



wexner center for the arts

JACQUELINE HUMPHRIES

jHΩ1:)

ON VIEW SEPT 18, 2021–JAN 2, 2022

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COVER
jHΩ1:), 2018. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in.
The Abrishamchi Family Collection.

Director's Foreword

Whether you're finding this interpretive guide in our galleries or on our website, wexarts.org, welcome to the Wexner Center for the Arts! Even in these uncertain times, we're excited to embark on a busy fall season here at The Ohio State University and proud to serve as its multidisciplinary laboratory for contemporary art and culture. One of the key tenets of our mission is to provide an open forum where artists can test ideas and where diverse audiences can engage the art and issues of our time. With our presentation of *Jacqueline Humphries: jHΩ1:*, its related events, and our many other programs this season, we're happy to provide that forum in person or online, wherever you may be.

Jacqueline Humphries: jHΩ1: marks a momentous occasion not only because it's the New York-based artist's first large-scale museum exhibition, or even because it features a new multipanel work and exhibition design made specially for our provocative building in tandem with guest curator Mark Godfrey. The exhibition is thrilling because Humphries's practice embraces abstract painting—a mode of art making that many think of as historical—while bringing it into dialogue with the issues and interfaces that shape our lives today. You'll see canvases that incorporate emoticons and the distended letterforms of CAPTCHA verification codes, and paintings that seem to glow with the light of computer monitors and smartphone screens (realities rendered all the more strange and familiar during the video meetings and remote learning of the COVID pandemic).

Humphries's work doesn't just concern itself with technology. A series of works created between 2018 and 2021 features gestural strokes of paint applied to supports that look like

protest signs, calling to mind the social upheavals that have defined our era. These objects prompt us to visualize similar signs being carried by Black Lives Matter activists or those picketing corporations with ties to opioid production. The artist's recent works that incorporate commercial logos drive the point home, calling to attention the political and corporate ties that underpin so many aspects of contemporary life—even the production of art.

This visionary ability to use art, even genres of the past, to so aptly frame our circumstances today underlines the social relevance of contemporary creators like Humphries. The Wexner Center is here to support them. The center is also here to bring the issues and ideas presented in our exhibitions to life for campus, the Columbus community, and beyond. Please join us online on October 4 as Godfrey delivers a virtual talk on his curatorial practice and the changing landscape of the arts, and in the galleries on October 27 when Humphries returns to present a performative dialogue with artist and author Felix Bernstein. Visit wexarts.org for details and a complete schedule of upcoming events.

We thank Jacqueline Humphries, Mark Godfrey, our staff, members, volunteers, and board of trustees for all they have done to bring this exhibition to fruition. And we offer our deep appreciation for the generous sponsors listed in the back of this publication for making it and all of our programs possible. We sincerely hope you enjoy this presentation and our upcoming programs this fall.

Warmly,
Johanna Burton, Executive Director



A Guided Walkthrough of *jHΩ1:*

with artist Jacqueline Humphries
and guest curator Mark Godfrey

Mark Godfrey: Jacqueline, this exhibition brings together works from the last seven or eight years of your practice, but it's also a response to the Wexner Center and to Peter Eisenman's building.¹ Can you say a few words about how you and I have conceived the installation of the paintings before we get into what viewers can see in each room?

Jacqueline Humphries: With architecture this unusual there were two ways to go: either install walls to make it a more conventional exhibition space, or meet the building where it is and then exceed it, which is the path that we ultimately chose. We tried to truly understand the building, to work with it and embrace all its idiosyncrasies (which are not just quirks or oddities, but highly considered architectural decisions). Our aim was to install the paintings in ways that visitors would never otherwise see them—it will likely be the first (and last) time that art is hung at the Wexner Center in this way.

Gallery A: Silver, X, and Black Light Paintings 2013–15

MG: In front of us are two paintings, *31/13* and *41/14*—some of the last of the silver paintings that you made in 2013 and 2014. This body of work primarily used black and a silver-based paint. Can you describe your approach to creating those two key pigments? What's special about both the black and the reflective silver paint?

JH: To the eye they read as opposites: black absorbs light and silver reflects it to the maximum degree. But there are further differences in their physical properties that made using these two elements very productive for me. I have my colors custom mixed, and the black paint is extremely dense, almost claylike. The silver paint, which I make in the studio, is light and fluffy—like whipped cream. Used in combination, those physical properties have allowed me to create very particular effects.

MG: When you move around the silver paintings they change appearance because of the different ways light is reflecting, so the paintings become an active presence in the room. How does the responsive quality of those paint-



41/14, 2014. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in. Collection of Maurice and Paul Marciano. Detail on page 4.

ed surfaces relate in your mind to other types of viewing experiences: to the computer screens, cinema screens, and phone screens that are synonymous with the world we live in?

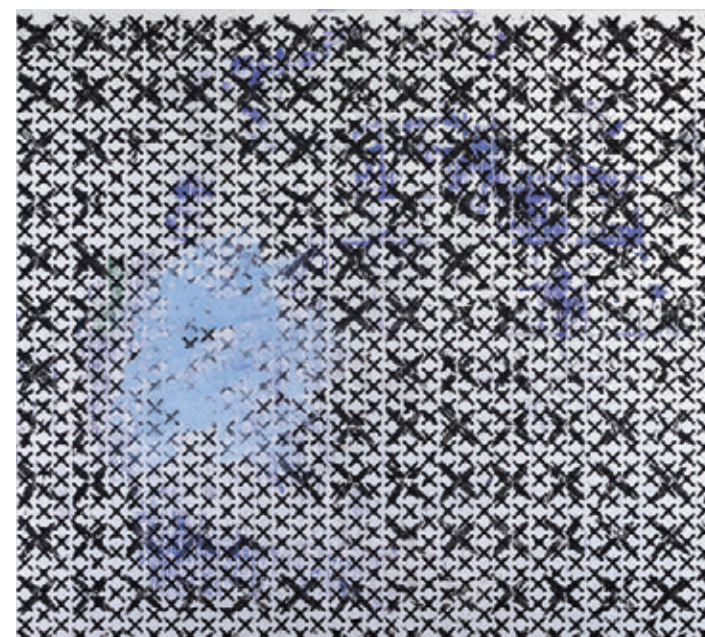
JH: The paintings really do change their aspect depending on the lighting conditions: it's almost as if they have the capacity to turn on and off in different light. The silver pigment can go very dull or it can be the purest white, and those effects are unpredictable.

MG: One of the silver paintings has a square interior frame, which follows the contours of the painting's support and directs attention to its center. What draws you to the frame as a compositional strategy?

JH: Articulating a frame is a good way to start. It's a way of declaring the surface—declaring the space where painting can occur. And frames are also closely tied to my thinking about screens and the glut of viewing devices that surround us. They started appearing in my work when my identity as an abstract painter began to dovetail with this new reality of proliferating screens, and I had to ask myself what kind of image I should commit to a painting in a world full of moving images that are constantly replacing each other. I wondered how I could capture that fleeting reality of screen viewing in a painting—a medium that has a long-standing commitment to a more permanent, more significant image.

MG: Your paintings display a dense variety of marks and mark-making strategies: paint can be applied with a brush or layered on with a scraping device; some of the marks are made through a stencil; and the stencils themselves are often made by tracing one of your previous brushstrokes or drips. The use of a stencil means that the marks on the canvas are mediated, rather than direct. What led you to that idea in the first place?

