Carrie Johnson
by Lynn Maliszewski

October 2018

“Look at the city of New York. Nobody can tell me that man feels like a king
in New York. He is just an ant on an ant heap and doesn’t count at all, he is
superfluous there, the ant heap is the thing that counts.”
— C.G. Jung (1)

What’s the point of abstract painting in the twenty-first century? Why hold steadfast
to formal suggestion and ambiguity? Carrie Johnson’s abstract paintings on canvas
establish balance and a sense of imaginary space dissociated from the regimen of
time. Even if flux is the singular constant, both outside and within the parameters of
her canvas, she seeks internal structure. Johnson’s output arrives slowly — repetition
and an intuitive sharpening of her vision define her practice. She is at once methodical
and open to chance encounters, informed by her interdisciplinary core.

Johnson’s process sprouts from strategies acquired during her time at Yale University
in the early 1980s. Situated within the Design MFA program, Johnson studied drawing,
book making, printmaking, typography, and poster design. She was inspired by
Bauhaus and skeptical of the imposed confines of departmental specificity, which
brought her to painting. In the Painting Department Annex, Johnson kept a studio
reserved for her painting practice in a repurposed public bathroom. She pursued both
interests simultaneously throughout the 1990s, with design satisfying her professional
and economic needs. Toward the end of the decade, she diminished her painting
practice to focus on her family. For nearly twenty years Johnson pursued the highest
level of design in magazines, museums, store design, branding, and advertising.
With this return to painting, Johnson surveys the scene around her with a new function:
the combination of disparate, borrowed, altered, repeated, and reimagined parts into
a coherent whole.

The methods common in the pre-computer design community provide the building
blocks of her recent paintings. Johnson assembles images from predominantly digital
sources that describe structures or subjects that appeal to her. Aerial views of factories
and industrial complexes in America have remained points of interest since her earliest
days commuting from New York City to Rutgers University for a job in their art
department. Enroute to Newark each day via New Jersey Transit, Johnson was
captivated by the topography of the banal landscape, the primary colors, the severity.
Her upbringing in the Midwest in the 1970s established a criticality toward the
industrial sprawl she observed and the languorous American Dream it represented.
Each seemingly directionless expanse collapsed on the X-and-Y axes, transforming into a scale-less, obscure zone trapped between elevation and plan. These photographs mingle with artworks by Arshile Gorky and Joan Mitchell, stacks of books to read, images of rock formations, and landscape photographs, among many other things. In this wide edit of images, Johnson digests scientific and art historical innovations from the twentieth century that inform our contemporary moment. These references set very loose parameters, like a block of marble awaiting whittling.

These images are complemented by collages on letter-sized paper, many of which are constructed from over 100 years’ worth of National Geographic magazines Johnson has collected over the last decade. Originally, National Geographic was intended to document environmental transformation on this planet and the maturity of scientific inquiry. As time and science progressed, the priorities and aesthetic of the magazine shifted. When National Geographic was launched in 1888, the contents resembled an academic journal; at the turn of the century, the shock of images from around the world motivated a more exploratory, non-specialist tone. Not unlike Diderot’s Encyclopedie, composed of over thirty volumes of information amassed from various scholars over several decades during the French Enlightenment, National Geographic became a source of expanded possibilities. It introduced microscopic complexities within the natural world to its readers, and exposed a correlation between science and culture.

