

New Work: R. H. Quaytman



Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, 1973

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R. H. Quaytman's paintings on beveled wood panels proffer richly conceived, multilayered subjects. The artist considers each body of work a new "chapter" in an ongoing investigation of the interrelationship of site, history, and object. Over time these chapters, each structured around a specific theme or concept relating to the site in which it is displayed, collectively develop a loose narrative thread. Quaytman's *New Work* exhibition at SFMOMA debuts the newest body of work, *I Love—The Eyelid Clicks / I See / Cold Poetry, Chapter 18*. This group of paintings, based on photographs the artist has culled from the museum's collection (a selection of which are reproduced on the cover of this brochure), serves as a method to reflect on the poems of Jack Spicer, a poet associated with the San Francisco Renaissance of the 1950s and 1960s. During the course of organizing this exhibition, Quaytman and I had a series of exchanges about *Chapter 18*; the following letters are selections from that correspondence.

—Apsara DiQuinzio, Assistant Curator, Painting and Sculpture

July 9, 2010

Dear R. H. Quaytman:

On my last visit to your studio, in March, you told me that Jack Spicer would be "the ghost that haunts the paintings" in your newest body of work: *I Love—The Eyelid Clicks / I See / Cold Poetry, Chapter 18*. You explained that your interest in him originates through your past acquaintance with Robert Duncan and through your mother, the poet Susan Howe. It is striking how ghosts occupy the spaces both of Spicer's poems and of your paintings. You have also referred to such figures as "guideposts"; in previous works these have included Katarzyna Kobro, Hilma af Klint, Władysław Strzemiński, Piet Mondrian, Agnes Martin, Stuart Sherman, Osip Mandelstam, Anne Tüng, and Dorothy Norman, not to mention individuals from your own familial and social genealogies.

Two of your most recent bodies of work, *Exhibition Guide, Chapter 15* and *Distracting Distance, Chapter 16*, deal with the ghosts that inhabit museums, specifically the ICA Boston and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Now you are contemplating the past and present of SFMOMA for your solo exhibition here. In May you visited San Francisco and looked through hundreds of photographs from the museum's collection, mostly taken by unknown photographers. This relates to your emphasis on

archives. You've mined institutions' archives and made paintings knowing that they will eventually compose your own archive. Could you elaborate on this strategy, and on how it relates to Spicer, language, and poetics?

The similarities between your work and Spicer's are revelatory. Both you and he have developed a system of "composition" whereby each new body of work develops as a serialized unit in an ongoing narrative structure. Your units are chapters, his are books. In certain poems, such as "After Lorca," Spicer develops his notion of "correspondence," adopting the form of the letter for his poetry. As Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian note, "It is within these letters that he developed his concept of composition by book—by which he meant not a collection of poems but a community of poems that 'echo and re-echo against each other' to 'create resonances.'" This description also relates to your paintings; your chapters function as communities that reverberate off of one another, building resonances. Would you comment further on why you chose Spicer as the main protagonist, or correspondent, of *Chapter 18*?

Sincerely, Apsara DiQuinzio

July 13, 2010

Dear Apsara DiQuinzio:

The core issue of *Chapter 18* involves the following: how to bring the two "damned mediums," as Spicer calls them—photography on one hand and language on the other—into a painting, one receiving the static transmission of the other and hopefully losing in that transmission some of its claim to authority. The painting further tries to counter the almost overwhelming pull of both the photograph and the text into the local and into the space of the viewer.

All but one of the photographs I am using from SFMOMA's collection are by unknown photographers. Copyright considerations originally limited me to this group, but in retrospect the anonymity of these photographers is apt in relation to Spicer, paralleling as it does the eclipsing of self so evident in his practice and, to some extent, my own. The exception in the group is a photographic drawing by Jay DeFeo that her Trust generously allowed me to use. Speaking of ghosts, it was spookily fortunate to come across this image just before ending our hunt through the boxes

