



John Torreano: Material World

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

Material World

John Torreano's monumentally scaled monochromatic fields, sentry columns and crosses studded with wooden balls and glittering gems are at once conceptually provocative and drop-dead gorgeous. Beauty is a resurgent cultural concept these days, as social critics and art historians try again to locate meaning in aesthetic experience that transcends the everyday, ephemeral or esoteric. But Torreano's art has always sought to balance aesthetic theory with real-world notions of beauty. Most often, he does this by emphasizing the inherent contradiction between the physicality of his utilitarian materials and the otherworldly evanescence of his painterly fields.

The reemerging interest in painting after several decades of neglect has resulted in an explosion of new subcategories: post-Pop, post-Minimal, post-Neo Geo, post-Neo-Expressionism, or what I somewhat facetiously dubbed "post-Structuralist Materialism."¹ While organizing an exhibition titled *Painting Outside Painting*, I became fascinated with how artists have singlemindedly continued to expand the essential terms of painting by altering its relationship with the wall, or by incorporating non-traditional materials and techniques that blur the boundaries between painting, installation and sculpture. Many of the participating artists were young — post-baby-boom — but the exhibition was anchored by a group of established artists, including John Torreano, who had long been taking this literal argument about what constituted a painting, well, literally.

Even though Torreano is a literalist in terms of his definitions, his art relies on the discrepancy between the prosaic use of plywood, wood balls and faux jewels, and the aesthetic spark they provide when transformed and reconfigured into a painting. Torreano is a painter, but he removes as much paint as he applies; he wields a brush, router or sander with equal aplomb. His process of layering paint applications, scrapings and sandings reinforces the physicality of what we see in his art. We want to read his surfaces as having great depth, to lose ourselves in their voidic, imaginary, starry nights. But as much as we struggle to suspend disbelief in the contemplation of so much beautiful, mysterious and imaginary nature, we are



Chroma Cay, 1990, enamel, wood balls, acrylic gems, plywood, 60" x 60", courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, Mich.

continually, sometimes bluntly, reminded that we are looking at several things at once when we look at a Torreano painting, and that one of them is a painted plane bearing a composition of routed ovals and circles amid a scattering of acrylic gems.

Like Richard Artschwager, Torreano has remained fascinated with the multiple perspectives of quotidian materials. He was an early proponent of the use of the everyday, and he has remained remarkably consistent in his approach. In the early 1970s he enlarged on his interest in the atmospheric lyricism of the Color Field artists by introducing clusters of faux jewels into impastoed monochromatic fields, making a direct analogy between his painted surfaces and the constellations of the night sky. "I wanted to make abstract paintings, but abstraction was never the point. I could not just do luminous color surfaces and leave it at that; I didn't want to be lost in a field. So I started to use the gems as location dots, and that became my subject."² In 1984 he showed these works at the Whitney Museum of