Johnson uses images from National Geographic as a guide for textural mark-making. The mysterious environments and phenomena documented in the magazine’s early days confront more recent considerations of the planet’s fragility. In these collages, the natural world and human footprint are in conversation. Johnson dares us to assess how our connection to these images has changed. She focuses on landscapes: craggy rock-faces, dense vegetation, and smooth canyons, among other sites and scenes, serve as backgrounds upon which dynamic shapes — an airplane wing or prism of color, for example — puncture the space. Manmade fragments rival the rhythm of organic forms. Each collage serves as the site to physically tease out a fore, middle, and background via texture, overriding the flatness of the excerpted locales. Per Johnson, these collages are scaffolds that expose her reverence toward landscape and the feelings provoked by natural subject matter. Visual anomalies captured after natural disasters, such as beached yachts or submerged homes, shock some of these collages out of quiet contemplation. Johnson disturbs the meditative coherence of nature by making it unrecognizable. This communion of spliced images remains discreet from Johnson’s paintings, but serve as obvious points of reference for how texture might summon depth and balance.
This source material recedes from view between the collage and overlay stage. Fragments of the collages are applied to clear plastic transparencies, defined only by line. Johnson calls these her prototypes, templates that will be randomly applied to canvas at the beginning of her painting process. Several transparencies, be they new compositions or sourced from her archives, are combined into a single choreography. Each prototype, made up of chains or clusters of shapes, will be applied to several canvases in varied orientations and magnifications. Overlays from the past may be layered upon newer compositions as well. The goal is a composition that implies a spatial plane. Sometimes Photoshop is employed for the sake of trial and error before applying paint to canvas. As both a planar reference and compositional tool, these prototypes provide the foundation for each series.

Composition is Johnson’s subject. Each painting renders a built environment, one that implies a meditation on the ways in which forms exist together. The artist was inspired early on by Paul Rand, one of her professors at Yale, and his emphasis on Modernist aesthetics and functionality. Spirituality in the Bauhaus, exemplified by the work of Josef Albers and Wassily Kandinsky, solidified Johnson’s affinity for phenomenology. The Surrealists and their suggestion of imaginative mobility within the confines of an image also shaped Johnson’s ethos, and inform her openness to chance despite the repetition of her scaffolds. Rather than a point of conflict for Johnson, this movement is innate to a successful composition.

The process is indicative of Johnson’s ultimate goal with her work: to set a composition, mutate the circumstances, and find a way to render a harmonized space. Each exercise leading up to putting brush to canvas is a node in her train of thought. When she paints, however, she refrains from complete loyalty to these prior designs. She employs earlier phases of her process as landmarks, and revels in the degree of inaccuracy inherent to translation. She remains conscious of each medium’s occupation and capacity within her process, and alters them accordingly as her paintings come into being. Johnson’s work strives for the necessity of every element, which starts with her definition of form via line. Johnson builds the background as the control, the stability, of the composition. Striated with color, scraped with a palate knife, or sanded and rubbed, the background serves as the stage for the shapes upon it.

The ground and atmosphere in Johnson’s work is defined by color and its opacity. In this new series, white blends with her color palate to produce muddy pastels that recede, in moments, into a gray purgatory. These backgrounds, upon closer inspection, bear the residue of Johnson’s process. Illusory flatness is punctured by murky splotches only visible in the light. When the background is set and stable, Johnson shifts her attention to the shapes in the middle and foreground. The subtle motion in the foreground is in constant conversation with the faint outlines
of overpainted shapes, slipping into oblivion. Johnson stops and starts, using her prototype overlay as a hunch that can only be affirmed with color on canvas. She embraces failure and is ready to pause on or completely repurpose a painting that has been overworked. There is an acute chaos inherent to this process, but Johnson is sensitive to the volatility of her components. The banter between canvases is not just a nod to their internal structure, but the goal of this entire family of paintings.

Johnson has a sense of tranquility within the turbulence of these works. In his essay, "Consciousness Slipped from Its Natural Foundation," C.G. Jung reflects upon the mind, “trained to produce an abstract condition of mind over and against the temptation of the senses or emotions”(2). Such abstractions define contemporary consciousness, riddled with “reflections, doubts, experiments,” and curtail our primitive instinct(3). This advancement has separated human beings from the soil and nature, according to Jung, because he must oppose his instinct in order to gain consciousness(4). Artist Liz Deschenes’ practice revokes the outward glance of photography in favor of abstraction and chemical reactions, not unlike Johnson. Deschenes was similarly immersed in a multidisciplinary arts education in the 1980s, and presents her work as spatial interventions. In an interview with Kathleen Peterson in BOMB, Deschenes proclaimed that “perception rather than description [is] the central, and most vital, task of an artist”(5). She and Johnson investigate a set of conditions within which they work, inviting a viewer to contemplate process and output simultaneously. Both artists embrace repetition as a mirror, where each series is comprised of a melody played at different tempos.