of pictures at the museum. This particular image exerted such a strong pull, even though at the time I had no idea that Spicer and DeFeo had been close friends. I've since read that Spicer was a passionate supporter of DeFeo's work, feeling that she was "one of the frightening harbingers of the new."<sup>2</sup> This image imparts a disposition of Spicer's poetry that I want in the paintings. For Spicer, the camera was often used as a metaphor for how the arrival of the poem occurred: "Poetry, almost blind like a camera."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the poem isn't inspired by the deepest self or by ego but rather is received the way a radio picks up signals. The self of Spicer is not entirely lost, however, being heard usually in the form of anger, or a mordant humor with which the poet is displaced from the traditional or assumed space of the author to a space in which one looks at the unfolding of the poem from outside the poem. As Killian writes: "'Invasion' itself might be a better metaphor for poetry than 'inspiration.'"<sup>4</sup> When this happens, the poet has no choice but to transmit the invasion: "If this is dictation, it is driving / me wild."<sup>5</sup> This transmission or dictation is frightening, dangerous even: "It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak only / Through our own damned trumpets, through our damned medium."<sup>6</sup> The fairylike transmission back to Spicer, via the poem, is "you can't see us in spiritland, and we can't see at all."<sup>7</sup> The DeFeo image so accurately speaks to that reply and to the silence and fundamental dislocation the viewer of a picture experiences.

I am trying to "take dictation" from the materials at hand but I realize, and this is the hardest issue, that when words appear near images they supplant the painting. Language wins all the time over image. I want to delay or suppress this phenomenon through optical manipulation. In my studio it is a battle of sorts between words and images. I realize that text above an image is a title, text over an image is an advertisement, and text beneath an image is a caption. None of these orientations is right for this poetry. I also realize that a picture is not worth a thousand words and that its worth is based in its very departure from language. It is through this linguistic absence that the picture can counteract the radical unresponsiveness or indifference of nature/outside toward the individual. One interesting footnote is that Spicer showed his poems hanging on a wall as if they were paintings at the Six Gallery, a place where DeFeo also showed her work. Having studied linguistics, Spicer believed in the materiality of language—its flatness as opposed to its communicative function.

Sincerely, R. H. Quaytman

July 20, 2010

Dear R. H.:

The line you have selected for the title of *Chapter 18* is from Spicer's "Imaginary Elegies," a poem he dedicated to the poet Robin Blaser, who was his close friend. The entire line reads: "I love—The eyelid clicks / I see / Cold poetry / At the edge of their image." In this poem Spicer discusses the relationship between poetry and images—specifically photography and the movement of the camera. And you have chosen a line in which he literally describes poetry as an act of visualization. In your newest chapter, language and images seem to coexist along each other's edges. The mediums are distinct but not mutually exclusive—they slip in and out of each other's frames. In a way, the photographs you selected illustrate Spicer's poems—they represent motifs he calls upon repeatedly: the moon, baseball, mirrors, the camera, his lovers, other poets. You have likewise used two of Spicer's poems, "5" and "6" from *Ten Poems for Downbeat*, as images in two of your paintings. It is interesting to hear you describe the tension, or struggle, between text and image at play here. To a certain extent his poem also becomes an illustration of your paintings.

In these newest paintings you move fluidly through the edges of texts and images, but such movement is not particular to this chapter or these mediums—it's characteristic of much of your work. You often paint the edge of the wood panel in trompe l'oeil onto the surface of the picture so that it reappears in or over the image (or pattern), thereby addressing the materiality of the painting itself. Your use of the edge builds a system of recursivity and a strong sense of movement into your work, so that abstraction and figuration, and the visible and the invisible, are constantly circling around one another. Similarly, your use of optical patterns plays with this sense of retinal movement, literally making it difficult to look at these pictures.

Spicer's notion of "dictation" or "transmission" was, in effect, a way to empty out his consciousness in order to fully yield himself to poetry. Blaser writes about this in the essay you mentioned to me. He describes it as an "emptying out [that] allows the unknown, as it is experientially and technically present to what we know, to enter and use the words."<sup>8</sup> This also relates to Spicer's emphasis on correspondence (and to your emphasis on the archive and the use of a given site), because it allows for a certain simultaneity to occur. Ghosts have no boundaries—they move freely in time and space.

About Spicer's poem "After Lorca," Blaser writes, "the power of the ghost is that it prepares a simultaneous appearance and disappearance."<sup>9</sup> Blaser attributes this movement from within and outside of the poem to a "flowing boundary." This metaphor captures exactly what happens in your work as well. The edges of your work move rhythmically around the gallery, propelling the viewer into one painting after another while also asserting the singularity of each one.

In *Chapter 18*, Spicer's poems flow into and out of your paintings, but so too does the site in which your works are shown. In fact, distinct levels of site-specificity are consistently present throughout your practice. On one level you have used Jack Spicer as a cipher for San Francisco—to refer to a moment in time widely identified with this city. On another level you've engaged with the specificity of this institution, widely known for its extensive photography collection, and, no less, on the heels of our recent symposium on photography, "Is Photography Over?" How do you approach your engagement with a particular site?