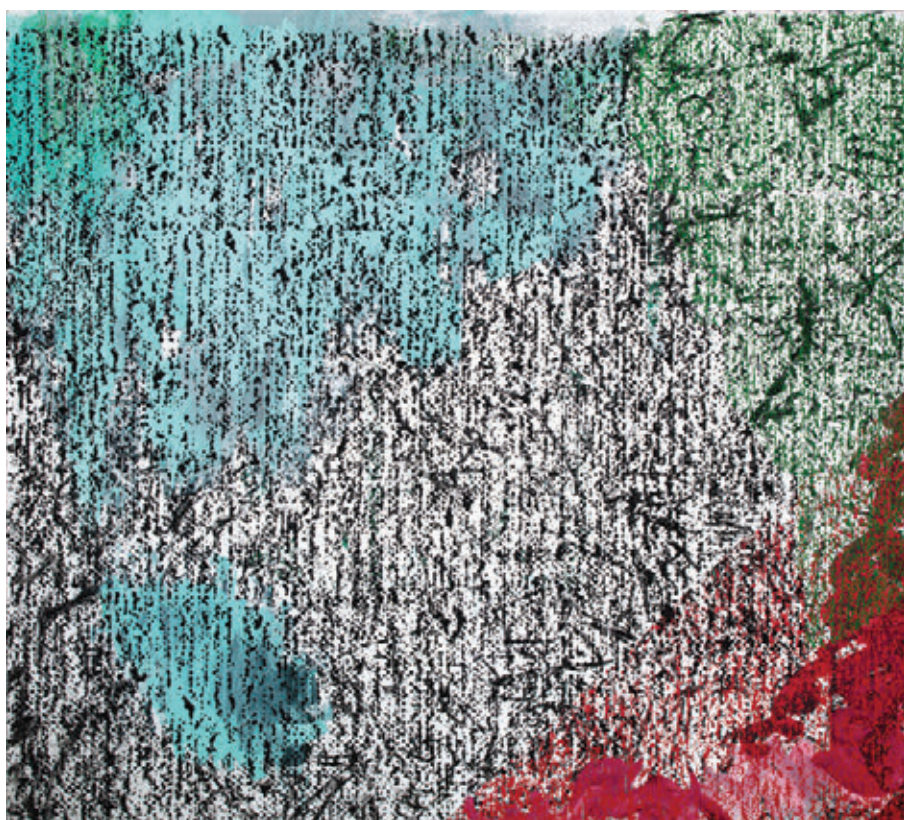
JH: I had been making hand-cut stencils for many years as a tool for generating marks. For instance, I might trace a drip from a painting, cut a stencil of that form, and then reapply it somewhere else on the painting. I was very interested in the idea of painterly marks that could reproduce themselves, not always directly originating from the artist's hand.



Xx, 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Sascha Steven Bauer, New York.

MG: Opposite the silver paintings are three works in which you used stencils made from repeated Xs. How do these relate to the frequently expressed impulse in painting's recent history to continue painting while canceling it?

JH: Any art student who gets interested in abstraction makes an X painting—it's an act of negation, which is also just a heightened version of the negation that's inherent in all abstraction. It has the imprimatur of radicalness and refusal. But my engagement with the X motif is more playful, because clearly nothing is being refused here. Instead it's a profusion of these stenciled Xs—an outpouring of them that uses repetition and excess to undercut the seriousness of the gesture.



[], 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. The Komal Shah and Gaurav Garg Collection.

MG: At the far end of the gallery is *[]* (2014), an extraordinary painting that has an allover field of marks made from a stencil based on a scan of the weave of an unpainted canvas—as though the canvas is depicting itself. Why were you interested in that kind of doubling, turning the surface materiality of a painting into the image that can occupy it?

JH: I'm very interested in both the conventions of looking at painting and how to disrupt them. Typically a person would stand in front of a painting to look at it, but I began to think, what if the viewer *were* the painting? If a painting looks out at the world, what does the painting see? That's obviously a theoretical proposition, but then I had to confront it visually, so my solution was to make a painting and then stencil the canvas over top, as if the whole surface of the painting were inverted or flipped in on itself.



Ω, 2015. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg. Detail on page 41.

MG: Opposite this work there is a painting (*Ω*, 2015) made from laser-cut stencils that came about after you had researched the computer game *Dwarf Fortress* (2006). What interested you in this game's graphics?

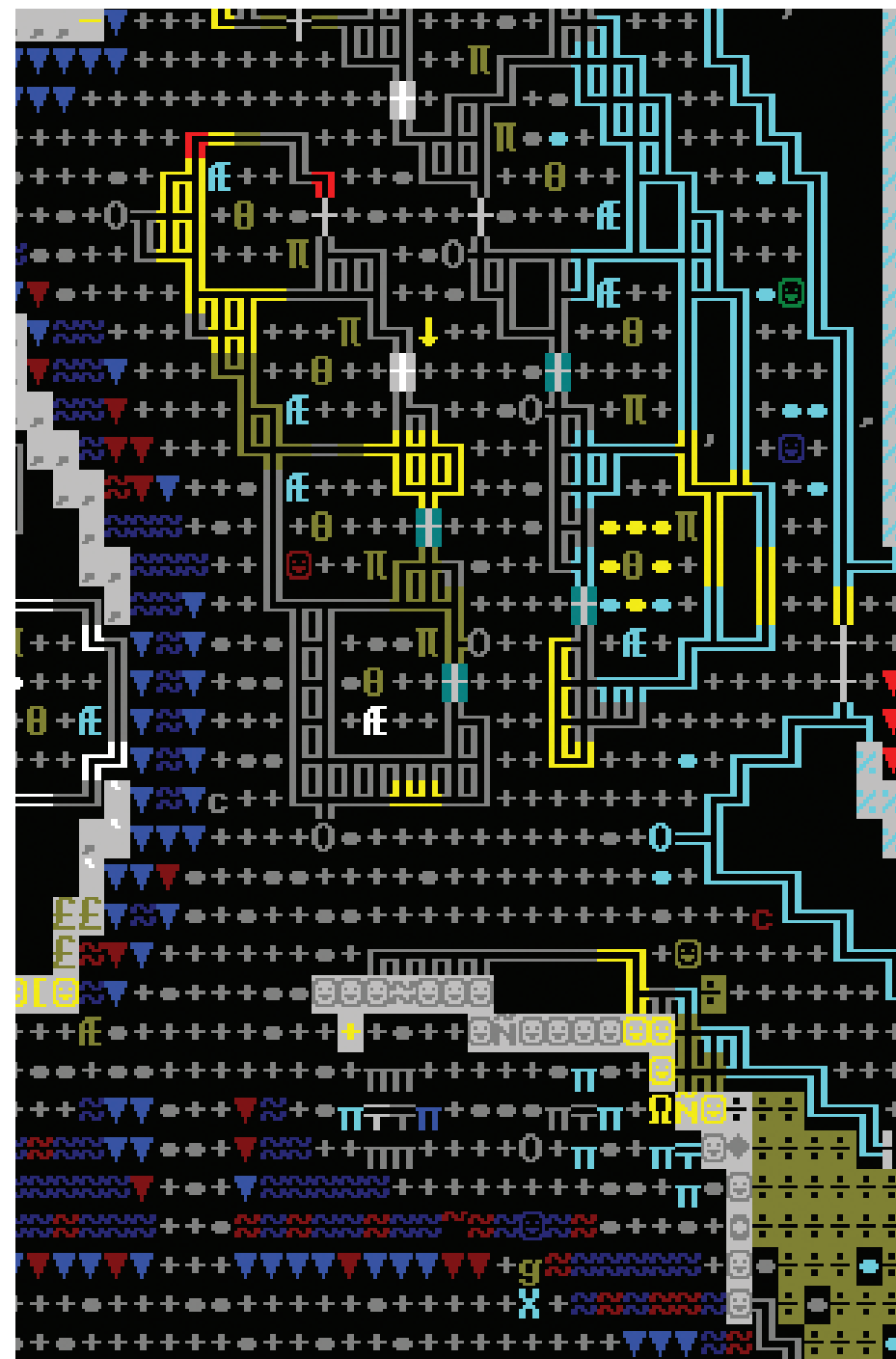
JH: *Dwarf Fortress* creates complex (and quite beautiful) landscapes from fields of keyboard characters in different configurations. There are no rendered graphics, yet it achieves incredible variety from this limited array of letters and numbers. It's very inventive and has a cult status within the ranks of serious gamers; there's an almost sublime quality to the visuals it produces from this mundane tool kit.²

This was a transitional painting for me, because it marked a shift from working with a single all-over pattern to abutting different patterns within in a single painting. That move opened up a different morphology in my use of the stencils—a layered look that created compositional interest out of different combinations and densities and gradients.

That work is also one that brought me more fully into the technological realm. The stenciled motifs I had used up until this point were fields of dots or repeated Xs—predigital marks that belong to a long history of high abstraction. *Dwarf Fortress*, though, embraces the keyboard as the generator and the content of the game, and making paintings from those characters was a way for me to acknowledge the keyboard as the space where life happens now.

MG: This gallery also contains an angular gallery-within-the-gallery, a wedge space that we constructed to house some of your black light paintings. How did it first occur to you to paint with these fluorescent pigments and to show them under black light?

JH: The appeal of these pigments is obvious—they're colors that make their own light. Painters have long been interested in capturing certain qualities of light, and Day-Glo colors allowed me to treat painting as a light source in a very literal way. No one had thought to make high art with these materials—to make serious abstract paintings in black light colors. I wanted to channel the experience I had visiting the Rothko Chapel, but to ask what would happen if I turned that sacred space for painting into a nightclub.³



Detail of *Dwarf Fortress* graphics



Gallery B: Emoticons and Emoji 2014–18

MG: The dense group of paintings installed in Gallery B features another quotidian element you've introduced to high abstraction: the emoticon. Emoticons derive from keyboard communication, text messaging, and so on. What prompted you to bring the emoticon into your arsenal of tools for making abstract paintings?