Johnson’s new paintings indulge in the introspection of painting. They do not support a discreet aim or function. Her color palate and soft, blurred line are in stark opposition to the high-resolution abstraction of artists such as Anne Truitt or Blinky Palermo, both of whom appeal more to the body in the space and the physical presence of color. Johnson considers painting an arena of conflict that can be resolved. Each construction summons late Byzantine attempts at rendering three-dimensional space. Repeating genre and religious scenes suggested by the church or wealthy patrons, painters in thirteenth-century Italy including Cimabue and Giotto were on the forefront of pushing the limits of three-dimensional representation. Both painters were rarely figuratively accurate, but managed a level of coherence despite poorly fore-shortened fingers and awkward drapery. Their audience sought a meaningful construction of forms in space. Jung notes, “abstract thought is always ruthless” — we seek a degree of meaning from it, like these early art patrons sought favor with God or the pride of their city through representation(6). Johnson prioritizes the inverse, using abstraction to draw attention to the contemporary landscape, and our ability to consider the elements of modern society in an abstract way. How do these forms influence our psyche? How do their literal shapes and forms effect us?
Per Dave Hickey, there are no prerequisites for looking at abstract art except a “proclivity for” reaction and “permission” to respond(7). After twenty-plus years in design, submerged in deliberate workflows and brand identities, Johnson’s abstraction is a large-scale meditation upon the dynamics of space that breed very distinct feelings of balance or imbalance. A conceptual connection can be made to Richard Diebenkorn’s Ocean Park series, which he undertook from his studio in the Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica, California, between 1967 and 1988. These architectonic works, over 140 in total, focused on the luminescent landscape and California light(8). Diebenkorn’s drawings and paintings in this series, despite their labored geometry and delicacy, also reflect his impulsive process — canvases could be reused or destroyed at a moment’s notice, mistakes or compositional misdirection covered by opaque layers of paint. He spent twenty years cataloguing the light on the hills via color, shape, and line. The sharp surges of electricity and subtle static of Johnson’s surroundings are translated from effect to visual information with similar attention.

In his reflection upon Paul Cezanne’s still lifes, Maurice Merleau-Ponty observed “a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force”(9). Each piece of fruit “vibrates as it is formed,” he says, ultimately generating “the indivisible whole” — the visual representation of the fruit that cannot be separated from its softness, aroma, or ripeness(10). In this new series, Johnson strives for a similar completeness, using abstraction to capture the riptide current of the metropolis. Each painting strives for equilibrium, even as it oscillates — a paradox seminal to long-term life in the big city, and perhaps a reflection of Johnson’s ambition moving forward.

(2) Ibid, 72.
(3) Ibid.
(4) Ibid, 72–3.
(6) Sabini, 143.
(10) Ibid.
Lynn Maliszewski is based in Brooklyn, New York. She has written for publications including ARTnews, The Brooklyn Rail, caa.reviews, Hyperallergic, and OSMOS, among others. Since 2012, her research and archival interests have earned her employment at the Museum of Modern Art; MoMA PS1; Printed Matter; e-flux; Primary Information; and CUE Art Foundation. Between 2015 and 2017, she attended the Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS), Bard College, to research the history of printed matter and samizdat arts publishing during the Cold War. She has curated exhibitions of new work by Huma Bhabha, Jeremy Olson, Max Razdow, and Jeremy Olson. She is currently the gallery manager and artist liaison at Callicoon Fine Arts in Manhattan.