

## The Eye Sees Only Eyes

Jan Tumlir, 2014

A strong impression is one that lasts, one that can be returned to or that returns on its own even after attention has drawn away from the original object or scene. Somehow it persists for hours, days, weeks, months, years after its initial sighting. As the word implies, something one saw was stamped and imprinted upon consciousness, which is not to suggest that it was immediately understood. Rather, this impression remains put in memory precisely because some part of it cannot be consciously processed right there and then. In this regard, one might describe the strong impression as traumatic; there is in it an element of psychic wounding, however slight. As Nietzsche writes of our “earliest mnemotechnics,” our memory technologies, “only what goes on hurting will stick.” (1) Some part of it must remain foreign and inimical to our thoughts, though not completely. That which is either already known, easily assimilated, or else wholly unknowable will tend to slip straight through the cognitive sieve. Conversely the strong impression travels “backward” from perception to memory, and it is retained there because it matters somehow. The beholder may not yet understand why and how it matters, but has instinctively grasped that it will matter at some later date. The strong impression is saved in “the back of the mind” for future processing, and in this sense it constitutes a kind of premonition. This may be assumed without necessarily drifting toward mystical speculation. Whatever was branded on the brain requires something else in order to reappear; it awaits another, a second impression with which to vibrate and synchronize. And by extension, we can say that the first impression is strong precisely because it recalls a prior one. Something less known became more so on the basis of a visual rhyming, a “correspondence” in the language of Baudelaire. From the first moment, then, the strong impression must be seen as a complexly layered construct; memory serves as its deeply sedimented ground. It reaches backward, becoming thick with visual history, but then it also pushes forward.

These thoughts are informed by an idea of the visual arts, and especially painting, as a form of “mnemotechnics.” The strong impression is what the visual artist transports into the studio and then transposes onto paper or canvas, where it inevitably becomes something else. In the work of Tomory Dodge, this passage is demonstrated with a particular acuity, for what he gives us to see always appears to be emerging, as if not yet fully present, or else is disintegrating. In their turbulent evanescence, that is, these works bear the ghostly signature of things seen long before, things partly forgotten and partly recalled. One could say that his paintings ride the line between abstraction and representation, which is no doubt true but also relatively meaningless, as the same could be said of all painting. Even the most realistic picture is an abstraction almost by definition—a drawing away from the material world, a rendering virtual of actual things—and this definition works both ways. (2) On first encounter, Dodge’s paintings would seem to incline in a rather more non-objective direction, but however far they may stray from the realm of resemblance, and however much they declare their autonomy as wholly constructed, invented things, they remain nevertheless haunted by intimations of reference. Within the abstract thing-in-itself, there stirs a

memory of a something or somewhere else; this is not so much a picture as the promise of one. These paintings show us transitional stages in the process of imaging, and they do so in a manner that is both provisional and highly resolved, which might well constitute a paradox, but it is one that illuminates just what it is that we find compelling about painting in general. What is true of all paintings is especially true of these: alongside any purported content, abstract and/or representational, they “depict” the workings of the imagination, which, as Baudelaire suggests, does not produce images out of the blue, *sui generis*, but decomposes already seen images. “Imagination decomposes all creation,” he writes, “and with the raw materials accumulated and disposed in accordance with rules whose origins one cannot find except in the furthest depths of the soul, it creates a new world...” (3)

In much of the work here featured, it would seem that these already seen images were delivered by other, prior paintings, and moreover by the artist’s own paintings. Dodge works in series; he produces numerous variations on a theme, and the aesthetic fallout and carryover from one painting to the next is evident. Taken together, these describe a kind of formal evolution. Certain modes of paint application and certain pictorial effects, perhaps at first spontaneous, are studied and refined, yielding to further fruitful elaboration, whereas others are left to wither and are gradually discarded. This process is at once improvised and highly orchestrated; we are progressing toward a determinate end, but what is it? What kind of logic subtends the seemingly endless recombinatory potential of all these gestures and marks, these lines, shapes and colors? Perhaps we should take our cue from the title of a work from 2008: *Debris Field*. In this painting and others from the same period, strokes, scrapes, swipes and drips of pigment float atop monochrome, often gradated backgrounds like the fragments of a ruined architecture—in this case, the architecture of the image—carried off by rushing waters or swirling winds. Detached from each other and from the overall field, these pictorial elements are relieved of any evident mimetic purpose to openly declare their materiality—“what you see is what you see,” in the words of Frank Stella. And yet the underlying ground, reminiscent of sky, nighttime or outer space, suggests that there is always more to be seen, that there is an illusionistic dimension beyond the one that is literally there. This is figured as a receding horizon that all of this fractured and agitated paintwork is pressing toward and where all of it will perhaps coalesce into a recognizable thing or scene. Yet this horizon, which lies beyond the painterly event, also lies before it—it was, after all, produced first—and thereby serves as a reminder that there is also always a horizon behind us, and that it too is impacting whatever we see.