JH: The period of my work surveyed in this exhibition coincided with me spending a great deal more time on an iPhone. The sheer volume of engagement that occurred with and through a keyboard increased dramatically, and that started to seep into the paintings. Those elements of text message and email communication started sticking to the work, and at first it was jarring. I thought, "I'm an abstract painter, what am I doing making emoticons icons on my paintings? They have no place there." But it was as though the world in its degree of abstraction had so far outpaced abstract painting that I had to confront that new reality.

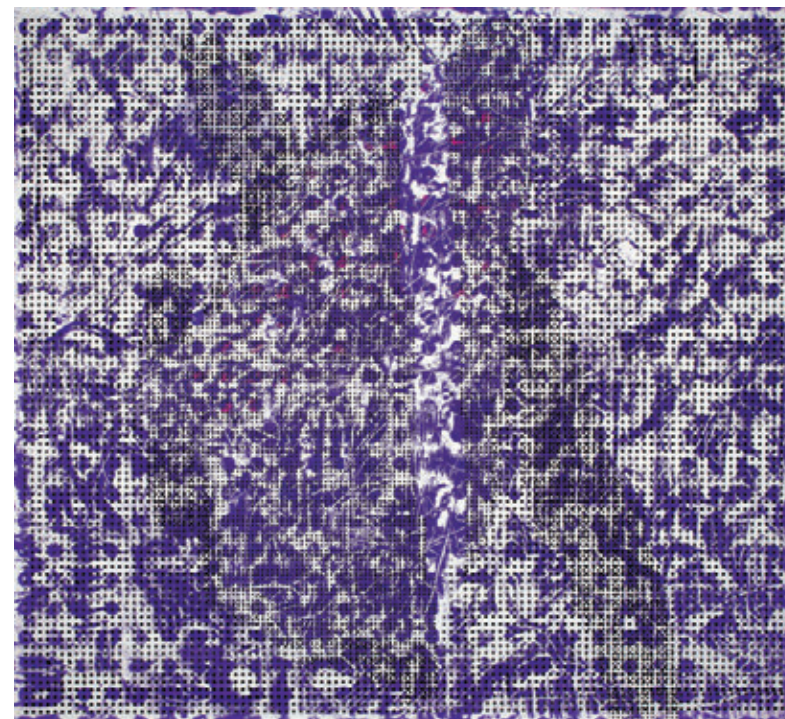
MG: The paintings in Gallery B feature a range of colors: purples, mint greens, blues, yellows, reds. However most of your paintings have a maximum of three colors. You're not known as a colorist, but this array of paintings is quite striking. How do you approach color choices?

JH: You're right to point out that within a given painting the palette is fairly limited—I tend toward some version of the monochrome. Partly that's because I don't paint shapes, so there's no bounded space for separate colors to inhabit, only a field.

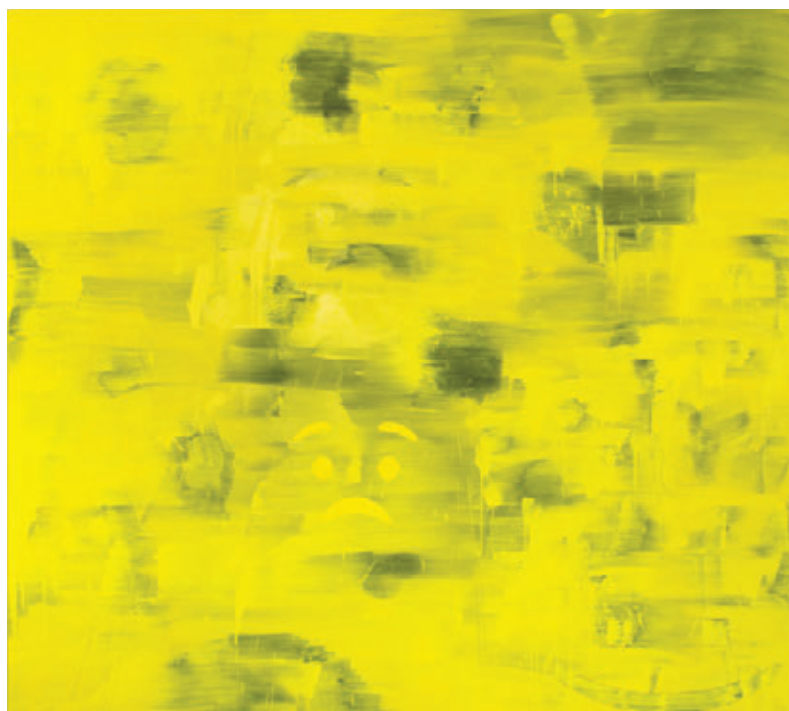
I hate blue but I use it all the time, because it does something no other hue does—it's insistent and passive-aggressive, but also disarmingly pretty and tied to the natural world. It's verboten for an abstract artist to make a purple painting, but I find myself doing it. Purple has a poisonous quality, like something tempting but toxic, and acid yellow is another evil-seeming color I keep coming back to. I'm less interested in the identity or associations of a given color than in what it *does*, how it behaves on the canvas. I choose colors that work on and in the painting in specific ways.



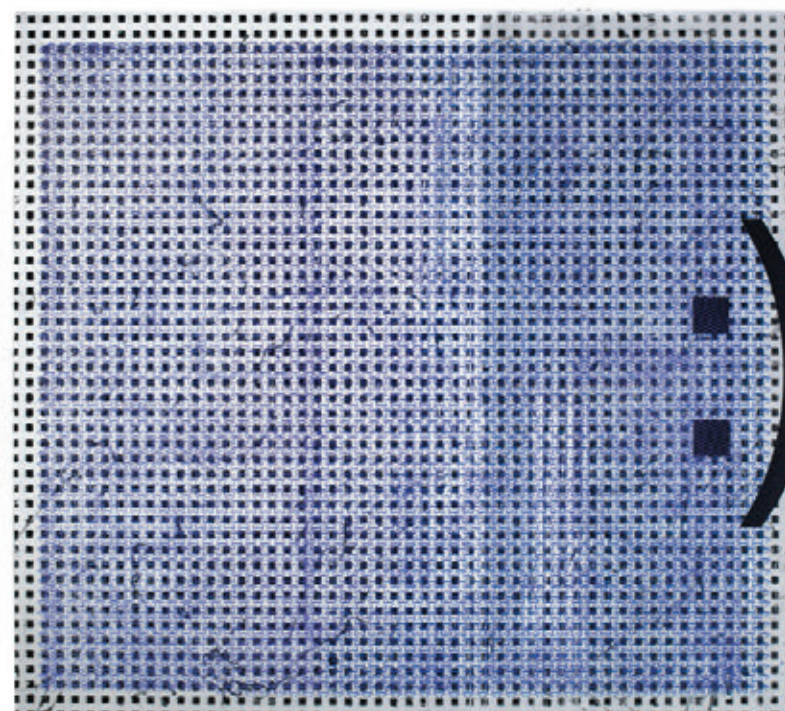
:):):)', 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Daskal Collection.
Detail on page 12.