In addition to addressing locality you have gathered a community of absent presences in this chapter: the unknown photographers who took the photos you selected, Jay DeFeo, Spicer, and then more broadly speaking the institution. Moreover, the mediums of painting, photography, and poetry all become personae within your paintings. These elements commingle and exist simultaneously in one porous, prismatic space that your paintings articulate. You open *Allegorical Decoys* with this very notion, stating: "I seek to maintain and simultaneously disrupt painting's absolute presence, to bring subject matter into painting without having to privilege a figure/ground composition."<sup>10</sup> Can you elaborate on the importance of time and place to your practice?

Sincerely, Apsara

July 25, 2010

Dear Apsara:

The two issues you mention—time and place—are inextricably linked and impossible to separate in my thinking. The work's initial engagement with a place or site comes out of my interest in the perspectival system as the fundamental point of contention in twentieth-century painting. The evacuation of that system left me, as a young painter, with an intense suspicion

and immediate distrust of perspective. I began using perspective via the photograph, in order to contradict it and expose its flatness—to, in a sense, prove its fiction. My initial logic was that if I depicted the painting in a model of the space where it was to be shown via a photograph, and then silk-screened this image onto another panel, I would privilege the painting over the photograph via a kind of mise-en-abyme structuring. Over time I found I could be freer with how the photograph referenced the place of the painting's exhibition and that still the painting's fact—its materiality—could be maintained. The edges, the picture plane, and the object of the painting could still be experienced in tandem with the illusionistic space of the picture. I also found that the photograph could be used to enforce the facts of the painting as a particular object in a particular time and place. Writing this I see that my paintings could be interpreted as defending something they are not and can never be, namely the abstraction of modernism. Strangely the ghost of the thing they defend is not in the photographic. This is counter to the more obvious idea, which is that the ghosts are accessed through perspective and the depicted illusion. Perspective is the grammar we talk to them in—the problem is finding and offering an end to the conversation. This repeated use of the word ghost, however, is becoming problematic, because when it comes down to it I don't believe in ghosts—I believe in the medium. What interests me about ghosts is not death or resurrection but rather how the word operates as a metaphor for precisely that which is not here; the word/poem/painting that is here, but is not.

The poem you mentioned in your letter, "Imaginary Elegies," is without a doubt my favorite Spicer poem. The choice of poems for the paintings was very difficult as there were abundant good options. I settled on the two from *Ten Poems for Downbeat* for several reasons: Firstly, they were short, which was important because I didn't want the demand of having to read lengthy texts. I also liked that the word "San Francisco" appears in "5" because this chapter is, in a sense, a letter to SF. Also, I love the line "If this is dictation, it is driving / Me wild," because it shows a recursivity similar to what you mentioned finding in my work. In "6" the lines "The poem begins to mirror itself. / The identity of the poet gets more obvious" perfectly state much of what we are discussing—the recursivity of the work to itself, a return from the illusion of the picture to the flatness of the poem and to the painting as material: "Thing Language."<sup>11</sup> The identity of the poet is reflected in this flatness, which is as articulate as a mirror—the flatness of perspective. This is why the singing wish of the poem is angrily declared impossible: "Why can't

we sing songs like nightingales? Because we're not / nightingales and can never become them."<sup>12</sup> The poems were written for *DownBeat*, a magazine devoted to "Jazz, blues and beyond." The first edition was printed on paper that simulated the stock used by the particular magazines to which the poems were addressed. None of the poems in this book ever actually appeared in the magazines they were written for; some were rejected, others were never submitted. Spicer notes this at the beginning of the book. This idea of writing the poems for the envisioned context of their publication is so similar also to my approach. We are both interested in the local. Another small detail to note is that occasionally Spicer would intentionally misspell words. We see that in the first printing of "6," in the word "nightengale." The word itself may be a reference to John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale." There are no nightingales in America and perhaps that's why Spicer misspelled it. The text in the painting retains the misspelling and duplicates Spicer's original version precisely in both font and size.

The challenge of how to make an exhibition of paintings through a poem and to describe an inversion from language to picture is what I'm interested in for Chapter 18. But like Spicer says, "things do not connect, they correspond."<sup>13</sup> I would like to end our correspondence about these issues with one of his most beautiful quotes, which says so accurately what my experience has been while trying to make these paintings:

*The mirror does not break easily regardless of what is reflected in it, regardless of whether there are blue apples, Rimbaud, or even angry white light belonging in it, imprisoned, one might say, in the death of its surface. It is the oblique patience of an Alice who plays with her cat and waits for something between her and the image to melt away.*<sup>14</sup>

Sincerely, R. H.