If a painting makes a strong impression on its beholder—if it is memorable, exerting a lasting influence—it is because it is itself made of a strong impression. In every next painting by Dodge, we may observe trace elements of the one before, and the one before that, and then further still, a whole history of paintings reaching back to the classical tableau. In the most of the works executed between 2007 and 2010, there is a clear separation of foreground and background, as noted, and as the eye moves between these two tiers, it moves through time as well as space. Two distinct approaches to painting are related upon each canvas, one attending to the literal flatness of the picture plane and the other to illusionistic depth. The viewer peers through a tangled skein of gestures and marks into a pristine atmospheric expanse of monochromatic or smoothly modulated pigment as though through the

embodied agitations of Abstract Expressionism into the eternally idealized stasis of a Renaissance landscape. Within the framework of Dodge's "debris field," the optics of the moderns and the ancients are superimposed to produce a mutually distorting parallax. Emphatically uprooted from its ground, the painterly stratum takes shape as a visual *object*—a thing "thrown in the way," as the etymology of the word indicates. (4) And here something curious occurs: by obstructing the distant view, which is patently unreal, the painterly as such is subsumed to its order of artifice. Dodge's self-declaring brushstrokes are de-realized by the underlying stratum of illusionism to become something like representations themselves, at times even acquiring shadows below to clinch the point. And this reversing effect is reciprocal, for when the technical feint of the background field is viewed through this thicket of stand-alone marks, it acquires an aspect of frank materiality. One recognizes that it is comprised of the same stuff, but subject to a more cohesive and finessed application. The same brushstrokes that stand out in foreground appear to recede in the background only because they are literally receding into one another.

This play of the rough and the smooth was itself known to the old masters, of course, and not only as a means to produce effects of verisimilitude, to shape three-dimensional objects in two-dimensional space, but to infuse them with self-reflexivity. An encrusted daub of white paint left protruding from an otherwise meticulously rendered ruffled collar in a royal portrait makes a strong impression, and it does so no less than the latent visions of forest growth and watery reflection that sometimes emerge from a Jackson Pollock. These are the sorts of impressions that, following their period of incubation in memory and imagination, accrue in Dodge's paintings. I see them there because these paintings have in turn made an impression on me; they have transmitted a "sensation of newness" that is at the same time pervaded by vestigial remnants of the age-old.

\* \* \*

The works included in this catalog cover a period of four years and may be roughly divided into two groups, although it would be more accurate to say that they describe a transition from the sort of painting described above to another sort. By 2011, the former dialectic of background and foreground has largely given way to a more integrated approach, a dense interweaving of painterly marks that becomes itself formed, internally spatialized, rather than locating space outside its compass. If the experience of the earlier paintings can be compared to peering through a window while also attending to the smudges on the glass, then these instead locate us inside the room. We are no longer dealing with a field of debris; the formerly ruined and dispersed architecture of the image begins to be rebuilt into a holistic structure.

Although Dodge cautions against overestimating his titles, they are nevertheless instructive: *Chamber*, *Palace* and *Ward* are just a few choice examples from his 2011 output. Those words, which serve the practical purpose of indexing an extensive body of work, are an afterthought, he claims, but they remain salient precisely because they point to what is retrospectively derived from works rather than prescriptively put into them. For