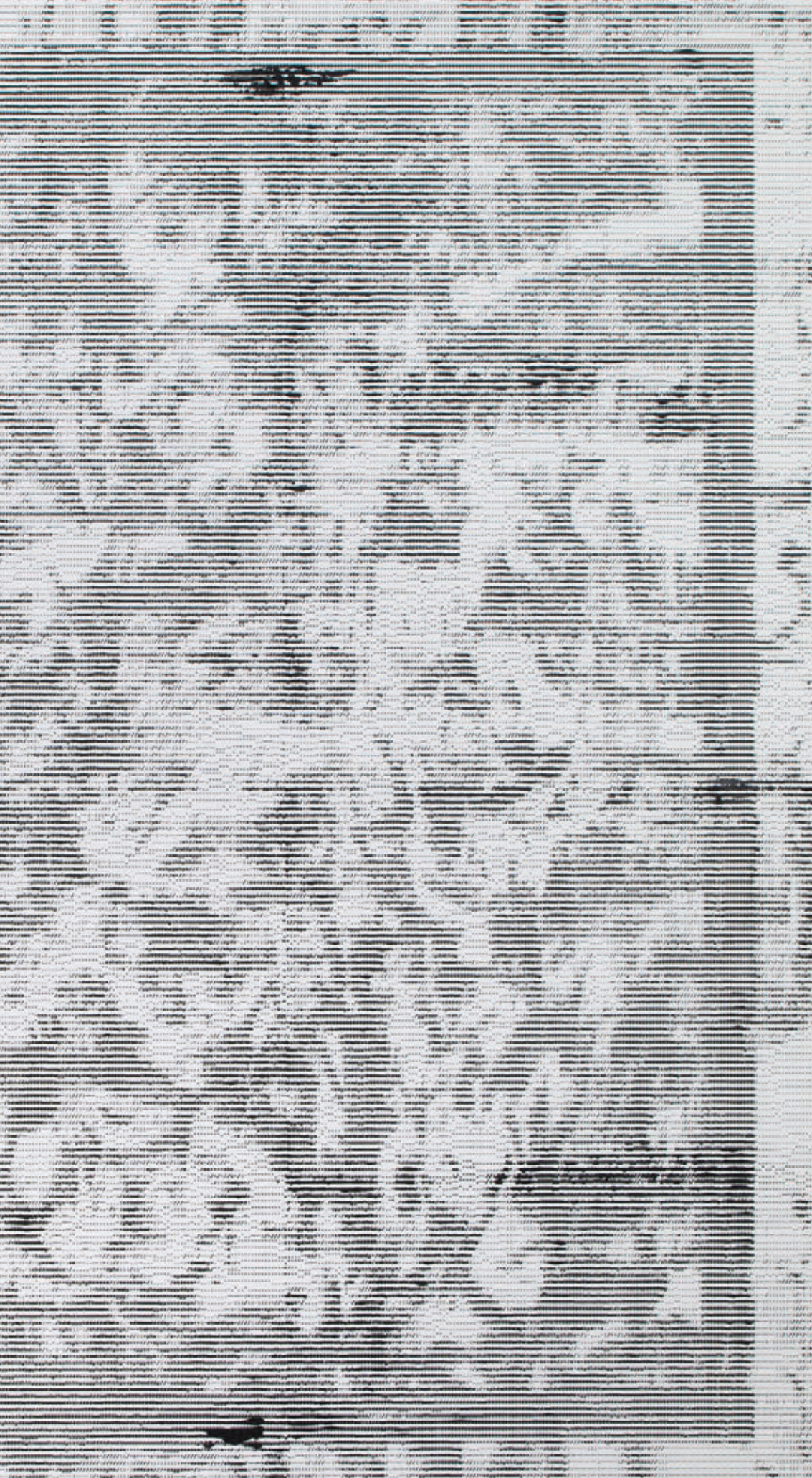
;;;, 2014. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Private collection, New York.



😏)', 2017. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Barasch Carmel Family Collection.



:):(', 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Michael Fuchs.



Gallery C: ASCII and CAPTCHA Codes 2018–21

MG: In Gallery C we see a new phase of your technical experimentation with stencils: ASCII paintings. As I understand it, you take photographs of your previous paintings—for example *31/13* (2013)—and those images are then turned into ASCII code, which renders every value in the older painting as a keyboard character, as seen in *sysysyo/* (2017).⁴ Then stencils are generated from those characters and paint is pushed through the stencils onto the canvases. What was your interest in using ASCII code to create new paintings out of existing ones?

JH: I thought, what if I could make a stencil the size of the painting so that the painting just gets stenciled? One day my assistant Peter Granados showed me an experiment, a painting of mine that he had generated in ASCII code. We have a highly collaborative relationship where I will ask for solutions to an idea I have and then he will go hunting; he'll come up with 15 different possibilities and I'll take some and reject others.

The ASCII approach seemed like a risky thing to do: the painting generates itself through a digital code that's automated and retranslates itself. I liked that you could make an ASCII [version] of a painting and then email it to a friend—taking this big, heavy, 10-foot object and reducing it down to lines of code. You could transmit it to the other side of the world and then turn it back into a giant painting. It took a lot of trial and error to arrive at a strategy for the ASCII paintings that I felt was visually interesting, parsing all the decisions that are still left for an artist to make within this automated technique (the types of characters chosen, the font, how many lines per surface, the density). There are still a number of subjective choices that you can make within this highly limited set of options.

MG: Also in this room are a series of smaller paintings. Most of the works that we've discussed in the exhibition so far are quite large-format paintings, but you do work on multiple scales. What do you find compelling or useful about working on a small painting? Is it an exercise for testing larger ideas, or are these artworks in their own right?

JH: I don't make studies, so each small painting is an independent work. But I certainly have a lot of ideas about the



31/13, 2013. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in. Udo and Anette Brandhorst Collection.



sysysyo/, 2017. Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in. Collection of the artist. Detail on page 16.

set of procedures that might constitute a painting, and I can experiment much more easily with new approaches on a smaller canvas.

MG: The painting on the far wall in this gallery, *jHΩ1:)* (2018), incorporates CAPTCHA, a type of ubiquitous code we use to authenticate ourselves online and prove that



Isolated CAPTCHA code from *jHΩ1:)*

we're not robots. CAPTCHA codes appear in a number of your paintings, and this one features your initials and the Greek letter omega. What drew you to CAPTCHA as a painterly motif, and why personalize it in this way?

JH: I had made a mistake in that painting and needed a fix for it, and the idea to use CAPTCHA was swimming around... Like the screen or the emoticon, it was another element that was of this world and part of my daily encounters with the digital. I started playing with this idea of making my own CAPTCHA—they are quite attractive with their distorted letters. CAPTCHA is a new-looking thing that has a practical purpose, and once it stuck to the painting I knew it belonged there.

This particular code is my logo: *jHΩ1:)*. That's me and the things I love. Omega stands for last things, last paintings—an obsession that dates back to my time as an art student, when painting was supposedly dead but we were all still competing to make "the last painting." And then of course the smiley emoticon, which is my favorite symbol. It's become a kind of avatar of mine (or the frowny).

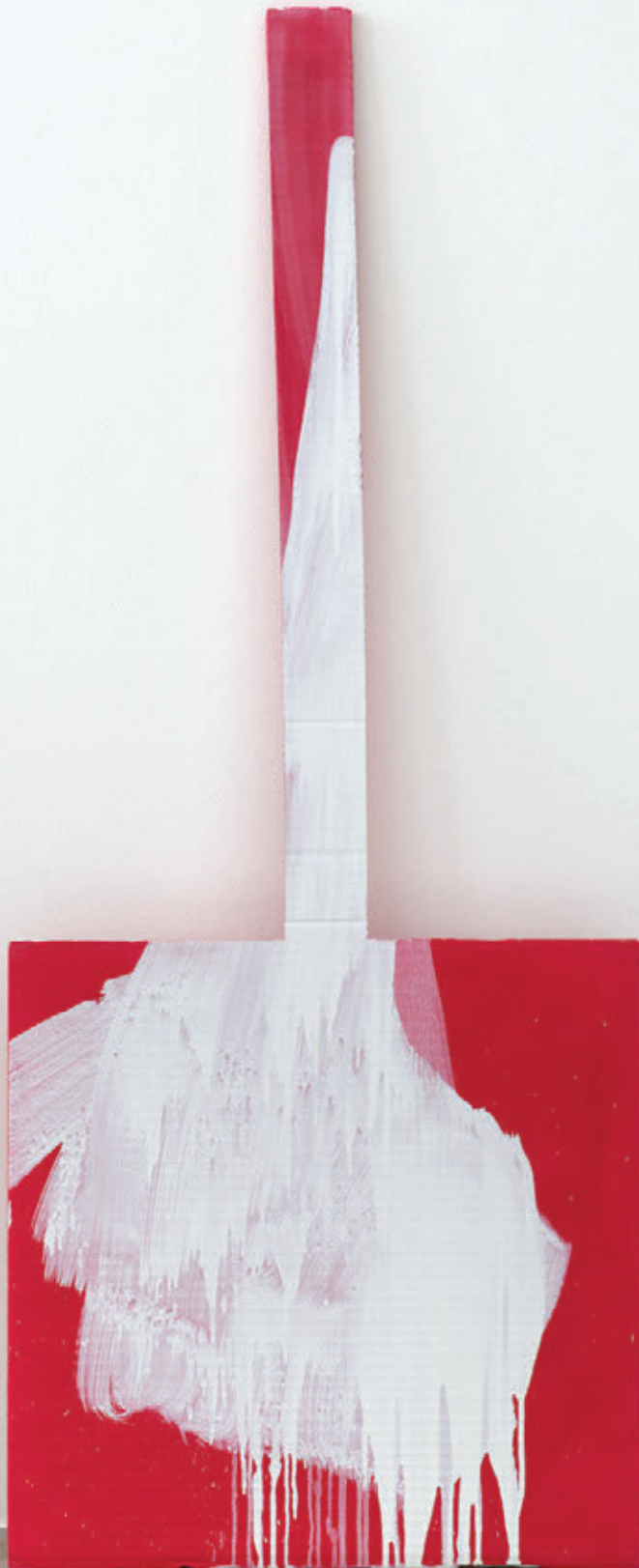
MG: This painting also demonstrates how you combine things that would seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, the ASCII code has autogenerated a new painting from a previous one, but on the other, the large red scrawls connote immediacy. That combination of opposites—mediation and gesture—seems to be generative for you.

