THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Israel Lund's Analog JPEGs

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Israel Lund has always been interested in the innumerable translations images go through as they circulate through various networks, taking on diverse forms as they do so—including, but far from limited to, that of a zine, a Tumblr post, or a painting.1 Lund has explored this movement between the digital realm—employing online venues like Tumblr, Flickr, as well as iPhone apps—and the more traditional analog forms of prints, zines, and posters. The surface of a painting is thus only one of innumerable stops in the circulation of one of the images Lund creates, if perhaps an especially concrete and material one.

This interest in networks of distribution and reception stems from the fact that, starting as a teenager, Lund made posters for local punk shows, as well as connected with other skateboarders by producing zines. This gave Lund an aesthetic education of sorts, which gradually took on additional significance as he encountered art, to the point where he felt that he should start making it himself, first attending art school in Portland, Oregon, before heading back east to go to graduate school. Lund never stopped making zines and posters; rather, it was the very process of making them that gave him the idea to bring the screenprinting process into the realm of painting. This is significant in part because this same general nexus of punk, noise, hardcore, and skateboarding subcultures has proven to be a productive ferment for contemporary artistic practice, serving as an originary (and continuing) space for aesthetic investigation for many interesting young artists today, who have gained more of an aesthetic education from subcultural ephemera than from traditional art school pedagogy.

Israel Lund, "Untitled," 2013. Acrylic on raw canvas, 8.5 × 11". Image courtesy the artist.

Despite the fact that plurality is inherent and central to Lund's practice, it is important to note that it is in the act of making a painting that Lund arrives at an "image," which he then reinterprets to produce other works. Early on he did so by photocopying the paintings—using the reproductive technology he was most familiar with from his experience making zines. More recently he has photographed and processed these "images" through digital mediators like a smartphone PDF-making app, which can either generate other paintings, produce a zine, or be uploaded to his Tumblr. The means by which Lund generates these images is specific to his curious joining of silkscreening—conventionally a commercial, graphic practice—with a canvas support: a low, rather than high, tech process. Lund is of course far from the first artist to introduce silkscreening into the space of painting, with numerous illustrious predecessors from Warhol to Rauschenberg but, to my knowledge, no one else has addressed this primarily reproductive technique as a means by which to generate a fully non-objective image. Warhol, even at his most abstract—as in the "Shadow" paintings of the late 1970s—relied on photographic source material, even if the exact nature of those sources are sometimes highly ambiguous or unknown.

To make his paintings Lund takes a conventional 8.5-by-11-inch sheet of paper, burning that "blank" into his screen, and then pushes paint through the resulting empty rectangle with a squeegee. This gives him a modicum of control over the kind of image he will produce: for example, whether it will be in color or black and white, dense or airy in execution. But the subtleties and specificities of each individual painting are more the result of the particular way Lund executes the image—how much pressure he exerts, how much paint he applies, etc. These decisions are intuitively determined by the artist, but largely outside of his precise control, some of which he must give up to his tools and materials. For example, in the earliest, black-and-white 8.5-by-11-inch paintings, Lund would first screen the white paint in an even, matter-of-fact way, after which he would apply the black in a looser fashion by applying a different amount and consistency of pressure. Lund continued this method as he began to work in color, allowing for an even more complex relationship between chance and control, as each color—derived from the CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and key, i.e. black) printing process—must be applied as an individual layer.

When Lund pushes paint through the mesh matrix of his silkscreen, small square paint marks are generated that correspond to the grid of the canvas weave and sit on top of it, sinking in only enough to bind, but not enough to fuse with the other paint marks into a coherent, readable image. Instead each mark remains resolutely on the surface as entirely un-, or only partially, processed painterly data, and it is on this count alone that a parallel may be drawn between Lund's screened marks and pixels, insofar as both are image substrates. These marks further bear a superficial relationship to the dot gradients produced through the conventional, if now mostly obsolete, photographic halftone printing method, an unintentional correspondence that Lund himself noticed after making the first few paintings by this method, at which point he said to himself, "If they look like halftone dots, then I'll treat them like halftone dots."2 This realization inaugurated his treatment of each painting as source material for any number of other paintings and, further, as part of a bank of images that might one day end up online or in a book, for instance.

As a result of this process, a hazy, hard-to-read image is generated, rather than one that achieves legibility by subverting the mute materiality of canvas into a vehicle for abstract pictorial space—the conventional function of paint on canvas. This is what most emphatically separates Lund's paintings from those of a precursor like Warhol. Even at his most abstract, as in the "Shadow" series, Warhol screened his images on top of a prepared and painted ground; because of such a ground's suturing and framing function, which physically and contextually binds the painted and screened marks together into a coherent image, he allowed for that screened image to still be legible as an image, albeit one that borders on unintelligibility. Lund denies this in his paintings by always screening acrylic directly onto unprimed canvas.