instance, Dodge may not have intended to paint a palace when he began work on the painting of that name, and in no explicit sense did he do so in the end, but the result is nevertheless somewhat palatial—it enfolds the viewer in a luxurious environment. Moreover, this title stands out in contrast to those that precede it; it emphasizes the painting's difference. Prior titles consistently suggest instability: notions of falling, as in *Drop*, *Medium Deluge* and *Freefall* (all from 2008); or floating, as in *Smoke* (2008), *Cloud Chamber* (2009) and *Atmosphere* (2010). They relate to climatic conditions (*Heavy Weather*, 2009), to diurnal cycles (*Evening Coming Down*, 2009), and to cosmic time (*The Future*, 2010). In sharp contrast to the more prosaic and grounded titles that follow in 2011, these earlier ones bear an insistently rapturous, apocalyptic undertone that might be traced back to the signature of the times in which the paintings were made. A title like *New Ice Age* (2009), for instance, announces a whole other order of strong impressions, these being somewhat more immediate: 9/11, the Iraq war, the banking failure, the housing crisis, etc. Echoes of the new recession economy resound within the painting *Death Bling* (2009), which makes one think of exploding luxury goods, the wreckage of conspicuous consumption randomly dispersed as *Space Junk*, to cite another work from that fateful year. In relation to their titles, many of these works take on an edge of bitter satire, prompting self-annihilating visions of grandeur and decadence akin to those that Brett Easton Ellis presciently explored in his 1998 novel *Glamorama*, which features a cabal of fashion model terrorists blowing up shopping malls. Ellis devotes lengthy passages of this book to precisely describing the outcome of these bombing raids, as rows of shops and products, once ordered within a system of differential design and brand identification, are haphazardly merged into a monstrous collage. (5) Dodge's pile-on of period styles occasionally elicits a similar sense of garish "anything goes" excess, whereas at other times the effect is more circumspect, as if the artist were taking a breath and regrouping in the face of "the new normal."

The paintings themselves are obviously not so beholden to the specificities of their moment. There is no direct reference in them to "current affairs," to terrorism or the simultaneous rise of so-called "disaster capitalism," but Dodge's objective treatment of non-objective abstraction invites speculation. As noted, the slowly accumulating elements of his painterly vocabulary take shape as objects—that is, etymologically, as things that are "thrown in the way" and thereby "presented to mind." In other words, these are the sorts of things that we are asked not only to see, but to analyze and interpret. Dodge's objective mark-making reaches back through a history that far exceeds his own, yet in their methodical recurrence they also become recoded in the present tense, and in the process are imprinted with contemporary experience. Between 2007 and 2011, we pass through a series of social crises that are covertly recorded in Dodge's paintings as well, and perhaps all the more forcefully for their iconographic indifference to them. On the surface, these paintings appear to be only concerned with the logic of their own formal development, but they also demand in-reading.

That this is so is made especially apparent in a series of paintings that start to appear right around the middle of our timeline, in 2009, and that recall the form of the Rorschach blot. A tendency toward symmetrical composition can be traced back much earlier; it is perhaps a characteristic trait of Dodge's work overall and, from the

first moment, suggests the presence of a vaguely instrumental impulse where the appearance of accident is made to sit side by side with utter resolve. By the time we get to a painting like *Umbriel* (2009), however, this formula is declared explicitly: the painting is bisected, its two halves mirroring each other. Freeform painterly exuberance is checked by its rote doubling as reversed reflection, which faces the viewer with an insoluble problem, a stubbornly un-reconcilable opposition of freedom and constraint, while simultaneously placating the eye with an inherent structural balance. It is precisely this tension, or series of tensions, that serves as a potent appeal to the imagination. One can “see things” in anything, but some things are more conducive to this end, as Rorschach himself well understood. As Peter Galison writes on the subject, “Rorschach believed that only a maximally *objective* stimulus, one that appeared utterly removed from human intentionality, could reveal the purely *subjective* nature of the response.” (6) No doubt, this set relation between subject and object, will and automatism, concentration and the unconscious, is complicated by the presence of the work of art, which is after all an object wholly made by the artist. To begin with, Dodge’s decision to painstakingly copy an original expression signals human intentionality in its most rudimentary and perhaps essential sense. Yet here too we are dealing with the question of appearances, for it is impossible to tell which side, which mark, came first and which followed, and by extension, where voluntary production ends and the involuntary begins. And because, in this case, the “objective stimulus” always already includes an element of “subjective response” within it, it is equally impossible to tell between what we project into these paintings and what Dodge has put there for us to absorb. One point is certain, however: these sorts of questions are what they are both of and about.