JH: It is! Engaging with ASCII was a real challenge artistically because it meant leaving everything behind that I loved about painting—leaving painting itself behind. But there was still a nagging desire to drag some of what had been lost back into the paintings and to force it to coexist with the approach that succeeded it. I could work as though I'd made enough paintings, I'd made enough gestures; now I could just make stencils or ASCIIs of them and generate new paintings on canvas out of all the things I already made.

Hallway: Protest Signs 2018–21

MG: In the next small room, there are a group of protest paintings. All of these were done during the Trump presidency, but that wasn't the first time that you've made work called protest paintings. As an abstract painter, how do you understand your relationship to the world of the street, the world of placards and banners and protest slogans?

JH: The first protest signs I made were during the George W. Bush presidency in the run-up to the Iraq War, and I returned to them during the Trump years when politics were all-consuming. The relationship between abstract painting and activism has a few different historical threads: the revolutionary zeal of [Aleksandr] Rodchenko and El Lissitzky one hundred years ago, when abstraction was compatible with radical politics, but also Daniel Buren's move in the 1970s to have people walk through the streets bearing placards with his signature stripes—stand-ins for painting—as if to acknowledge those utopian claims for abstraction had been exhausted. Both stances had validity in their own time, and neither feels adequate to where we are now. There's an ambivalence to my protest paintings that tries to expand on how we conceive of the placard or picket sign as a cultural form.



Untitled, 2020. Oil paint on Aqua-Resin, 50 x 20 $\frac{3}{8}$ x $\frac{3}{4}$ in. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.



Gallery D: Logos and White Noise 2020–21

MG: As we continue up the ramp, we see on the window wall a new development for you: a multipanel painting. The work has a buried or almost secret CAPTCHA image based on the word WEX, in reference to the founding donor of the Wexner Center whose businesses included Victoria's Secret. The painting comes out of your thinking about brands and logos, and the economic and institutional conditions that are in place for paintings to be displayed today. After working with keyboard characters, emoticons, and CAPTCHA codes in your paintings, what made you turn toward the graphic logo?

JH: It offered a way to more fully acknowledge the entirety of the situation. We can't pretend that I am alone in my studio painting away and that's all there is to it. I'm working toward an exhibition, and that exhibition is happening in a space, and that space has funders. The painting was made with an eye to that context, and if it bears the stamp of my own artistic being, that can also be commercialized into a kind of a logo. The brand name also satisfies my desire to contaminate the vaunted purities—the exalted status—of abstraction.

MG: As we move into one of the final spaces, we see something else that you're doing in this exhibition that you haven't done before, which is to project a kind of animated light show onto a painting. The painting, *Untitled* (2021), derives from a stencil depicting TV interference, and the light projection on top of it is also based on interference patterns. Can you talk about the evolution of this new idea? We've already discussed the black light paintings that generate their own light, but projecting onto a painting is a new thing.

JH: I'm working with white noise patterns in this work, which harks back to the idea of the painting as a light source. I thought, why not use the motifs within the painting as the actual lighting to exhibit the painting? White noise is like TV static—it moves. So the canvas is animated to create a narrative of the painting lighting itself.

MG: There are many abstract artists who don't offer points of connection between their interests in form, color, materiality, and the everyday world outside an art gallery. But in your practice, there are so many links to the world of any-



Untitled, 2021. Oil on linen, 90 x 96 in. Private collection. Photo: Ron Amstutz. Detail on page 22.

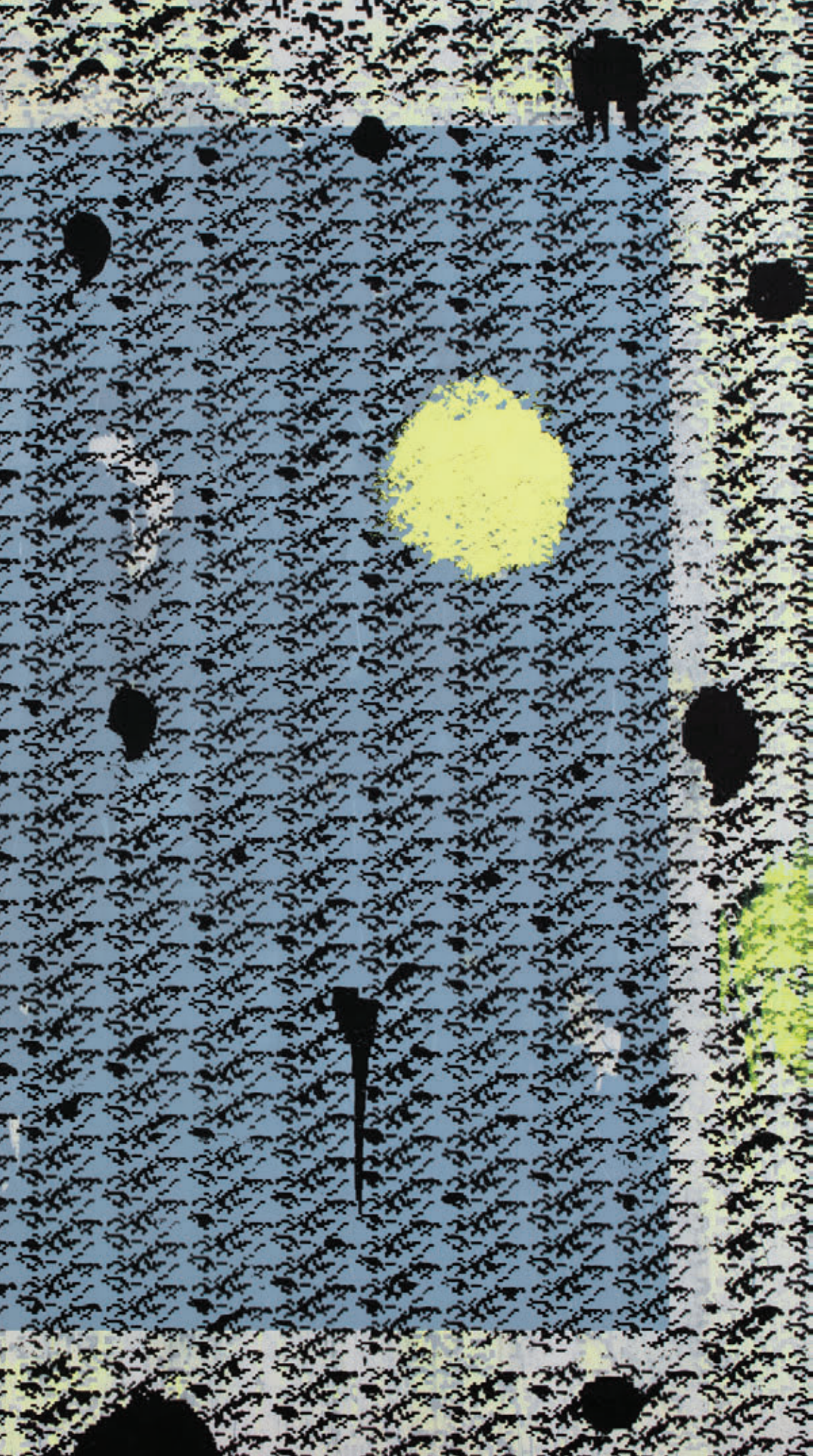
one who has a smartphone—anyone who looks at a screen, plays a computer game, verifies they’re not a robot, and so on.