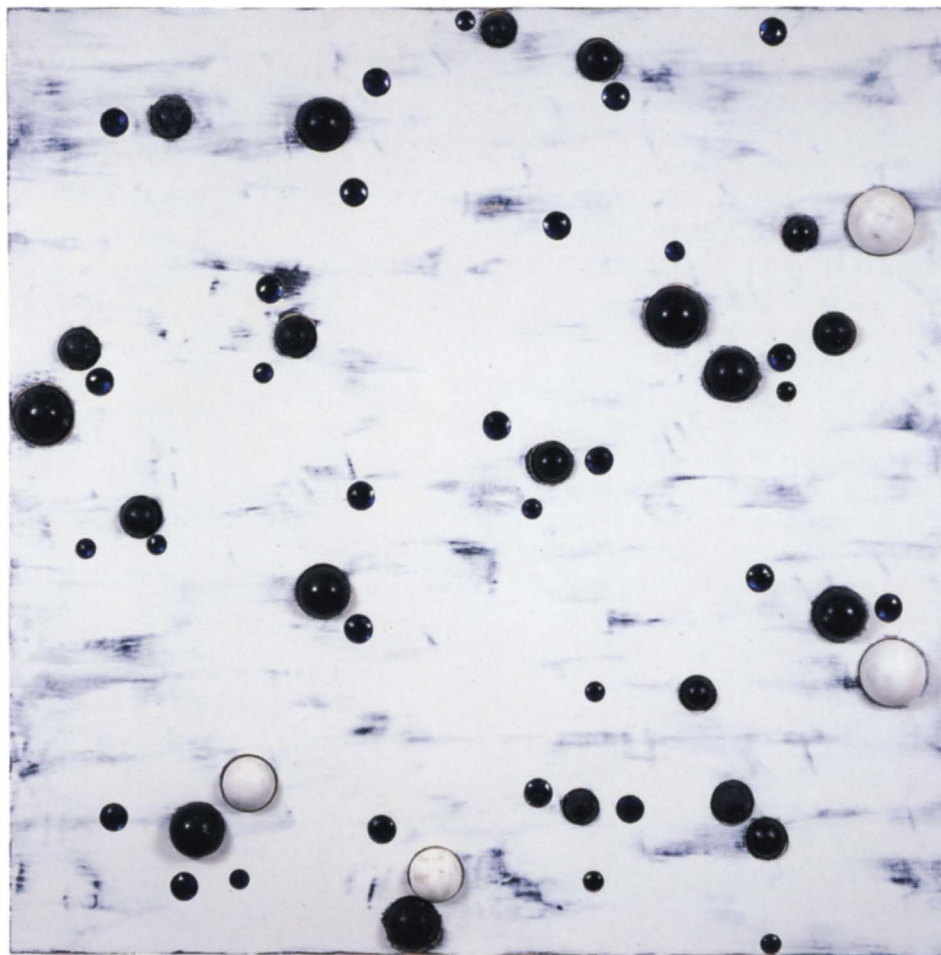
American Art; like the art of Elizabeth Murray, another artist included in *Five Artists in New York*, Torreano's paintings were notable for their willful, aggressive declaration of a territory between representation and abstraction and between painting and relief sculpture. Shortly after this exhibition, Torreano began to incorporate plywood as his preferred surface, increasingly featuring the texture of the plywood as an essential component of his painting. Plywood's grained, vaguely illusionistic field provided a natural analogy for the weightlessness of deep space, and, to Torreano's utilitarian sensibility, plywood's intended use to build a structural "someplace" was the perfect antidote to the infinite "nowhere" veneered across the material's surface. When used in the context of his painting, plywood became a perfect contradiction in terms.

Each of Torreano's paintings charts a cognitive dissonance between the retinal directness and emotional immediacy of flat-plane abstraction and an illusionistic space. Commingling these opposing visual impulses, a painting like *H & Chi*

Persei (1988) insistently reminds us of the elemental incongruity in a material that is manufactured to provide structure support while presenting a vast, undetermined galaxy bannered across its surface. If *H & Chi Persei* suggests an ephemeral, contradictory space, Torreano's columns and crosses, poised as they are between painting and sculpture, are much more assertively physical, addressing us both optically and physically, frontally and peripherally. "The idea of flatness was a problem with me all along, because I never saw painting as flat. I made the sphere paintings and the columns because I always thought that painting was dimensional. The original impulse with the columns had to do with making a 180-degree painting that could be experienced from multiple points of view." Unlike the panel paintings, the columns assertively deny the traditional painterly metaphor of a rectangular window to another world. Instead, these half-round painted hybrids establish their presence by subtly intruding into the architecture of the room. Torreano pursued this idea to its logical extreme in a series of room-sized installations — such as *Ghost Gems* (1989) or *Wall Balls* (1999) — which are composed of dozens or hundreds of discrete painted objects that concretize in architectonic terms the Greenbergian ideal of an atmospheric field. In these installations, each sphere or gem retains a discrete and individual personality while maintaining a place as part of a larger whole, luring the viewer toward the interior of the "painting," which is in fact a physical, sculptural space. The viewer then becomes the central



Cross, 1993, enamel, acrylic gems, wood, 30" x 30", courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, Mich.



Black Balls, Blue Eyes, 1990, enamel, wood balls, acrylic gems, plywood, 72" x 72", courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, Mich.

element in this metaphoric theater-in-the-round, and Torreano's composition exists as a process-based interaction rather than as a hierarchical statement within a static, illusionistic work.

Recently, in works such as *Two Balls with Cream* (1997), *Binary Balls with 2 Gems* (1997) and *Female Oddball* (1998), Torreano has anthropomorphized his clusters, departing from his longstanding use of geometric models such as crosses, columns or geologic patterns. With their dislocated anatomy and bulbous forms, these distant cousins of the *Venus of Willendorf* conjoin sensuality with eccentricity, eroticism with disturbing implications of violence. Although Torreano thinks of these "odd balls" as humorous, I find them more akin to Hans Belmer's dismembered and realigned surrealist dolls. It is as if the balls and gems that inhabit the implied spatial world of *Black Balls, Blue Eyes* (1990) or *Chroma Cay* (1990) have mutated, evolving from single-cell organisms into complex entities. As usual in Torreano's art, beauty lurks everywhere,

subversive and elusive. Proffered through lurid shapes and high-key colors, it gets under your skin and itches.

