodies of work.

**JO:** Okay, last question. You've mentioned that you strive for contradiction in your work - that you want a visual experience that feels both artificial and realistic at the same time. Could you explain this idea a little more?

**PG:** I believe contradictory statements are the most clear and purposeful art can make. My processes are centered on creating contradictory experiences. Every step in the translation of my images alters their content and our reception of the events. Every filter the image must pass through, including me, becomes both barrier and mediator between the viewer and the event. An inverse relationship is created: the closer my paintings approach optical or photographic realism the further they get from experiential realism. This relationship creates contradiction on the canvas... and for the viewer. How can a painting so tactilely convincing feel so artificial?! Because paint evidences my hand and my presence, the viewer must deal directly with me as mediator, regardless of how tactile the paint surface may seem. When my narratives enter this context human drama and experience become simultaneously more and less real.
Reading our interview five months later, I am struck by how I completely avoided talking about painting. I spoke about process, but lumped the painting stage in with the photography and computer work - how obtuse! I am a painter! As I pondered my glaring omission, questioning why I would leave out the most important aspect of my work, I began to see that the act of painting these images is the aspect I understand the least. As such, I am hesitant to discuss critically the part of the process that occurs intuitively. But something compels me to paint - otherwise I would simply make large photo-collages and be done much more quickly.

I can't seem to articulate exactly what happens when I put brush to canvas. All the theory and conceptual agendas go away, and I become lost in that intangible place that has kept artists painting for centuries. At first I was troubled by my inability to describe what painting is for me and why I choose it, but a conversation in April with Julie Puttgen (an arts writer in Atlanta) helped make tangible what it was I couldn't seem to say.

I have been reflecting on how drawing is an act of faith: how at every turn, in order to draw, we must trust and trust again what is, forsaking ideas of what could or should be. I feel that trust when I look at Paul's work: trust in the act of painting, curiosity about the specifics of the world, pleasure in the act of seeing. At its very best, as in Mourning Would, Paul's work links together small episodes from the world of seeing into poems whose implications go much further than leis and margaritas, whorls of hair and shimmering skin. This is devotion beyond style.

-Julie Puttgen

"On Vampires and the Pleasure of Painting"
Ratsalad Deluxe, Issue 1
2004
Mourning Would
69" X 84"
Oil on Canvas
2003
Tidal 2003
43" X 96"
Oil on Canvas
Controller  2003
48" X 73"
Oil on Canvas
Monkey Do 2003
40" X 79"
Oil on Canvas
Gulf
2003
60" X 66"
Oil on Canvas