These symmetrical, two-sided paintings mark an interim point in the aesthetic evolution that transitions between *Debris Field* and *Palace*, and they mark a decisive turn in Dodge’s relation to the architecture of the image. We see these works somewhat differently than their predecessors: due to their doubling, formerly scattered marks begin to gel into emblematic shapes, an obscure heraldry. Likewise, the sharp division between background and foreground is here mitigated by the sense that pictorial space as a whole is folding around a central axis. The two sides of the painting project outward from one another like adjoining walls; they place us in a corner. In the works that follow, this rudimentary structure will become further resolved and differentiated. Once formulaic allusions to space as such become increasingly suggestive of particular places, constructed environments filled with a complex assortment of figures and things. The paintings of 2011 open the way to the ones he is still making today, paintings that ever more insistently recall the forms of the nocturnal cityscape, airport terminal, shopping mall, restaurant and bar, etc. However, this is not to suggest that we traveled full circle or that we have simply returned to representation—far from it. These visions greet us from afar; they remain buried deep beneath the veil of surface and in marks that do not deliver an image so much as indicate where it might be.

In Baudelaire’s poem “Correspondences,” it is an uncanny intuition of secret accord between words and things that mobilizes his primeval forest, now a forest of signs, to “follow him with ... familiar glances.” (7) In the more or less contemporaneous paintings of the Impressionists, we might also note the play between sunspots and daubs

of pigment as one of correspondence, transforming the cityscape in its entirety into a radiant eye. Dodge's recent paintings are bathed in a somewhat dimmer light, issuing from long-dead stars, or else they are irradiated with electricity, the phosphorescent glow of televisions and computer screens, of neon and LEDs. Moreover, the real world sites that they distantly recall are increasingly artificial themselves. Less a product of architecture per se than environmental design, their imagistic properties are literally embedded within them. Dodge's painterly vocabulary has kept track of these developments, but again from a distance. His always accruing repertoire of marks—thick and thin, wet and dry, dripped, swiped and scraped—all bear traces of distant memories, and perhaps more to the point, the memory of distance itself. All of the successive stages of corruption that assail the original impression—its deformation and reformation, or in the language of psychoanalysis, its repression and secondary elaboration—are also stored within them. And it is in their objective opaqueness alongside the promise transparency that we sense a shudder of recognition, as if what we saw could see us in turn.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (NY: Anchor Books, 1956), 192: "(I)n fact, there is perhaps nothing more terrible in man's earliest history than his mnemotechnics. A thing is branded on the memory to make it stay there; only what goes on hurting will stick..."
2. From Latin *abstractus*, "drawn away," past participle of *abstrahere*, from *ab-* "from" and *trahere* "draw off."
3. "Imagination decomposes all creation, and with the raw materials accumulated and disposed in accordance with rules whose origins one cannot find except in the furthest depths of the soul, it creates a new world..." Charles Baudelaire, *Salon of XXX*
4. From the Medieval Latin *objectum* "thing presented to the mind," neuter past participle of Latin *obicere*, from *ob-* "in the way of" and *jacere* "to throw."
5. For example: "First the Crunch gym, seconds later the Gap and immediately afterward the Starbucks evaporate and then, finally, the McDonalds. Each of the four explosions generates a giant cumulous cloud of roaring flames and smoke that rises up into the gray sky and since the carefully planted bombs have caused the buildings to burst apart outward onto the walkways bodies either disappear into the flames or fly across the street as if on strings, their flight interrupted by their smashing into parked BMWs, and umbrellas knocked out of hands are lifted up by the explosions, some on fire, swinging across the gray sky before landing gently on piles of rubble. ... (A) strange wind blows the smoke away, revealing more rubble, more body parts, bathroom products from the Gap, hundreds of blackened plastic Starbucks cups, melted crunch gym membership cards, even fitness equipment—StairMasters, rowing machines, a stationary bike, all smoldering. Brett Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (NY: Vintage Books, 1998), 270-71.
6. Peter Galison, "Image of Self," *Things that Talk*, ed. Lorraine Daston (NY: Zone Books, 2004), 258.
7. Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondences," *Poems of Baudelaire*, trans. Roy Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952): "Nature's a temple where each living column / At times, gives forth vague words. There Man advances /

Through forest-groves of symbols, strange and solemn, / Who follow him with their familiar glances. / As long-drawn  
echoes mingle and transfuse / Till in a deep, dark unison they swoon, / Vast as the night or as the vault of noon — /  
So are commingled perfumes, sounds, and hues. / There can be perfumes cool as children's flesh, / Like fiddles,  
sweet, like meadows greenly fresh. / Rich, complex, and triumphant, others roll / With the vast range of all non-finite  
things — / Amber, musk, incense, benjamin, each sings / The transports of the senses and the soul.”