In *Spot Ball* (1997) and *Dark Matters Too* (1999), Torreano demonstrates a melding of process and content that is at the heart of the reconsideration of abstraction at the end of the 20th century. It might be tempting to see *Spot Ball* as echoing the constellation paintings of the mid-1980s, but there is no attempt to create a three-dimensional spatial relationship between the foreground drawing and the deep space of the painted field, as in *H and Chi Persei*. Moreover, Torreano has altered the relationship of the rectangle to the wall by bolting his panel to an aluminum frame, beveled at the edge so that the picture appears to be floating, hovering in a nether space inches away from the wall. In these new paintings the abstract imagery suggests balanced equations or syncopated rhythms that evoke mathematical or musical structures as an analogy for the organic structure of nature that human beings find beautiful.

Torreano's combinations of high and low reinforce the inherent instability of such a position by consciously subverting our ability to align ourselves with either beauty or utility as we make sense of his art. This subversive stance is closely linked with his sense of humor, much of which is based on what happens when you take things too literally. His wit has the connect-the-dots quality of a stand-up comic's monologue, an avocation he has occasionally pursued. From his perspective, performing in front of a live audience changed his studio practice, forcing him to rely on trust and process instead of any predetermined ideology or belief. Bringing us to the intersection of high and low, Torreano accomplishes in his paintings what he does in his daily routine as he vocally reinvents, deforms and astringetizes '50s pop ballads through a series of subtle lyric and key changes. He makes you see the beauty of these forms as if for the first time. Willfully combining polarities as an excuse to push the aesthetic envelope, Torreano's paintings start with the essence of a classic Color School field painting, as if humming a standard by Frank Sinatra or Nat King Cole. Seducing us with the familiar, they then nudge the lyrics of this by-now-familiar and overly decorative tune ever so slightly, so that our memory of the form and our current perception no longer align. And when this happens, Torreano has won, because as the canon of field painting collapses it ceases to function as an aesthetic, which means that it can once again become a forum for beauty.

— Terrie Sultan

Curator of Contemporary Art
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

NOTES:

1 Terrie Sultan, *Painting Outside Painting: 44th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting* (exh. cat., Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1995), 13.

2 All quotes by John Torreano, unless otherwise noted, are taken from an interview with the author on March 14, 1999.

Cover: *Pink Column*, 1998, wood, acrylic gems, silicone, krylon, 96" x 12" x 6", courtesy the artist, New York



Sun Spots, 1995, wood, enamel, acrylic gems, silicone, 96" x 12" x 6", courtesy Jean Albano Gallery, Chicago

The Columns

The column shape, for me, is a successful alternative to the easel-based rectangle of modern painting. While it can share space on the wall as painting, it also presents the viewer with a continuous curved surface, an effective solution to the problem of flatness, which requires viewers to locate themselves in the front and center of the painting. With the column, every viewer in a 180-degree relationship has equal access. Equality of viewer location eliminates a hierarchy between the viewers based on their relationship to the object(s). The column bulges towards the viewer, which contributes to its three-dimensional sense of presence. This makes it difficult for the viewer to look into it as a "window" and implies that the art object is not a container for the "idea" or the aesthetic experience. Thus, the idea of the viewer as a "decoder" or aesthetic receiver is minimized, and the idea of the viewer as an equal participant in an interactive "transaction" with the object is emphasized.

The columns' shape constancy turns any exhibition space into a "ground." Just as gems, balls or other marks function as "figure" to each column, so too can each column function as a mark on the room or gallery space. The room becomes a painting. The verticality and proportion of the columns mirror the viewer. (They are larger than people but not so large as to disconnect from an anthropomorphic identity with them.) Experiencing the given physical size of the columns contrasts with the viewer's retinal perception of the image(s). Depending on the location of the viewer, the number and size of images that can be experienced become magnified. Furthermore, as the viewer moves, retinal sparks from the gems and size relationships between the columns constantly change. Thus motion itself becomes part of the content as the viewer's point of view is reaffirmed from moment to moment. There is no decoding. When the viewer activates the communication, a simultaneous "transaction" takes place. The viewer becomes the column; the column becomes the viewer. The viewer looks at the object but the object also "sees" the viewer. Together the object and the viewer participate in an elaborate choreography of spatial perceptions.

— John Torreano, 1998