JH: My starting point is abstraction, and that’s a visual tradition that has had a bad rap for being alienating or aloof. I feel it’s my job to bring abstraction into a renewed confrontation with the actual world, rather than hermetically fulfill some private desire to be [Kazimir] Malevich today, which is impossible. Malevich is sealed in time; I can’t access the conditions which enabled those paintings.⁵ But I see threads that tie what he achieved to the world I’m living in and sharing with others. I try to make those connections felt in highly tangible ways and to evoke the more personal, psychic states that define how we all live with these very new demands on our attention.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Notes

1. Peter Eisenman partnered with the Ohio-based architect Richard Trott to design the Wexner Center; together, they submitted the winning proposal for Ohio State’s Center for the Visual Arts Competition in 1982–83.
2. See page 33 for further discussion of these characters generated by the ASCII encoding standard.
3. A nondenominational chapel located in Houston, Texas, the Rothko Chapel holds 14 abstract paintings by artist Mark Rothko, who created this body of work specifically for the octagon-shaped building. Commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil, the chapel was completed in 1971 not long after Rothko’s passing; it’s open to the public today as a space of contemplation and prayer.
4. The ASCII character set contains 128 characters, including the numbers 0–9, upper and lowercase letters from A to Z, and the special characters available on a standard QWERTY keyboard (*, \$, #, etc.). To translate an image into ASCII code, a computer program first renders it in grayscale, then assigns a character for each light/dark value—for example, a darker value might be rendered with the letter R, and a lighter value, with the symbol /.
5. In 1915–16, Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich exhibited his first fully abstract paintings, including *Black Square* (1915), at his one-person exhibition *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10* in Saint Petersburg.



Screen Resistance: Jacqueline Humphries after the Internet

Daniel Marcus

At some hard-to-locate moment in the year 2014, a cultural threshold was crossed, ushering in the online world as we have come to know it. Previously, the Internet's full-time denizens had been an object of fascination, and even ridicule—especially its youth contingent, whose thumb-powered smart-phone habit furnished the butt of endless “kids-these-days” commentary. By the end of 2014, however, this shtick had worn thin. With more and more of life and work routed through online platforms and networks, from texting and shopping to gaming and house-hunting, the Internet was fast becoming normal, a default mechanism in the gear-works of modernity. To refuse the Internet was no longer an option.



Ellen DeGeneres's star-studded selfie from the 2014 Academy Awards Ceremony

Take the selfie, a bellwether of changing attitudes. In the early 2010s, selfies emerged as a phenomenon—often an embarrassment—along the margins of social media; but 2014 witnessed the genre's mainstream normalization, as reflected in the boom in selfie stick sales (“2014's most controversial gift,” per the *New York Post*). By 2014, emoji were no longer a passing curiosity: “When I first encountered emoji,” wrote Adam Sternbergh in *New York Magazine*,

I assumed they were used only ironically—perhaps because, as a member of Generation X, I am accustomed to irony as a default communicative mode....But emoji have also proved to be popular with the least techno-literate and ironic among us, i.e., our parents. Many

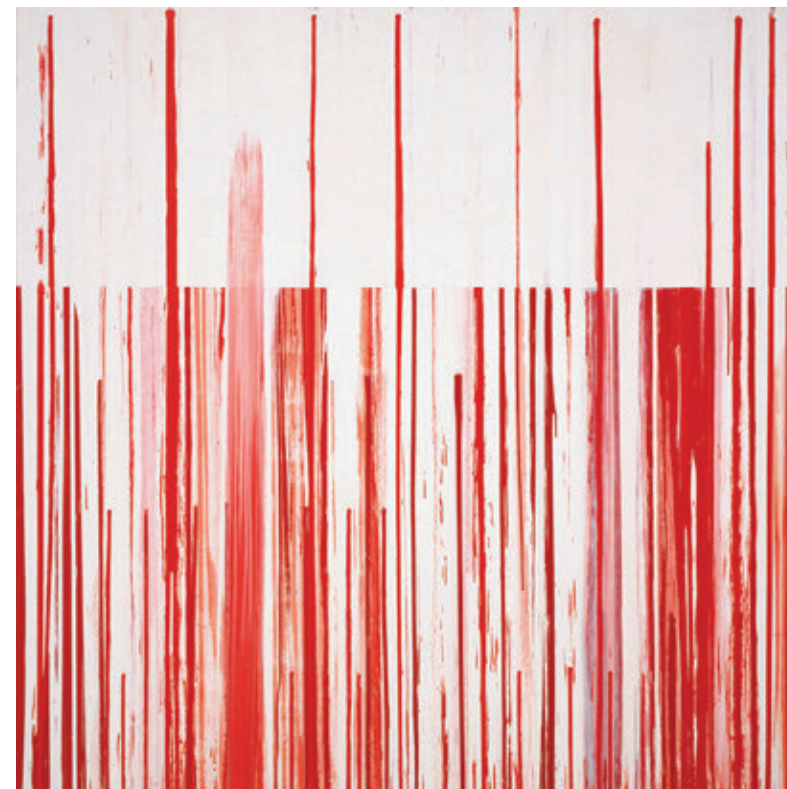
people I spoke to relayed that their moms were the most enthusiastic adopters of emoji they knew. One woman said that her near-daily text-message-based interaction with her mother consists almost entirely of strings of emoji hearts.¹

Perhaps most tellingly, 2014 marked the year of Tinder’s explosive growth, incorporating roughly 20 million new users, linking the pursuit of real-life intimacy with the slick surface of the touch screen.

The art world also crossed a digital Rubicon in 2014: “It was the year that Post-Internet Art ‘finally cracked the market,’” wrote one journalist, invoking a previously obscure moniker.² Coined in the late aughts to describe the impact of online networks on contemporary art, “Post-Internet” became the rallying cry of a small cohort of artists and bloggers, who congregated around the idea that *all* art—including artworks made and exhibited off-line—would inevitably fall under the Internet’s vast shadow. “Even if the artist doesn’t put the work on the Internet,” argued blogger Gene McHugh, “the work will be cast into the Internet world; and at this point, contemporary art, as a category, was/is forced, against its will, to deal with this new distribution context or at least acknowledge it.”³

Enter Jacqueline Humphries, an artist uniquely positioned to meet the challenge of “the Internet world,” albeit from the perspective of the 21st century’s ultimate legacy medium: painting. Although the World Wide Web was embryonic in her formative years (the first commercial Internet service providers, or ISPs, launched in 1989, contemporaneous with her first New York solo exhibition), Humphries quickly recognized a latent analogy—and productive friction—between paintings and digital interfaces, which captured her attention as early as the 1990s. Discussing the relationship between digital space and abstraction around the turn of the millennium, she proposed the canvas as a substitute for the techno-psychological space of the screen:

The important thing is that [the canvas is] not an actual screen with actual projection, but a sign of a screen. A space for psychological projection for the viewer; like



Untitled #2, 1995. Oil on linen, 90 x 90 in. Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; gift of Alexander Lasarenko in memory of Anna Lasarenko.



Screen 1, 1997. Oil on aluminum, 12 ¾ x 16 ½ in. Collection A. G. Rosen.



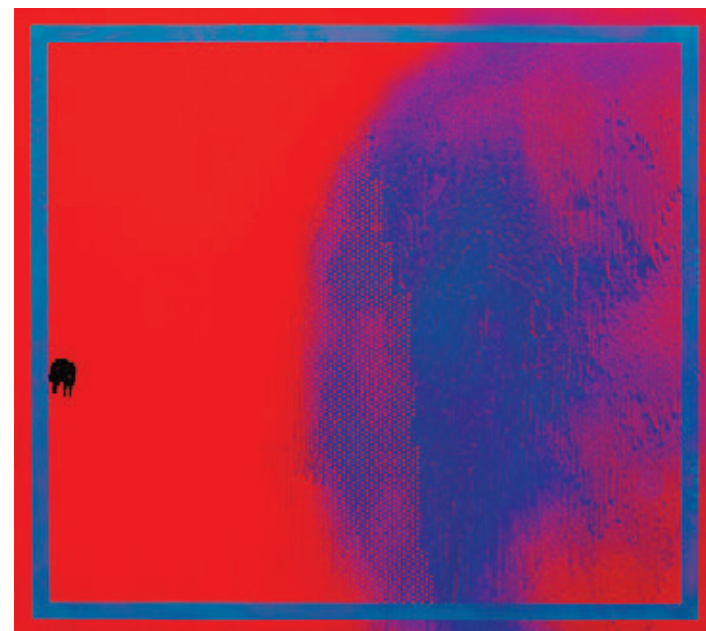
Installation view of *Jacqueline Humphries: New Paintings* at Greene Naftali Gallery, New York, October 14–November 27, 1999.