For this reason, while we can discuss these works in general terms such as color, the density of the overall painted field, or resemblance to a haze or TV static, it is very difficult to speak of the appearance of a typical Lund painting with any formal or iconographic specificity. Instead, in confronting what we might call the "non-image," "partial image," or "imagistic noise" of one of Lund's paintings, we are left more with a particular feeling or sensation. In an era when so much of our lives is determined by our encounters with the endless stream of images proceeding across our various devices, it is radical to produce art that resists easy formal discussion and categorization, even as it nevertheless circulates through these same systems. The same can also be said of the art's circulation through

the more traditional networks of the art world—exhibition spaces, private and public collections, etc.—where, as a physical object, it similarly resists easy formal meaning in its refusal to become an image.

It is important to realize that as seductively and beautifully as Lund's paintings are sometimes reproduced, this process occurs graphically, in a way that flattens the tension between material and optical terms that I am describing here. Given Lund's interest in the circulation of images, it seems important that those of his works both seamlessly enter the stream of the Internet, and present a very particular experience when seen in person—an encounter that reveals the necessity of their existence as paintings on canvas, and not simply as images on the Internet, like some art today. Lund's paintings blank out on the computer or smartphone screen, where they morph into everything from monochrome rectangles to explosions of smeared static.

Their non- or anti-imagistic terms mean that these paintings will inevitably be mistranslated in the digital realm, challenging the very systems through and by which they are most often disseminated and seen. Yet, Lund goes even a step further by purposefully restricting the linguistic markers of difference between one work and another: each is uniformly "Untitled," executed in the same medium, acrylic on raw canvas, and (presently, at least) restricted to three formats: 8.5 by 11 inches, 34 by 44 inches, and (most recently) 68 by 88 inches. As such, one paradoxically has to rely on these willfully imperfect images to distinguish one painting from the next, even as those directly factual descriptors, such as size and medium—not to mention the less tangible ones such as optical effect and phenomenal presence—are flattened and obscured in the digital image. Subversive, but not negative, all parts of Lund's practice thus force us to confront the simultaneous necessity and inadequacy of each element of the work's context and circulation; in a sense none is primary, nor can it substitute for any of the others. Instead we are sent continually cycling between image, object, and description, and are consequently left in a permanent state of fragmented movement.

Recent developments in Lund's practice, as seen in his latest solo exhibition at David Lewis, allow us to survey and further probe how these formal and experiential tactics operate in Lund's work, and how Lund continues to experiment with them. By introducing sculptural screens in this exhibition, Lund has added another even more material layer to his exploration of image circulation. Each of these custom fabricated, free-standing powder-coated aluminum armatures contains an image made via a photo emulsion on an acrylic mesh screen, and relate directly to the silk-screening tools and process by which his paintings are produced. Lund distributed these screens around the gallery in three groupings: one that receded down the middle of the gallery, following the sightline from the gallery's entrance; another to the right as a small, somewhat randomly arrayed cluster; and in the back a small row of three formed a horizontal line, perpendicular to the central group.

These complex new sculptures operate at multiple levels. Most immediately, they motivate the movement of the viewer to activate a constantly changing visual experience of the gallery space. While flatly graphic from afar, moving in close to peer into and through the linear drawings, patterns and translucent fields that fill these armatures differently frame the viewer's perception of the gallery as he or she moves through it. Other artworks and people flicker past and, in the process, become temporarily caught within the lenses created by these screens. We are, for example, momentarily captivated by how one screen—pink with a panel of linear scribbles—distorts what it frames to the point of almost complete obfuscation, while the next—navy blue with a pale gray dot matrix pattern—subtly fuzzes it out, causing us to peer more intently to try to make out what is happening just beyond it.

The roughly human scale and upright posture of Lund's screens mediate our perception of the world around us. Further, by requiring the movement of the viewer to activate a particular visual encounter—since we must perambulate Lund's armatures in order to experience how they differently frame and color space—they evoke our physical, tactile manipulation of virtual material on the digital screens of our smartphones, tablets, and H.D.T.V.s. However, unlike those passive digital prostheses, Lund's screens lend agency to the activity of our vision, transforming the exhibition space into a variegated array of different filters through which our perception of that space, not to mention its contents, is constantly changing, enhanced and controlled by our body's movement and alternation between focus and distraction.

Installation Shot of Israel Lund Untitled Exhibition. Photo: Adam Reick. David Lewis Gallery, New York, 2014. Image courtesy the artist and David Lewis Gallery.

Two of Lund's latest and largest paintings accompanied the sculptural screens, containing in their quadrants a diverse summary of the different imagistic formats Lund has thus far used in his work. These works incorporate images of multiple overlapping Martin Kippenberger drawings and a photo Lund took of a Daniel Buren vinyl piece while it was on view at Petzel (complete with the halo made by his phone camera's flash). Along with his signature hazy color fields, all have appeared in his oeuvre before, albeit not together in the same work.