“this is the site, the new landscape.” A site of image production after cinema, billboards, TV commercials, Photoshop, the Internet.⁴

In her earliest efforts to define painting’s role “after” digital technology, Humphries sought to import both the look and feel of screen-based culture into the two-dimensional terms of abstraction. She had gravitated toward abstract painting since the early 1980s, and Abstract Expressionism in particular—an enthusiasm that “did not make [her] popular with anyone,” as she later recalled.⁵ With her first exhibition at Greene Naftali Gallery in 1995, Humphries manipulated abstraction’s gestural power to immersive, and frankly emotive, effect, translating the propulsive soundscapes of New York’s nightclubs into a field of cadmium zips and drips. Two years later, she exhibited a new suite of paintings at the gallery, applying horizontal brushstrokes across each canvas as if wiping an impossibly dirty screen; and in 1999, her suite of “black paintings” approximated the eerie vacancy of an empty computer desktop, suggesting an analogy between abstraction’s banishment of iconic signs and the erasure of cluttered files.

Humphries was not alone in identifying a correspondence between digital and painterly form, but her efforts to analogize technological effects on canvas set her apart. In 2005, she exhibited her first set of black light paintings: canvases splashed and sprayed with fluorescent pigments and exhibited in darkness under ultraviolet illumination. Throbbing

with Day-Glo color, these works mimic the artificial luminescence of LCD-screen technology so successfully that they—like glowing monitors—resist photographic reproduction, emitting a light all their own. The following year, she elaborated on this antiphotographic tactic in her first “silver paintings,” slathering the canvas with a custom-made metallic pigment that turned reflective under gallery lighting.



Untitled, 2016. Oil and enamel on linen, 114 x 127 in. Collection of the artist.

Whereas Humphries’s practice before 2014 exploited latent analogies between paintings and screens, her work over the past seven years has made this relationship increasingly explicit. In the spring of 2014, she began to experiment with a laser cutting machine, incising dots and Xs into large plastic sheets, which she then used to create a pattern of regular marks on the canvas. Initially, this practice was limited to abstract shapes, which, repeated in orderly rows and grids, recall both pixels and the punch cards used in early computers; however, rather than merely assert the formulaic regularity of these patterns, Humphries flooded the overlapping weave of marks with paint to create (seemingly) random variations of typographic weight and density.⁶ Before long,

she modified her use of stencils to include emoticons (humble predecessors to emoji that fashion facial expressions out of keyboard characters) in addition to abstract shapes, starting with a slant-mouthed “meh” symbol in :-/ (2014). “I simply had the idea of using emoticons one day,” she recalls. “I knew that the explosion of emoticon speech had both delighted and annoyed me at times, but it seemed to have become an essential component in the general impoverishment of SMS [text message] speech, so that made me really want to make it work.”⁷



:-/ (2014). Oil on linen, 114 x 127 in. Collection of Allison and Warren Kanders.

These experiments opened a floodgate for Humphries, whose recent paintings brim with emoticons, emoji, and CAPTCHA codes (online puzzles created to distinguish humans from autonomous—and often malicious—computer programs, called bots), among other digital artifacts. In :)green (2017), for example, a huge smiley emoticon hovers in the airless space of the painting, endowing it with a ready-made emotion: chill vibes embodied. Rotated 90 degrees on its side and expanded to human-scale proportions (the painting measures 100 inches tall by 111 inches wide, a



:)green, 2017. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of the artist.

standard format for Humphries), the smiley face confronts us like a phantom from the digital realm, grinning serenely beneath a thin wash of aquatic greens and blues. Yet the confrontation is disquieting and raises more questions than answers. Whose emotion does the smiley face convey? Does the emoticon see (does it return our gaze?), or is it just an empty shell, like a Guy Fawkes mask?

Authenticity is a term postmodernism taught Humphries’s generation to discount. Authorship is another. In many of her recent paintings, the artist set the tools of computer imaging to work on her own oeuvre, deploying stencils created from scans of her previous photographic documentation, a gesture she describes as “self-cannibalism.” In *Two Cat* (2016), for example, pixelated blobs and drips digitally copied from an earlier painting merge with a cascade of blue paint, muddling the distinction between digital and manual mark-making. Other works introduce a further level of computerized mediation, replicating entire paintings using ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), a 1960s-era system capable of generating letters and symbols from a set of binary or hexadecimal codes. In *sysysyo/* (2017), for instance, the composition derives from an earlier painting, *31/13* (2013), rendering its welter of



Two Cat, 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of Jack K. Cayre, New York.

brush marks in a ghostly transcription. When viewed from afar, the two paintings appear roughly similar; seen at close range, however, their divergent facture could not be more pronounced: each individual keyboard character in *sysysyo/* stands out in high impasto relief—an effect that lends the illegible script an absurd sort of gravitas, as if the artist had fashioned her own abstract Rosetta Stone.

In the transit between *sysysyo/* and *31/13*, the ambivalence of Humphries's strategy comes fully into view. Turning away from gestural brushwork, her practice has increasingly focused on the use and reuse of laser-cut stencils, which, applied in densely layered fields, approximate both the methods and visual effects of an overcrowded computer screen. Positioning herself as a manipulator of data, Humphries effectively recasts her artistic persona in the guise of an algorithmic function—a point underlined by her adoption of a tongue-in-cheek moniker:

I use the characters “J. H. \$” as a playful gesture that self-mocks the idea of painting as authorial expression....And I also paint on CAPTCHA tests. The funny thing about those is I always fail at the CAPTCHA test.

So maybe I'm a robot. Certainly, based on the test, I'm not human.⁸

This embrace of CAPTCHAs (the acronym stands for Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart) cuts two ways. On one hand, by stenciling her canvases with personalized CAPTCHA puzzles, as in her painting *jHΩ1:* (2018), Humphries aligns her methods of digital self-plagiarism—that is, her process of copying her own original work, rendering paintings into infinitely replicable digital files—with less benign forms of identity theft and data piracy, gesturing toward the bot's pernicious imitation of authorship. At the same time, the CAPTCHA places the viewer under equal suspicion, implying that *you*, the onlooker, might not be entirely trustworthy (or fully human) either. Typically administered to safeguard access to confidential information, Humphries's CAPTCHA tests hold open the possibility of a viewer's “unlocking” the painting's hidden (original, authentic) content—except that the test can't be completed, leaving the distinction between human and computer, and between prototype and copy, permanently unresolved.

Although the “moment” of Post-Internet Art now feels securely behind us, the question of art's relationship with online culture lingers. To many commentators at the time, the infinite reproducibility of digital images, coupled with the near-global expanse of high-speed wireless networks, promised to flatten the cultural field, leveling old hierarchies between and among venues, formats, and sites of visibility. For Artie Vierkant, whose essay “The Image Object Post-Internet” remains a touchstone, the new paradigm of digital culture necessitated a strategy of aesthetic dematerialization, privileging “projects which move seamlessly from physical representation to Internet representation, either changing for each context, built with an intention of universality, or created with a deliberate irreverence for either venue of transmission.”⁹

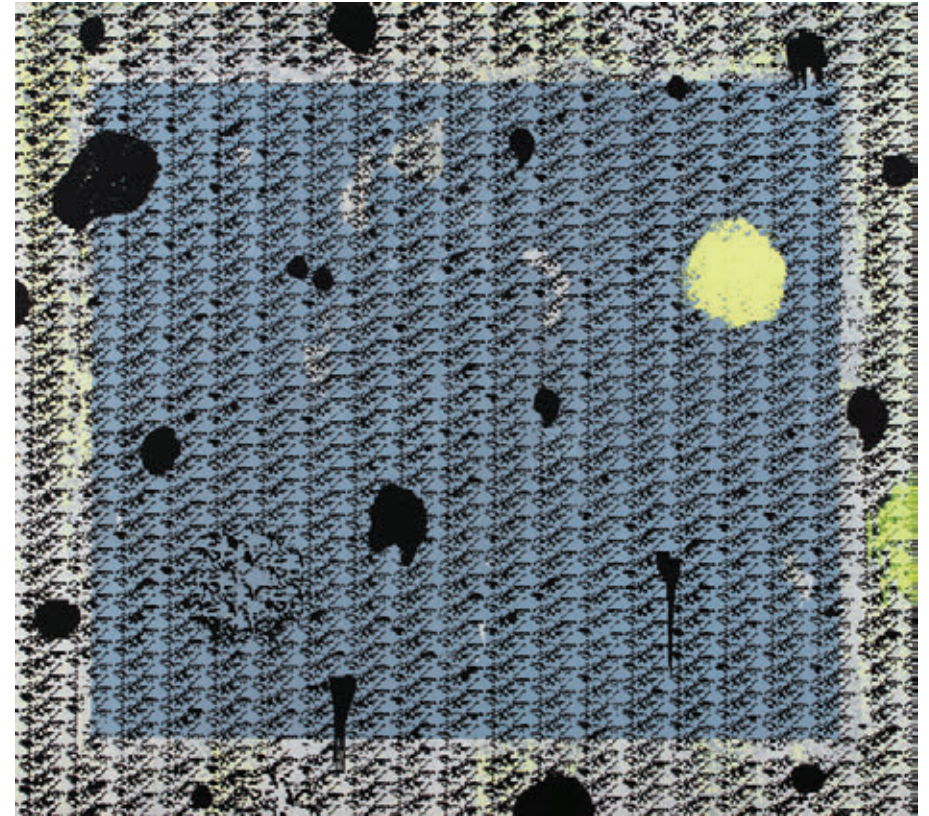
Developed alongside the Post-Internet phenomenon, Humphries's practice offers a powerful countermodel—one that reformats painting as a site of digital image replication, not to erase the division between gallery-space and the “Inter-

net world,” however, but to amplify their discontinuity. Dissenting from Vierkant’s view of digital images as objective (realer-than-real) and therefore authoritative, her practice instead exploits the instability and evanescence of screen-based imagery—a position Humphries stakes out in a recent interview:

What’s striking in today’s screen culture is how one image is so rapidly replaced by another which doesn’t relate to it in any way: there’s no *definitive* image, nothing which synthesizes or sums up, just an endless torrent. The screen itself is the unifying element, and compresses within itself this multitude. I can’t look at an image on a screen any more without sensing another billion images lurking just behind it ready to push it off-screen. The way windows can appear to stack up on the dimensionless area of a computer screen also has a very unsettling effect. But to give a sense of this reality in painting is a different matter partly because it is a fixed image but also because we expect different things from painting, namely unity or resolution. And though I don’t seek to always deliver fully on those expectations—which maybe is impossible anyway—I still have to lock everything together so that nothing can be removed or added....A painting is a physical object so I must enact this sense of compression on those terms. If the result feels like it has something wrong with it, that’s good because then I (the viewer) can feel a heightened sense of complicity with it. A painting is better when there’s something wrong with it.¹⁰

Painting will not survive the era of Instagram and Google, in other words, if it cannot risk exposure to the digital manifold, opening itself to the *unfixity* of the LCD screen, and to the infinity of images-in-waiting. Rather than rebalance art through rapprochement with the Internet, Humphries proposes, provocatively, to make painting *wrong*, and in so doing, to render it vividly present in the eyes of the doom-scrolling spectator.

This embrace of digital culture as a vector for unsettling painting places Humphries in a singular position, at once inside and outside the medium’s hallowed circle. Consider Humphries’s



Earthbound, 2016. Oil on linen, 100 x 111 in. Collection of the artist. Detail on page 26.

paintings *Ω* (2015) and *Earthbound* (2016), both of which “steal” their imagery from the electronic games *Dwarf Fortress* and *EarthBound*, respectively, copy/pasting sections of the game-scape to create a matrix of pixelated patterns and textures. These sources call back to an earlier generation of computer games: *EarthBound*, a 16-bit role-playing game (RPG) developed for Super Nintendo in 1994–95, dates to the waning years of the cartridge era (it has become a cult classic); and *Dwarf Fortress*, a world-building/adventure game beloved of e-cognoscenti, offers self-consciously stripped-down visuals, with players and resources designated by colored ASCII keyboard characters. Viewers facing *Earthbound* in a gallery may never guess that the all-over pattern, a repeated fractal graphic, originally derived from a forested region of the game-world; likewise, with *Ω*, the character patterns culled from *Dwarf Fortress* are readable only in the eyes of gamers (in true postmodernist spirit, the game’s graphic signs don’t resemble their referents).

Beyond sheer formal interest, *EarthBound* and *Dwarf Fortress* both rework the codes of conventional gameplay in ways consistent with Humphries’s self-ironizing attitude,



Final battle with Giygas in the game *EarthBound*

placing the pursuit of “kills,” and even the horizon of victory, under suspicion. In *Dwarf Fortress*, winning is straightforwardly impossible, hence the game’s unofficial mantra: “Losing is fun.” In *EarthBound*, too, the RPG plot bends in a meta direction. Rather than face a traditional “big boss,” gamers confront an absent archenemy, Giygas, who never appears explicitly and is evoked in the final battle sequence as an agitated fractal background. As recounted by game critic Anna Wiggins, Giygas’s life and death ultimately depend on the player’s desire for narrative closure. Impervious to direct attacks, he can only be defeated through an obscure mode of attack available to one of the game’s four protagonists—prayer:

The key [to beating Giygas] is to keep hoping, keep praying. You pray again, and someone hears your prayers. And they are truly powerful. They pray and pray for you, and the strength of their hope and faith is enough to destroy Giygas and win the day. Ultimately, the game reveals their name—it is *you*, the player, sitting in your living room trying as hard as you can to defeat the final boss of *EarthBound*. (the intent of this scene is much clearer in the Japanese release, which has you enter *your* name separately from the *protagonist’s* name, and uses your name here)

In other words, these four fictional heroes only win the day and purge evil from their world because you, the

player, want it that way. And you, in turn, only want it because it is the goal, it is how you complete the game....

Giygas only exists because of us, because we demand conflict in our narratives. We demand that our heroes suffer. The reason Giygas is unseen is that *he is the entire game*, the narrative structure itself.¹¹

Something similar can be said of Humphries’s work: to appreciate her contribution to painting requires that we first admit the medium’s absurd, yet undeniable, desirability. We still want paintings—not out of fealty to tradition, however, but because the wish for a “definitive image,” and of a fixed and unified view of the world, lingers in spite of the Internet. To repress this desire, and to “deal” with the Internet solely on its own terms, as McHugh suggests we must, requires an acceptance of contingency (and related, precarity) few of us could inhabit fully or completely. The very bottomlessness of the Internet is reason enough for painting: not as an elite subculture, but as the expression of an unrequited need for a different kind of image—and relatedly, for a life unshackled from the screen. Only from this transitory perspective, simultaneously after and *before* the Internet, does the digital realm reveal itself for what it is: a space we can neither enter nor exit with complete satisfaction. For Humphries, painting is the mirror, pigment-streaked and smirking, that lets us look the screen in the face.

Notes

1. Adam Sternbergh, "Smile, You're Speaking Emoji: The Rapid Evolution of a Wordless Tongue," *New York Magazine*, Nov 16, 2014, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/11/emojis-rapid-evolution.html?src=longreads>.
2. Gary Zhexi Zhang, "Post-Internet Art: You'll Know It When You See It," *Elephant* 23, July 6, 2015, <https://elephant.art/youll-know-it-when-you-see-it/>.
3. Gene McHugh, *Post Internet* (blog), September 12, 2010, <https://122909a.com> (archived on Rhizome.org)
4. Jacqueline Humphries, interview by Josefina Ayerza, *lacanian ink*, no. 22 (2003), emphasis added, <https://www.lacan.com/frameXXII7.htm>.
5. Jacqueline Humphries, interview by Cecily Brown, *BOMB* 107, Spring 2009, p. 28.
6. "I never use the stencil and leave it," Humphries has insisted; "It's something to work against.I violate its regularity, wiping it completely, smearing it, painting over it." Quoted in Cristina Rouvalis, "Born to Paint: Jacqueline Humphries's New Direction," *Carnegie Museum of Art Storyboard*, June 17, 2015, <https://storyboard.cmoa.org/2015/06/born-to-paint-jacqueline-humphriess-new-direction/>.
7. David Ryan, "Painting as Event: An Interview with Jacqueline Humphries," *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 4, no. 1 (2018): 54.
8. Jacqueline Humphries, interview by Felix Bernstein, "A Romantic and Sublime Threshold State: Jacqueline Humphries," *Mousse* 66, Winter 2019, <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/jacqueline-humphries-interviewed-felix-bernstein-2019/>.
9. Artie Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet," *JstChillin*, December 14, 2010, http://jstchillin.org/artie/pdf/The_Image_Object_Post-Internet_us.pdf.
10. Ryan, "Painting as Event," 56.
11. Anna Wiggins, "You Should Have Been a Mother (Earthbound)," *Eruditorum Press*, August 22, 2016, emphasis added, <https://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/you-should-have-been-a-mother-earthbound>.



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Jacqueline Humphries: *jHΩ1:*)

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CURATOR TALK

Mark Godfrey

Where Does Art Lie?

Mon, Oct 4 | 7 PM

ARTIST TALK

A Performative

**Dialogue Featuring
Jacqueline Humphries
and Felix Bernstein**

Wed, Oct 27 | 4 & 7 PM

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