These paintings rigorously advance Lund's seemingly contradictory idea: the "analog jpeg." This neologism allows Lund to address the way that images take on a peculiar and multifaceted existence when they get caught in the weave of one of his canvases, where they hover between the register of the flat image that we find in the painted surface, and an object—the work taken as a three-dimensional whole. This is an inevitable condition of all painting since the 1960s, which definitively introduced the notion of painting-as-object: a flat surface backed by a three-dimensional support. Lund demonstrates how this necessarily dual existence becomes newly significant in an age where we treat images as having the same degree of functional reality as objects, and vice-versa.

Beholding the two paintings on view—their seemingly full, even lush, coloristic fields—we at first expect our eyes to be able to travel, unfettered, through these sprays of pigment. Yet, we quickly find ourselves halted, as clouds of suspended color refuse to let us get our bearings. They remain resolutely on the surface of the canvas. The more we probe with our eyes, asking the haze to part and let our eyes float into the image, the more Lund's painted fields firmly hold their ground. The matrix of Lund's painterly marks insistently point us back to the materiality of the canvas weave on which the paint has been deposited, the cross stitch of which correlates to the screen's dot matrix, and all this despite our desire, and even our insistence, for the marks to fade into it and resolve into an abstract pictorial space.

No doubt this is why, in many of his paintings, Lund has explored the possibilities of layering screened paint, such that it raises up to make ever more obdurate surfaces that demand to be read as one material (paint) lying on top of another (canvas). In some paintings—like those he has shown in group shows at Torri, Bill Brady, and Roberts & Tilton—Lund has pushed this exploration to an extreme. In these very dark and densely built-up works, any "image" we might perceive from the front is obscured, when viewed obliquely from the side, by Lund's layering of purple-blue acrylic.

Lund has seized upon our contemporary visual vernacular to trouble our notions of spatial experience, whether painterly, digital, or actual. Not only is it impossible to place oneself in the space Lund has generated but, even more subversively, we cannot definitively characterize it either. This experience has as much potential to intellectually stimulate as it does to challenge our assumptions about access to both imaginary and real space, a line which has itself become extremely unstable and blurry in an age where we often trust the images delivered by our digital devices as much, if not more, than what we see around us.

Thus Lund's works do not resolve these material and pictorial terms, but rather hold them in constant tension. As soon as we want to read abstract pictorial space out from the cues presented by the hazy fields generated by Lund's screening process, this reading is undermined by the resolutely material nature of the canvas weave onto which it has been deposited. The obfuscation of the paint means that we cannot simply read the work as a mute, materialist expression, given that the basic spatial cues remain. We are thus caught endlessly oscillating back and forth between these two poles, never able to fully stop at one or the other.

Our eyes dart around, trying to gain a foothold, but we find ourselves without a clear hierarchy of spatial coordinates to logically resolve a field that is hard to characterize. Anytime we feel we are getting close to doing so, we quickly find ourselves confronted with the material presence of the canvas weave with which the matrix of Lund's paint application corresponds. It is as if his images offer up a haze of information, seemingly meaningless as it is caught between either resolving itself into an image, or definitively dissolving into the digital noise of aggregated pixels without specific purpose. These basic components of the image detach from it and stand out as dumb units of "pure" information, communicating nothing but significatory potential.

Like several of the most interesting artists working today, Lund both solicits our expectation of mastery and agency via the activity of vision—which animates and activates the screens that increasingly mediate the world around us (think, for example, of how a touchscreen largely doesn't function without the faculty of sight which directs our fingers)—and denies it by playing the extremes of visual and tactile cues, without satisfying either.3 This sends us on an endless relay between the two terms, but this experience is far from frustrating. Rather, in humbling us, it also presents its own particular form of pleasure. There is a sense of agency otherwise gained, whereby we realize that perhaps the main valence of agency that we have today is that of dropping out, of refusing to participate in a seemingly endless number of apparently compulsory, even largely invisible, systems in which we are inculcated. This is, of course, not a full dropping out, but rather an exploratory, fragile, abstract, and intellectual one, whereby we can understand the possibility of opting out of the simulated agency that we are fed today, so as to hopefully conceive new modes of agency.

These new modes are not engendered by Lund's paintings, for they cannot be. Rather this momentary release, and the other ways of thinking it potentially opens up, become the grounds for possibility: the possibility of reimagining agency and action in an as if fully foreclosed time. This is the underlying radicality of Lund's practice, to provide us with this small space for rethinking the very terms of the political—however transient, temporary, and hard-won that might be. As such, these works open up an unexpected horizon of future possibilities.

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