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Printed on recycled paper.

Born in Boston in 1961, R. H. Quaytman lives and works in New York. The artist received a BA in painting from Bard College (1983) and attended postgraduate programs at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Ireland (1984), and the Institut des Hautes Etudes en Arts Plastiques in Paris (1989). Over the last decade Quaytman's practice has encompassed various roles, including artist, writer, and curator. From 2005 to 2008 Quaytman was director of the New York gallery Orchard, a loose collective of artists, filmmakers, and art historians. In November 2009 Quaytman's first solo museum exhibition was mounted at the ICA Boston, and in November 2010 the artist's first survey will open at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York. Quaytman has had solo exhibitions at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; Vilma Gold, London; and Silberkuppe, Berlin; and will soon have one at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne.

#### Works in the Exhibition

All works: *I Love—The Eyelid Clicks / I See / Cold Poetry*, Chapter 18, 2010. Created in the following media: diamond dust, oil, and gesso on wood; oil on wood; oil, silkscreen ink, and gesso on wood; silkscreen ink and gesso on wood. Produced in horizontal or vertical formats on wood panels in the following sizes: 12 3/8 x 12 3/8 in. (31.4 x 31.4 in.), 12 3/8 x 20 in. (31.4 x 50.8 cm), 20 x 20 in. (50.8 x 50.8 cm), 24 3/4 x 40 in. (62.9 x 101.6 cm), 32 3/8 x 20 in. (82.2 x 50.8 cm), 32 3/8 x 32 3/8 in. (82.2 x 82.2 cm), 40 x 24 3/4 in. (101.6 x 62.9 cm), or 52 3/8 x 32 3/8 in. (133 x 82.2 cm). Courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York.

#### Notes

1. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, "Introduction," in *My Vocabulary Did This To Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), xvii.
2. Jack Spicer, quoted in Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian, *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, published by the University Press of New England, 1998), 42.
3. Jack Spicer, "Imaginary Elegies," reprinted in Gizzi and Killian, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, 26.
4. Kevin Killian, quoted in Ellingham and Killian, *Poet Be Like God*, 58.
5. Jack Spicer, "5," reprinted in Gizzi and Killian, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, 423.
6. Spicer, "Imaginary Elegies," reprinted in Gizzi and Killian, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, 27.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Robin Blaser, ed., *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), 310.
9. *Ibid.*, 307–8.
10. R. H. Quaytman, *Allegorical Decoys* (Ghent, Belgium: MER. Paper Kunsthal, 2008), 9.
11. "Thing Language" is the title of a poem from Spicer's *Language* (White Rabbit Press, 1965).
12. All quoted lines in this paragraph are from Spicer, "5" and "6," reprinted in Gizzi and Killian, *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, 423.
13. Spicer, quoted in Gizzi and Killian, "Introduction," *My Vocabulary Did This To Me*, xviii.
14. Quoted in Peter Gizzi, "Afterword," *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, ed. Peter Gizzi (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, published by the University Press of New England, 1998), 210.

Cover images, from left: Unknown photographer, *Camera Reflected in a Glass*, ca. 1910, gelatin silver print, 8 7/16 x 5 1/2 in. (21.5 x 13.9 cm), Accessions Committee Fund purchase, 2003.127. Unknown photographer, *The Oldest Baseball Bat*, ca. 1937, gelatin silver print, 4 x 6 in. (10.2 x 15.2 cm), Foto Forum purchase, 97.571. Unknown photographer, *Untitled* (negative image of the moon), n.d., albumen silver print, 8 3/16 x 6 3/4 in. (21.1 x 16.9 cm), Gift of Gordon L. Bennett, 2004.701. Unknown photographer, *Untitled* (from a photo album belonging to a San Quentin inmate), n.d., gelatin silver print, 4 3/4 x 4 in. (12.1 x 10.2 cm), Gift of Gordon L. Bennett, 2004.376.0. Jay DeFeo, *Untitled*, 1973, 9 7/8 x 7 1/8 in. (25.1 x 20 cm), gelatin silver print, Members of Foto Forum purchase in honor of SFMOMA's 75th anniversary, 2010.106, © 2010 The Jay DeFeo Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

new work

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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Unknown photographer, *Camera Reflected in a Glass*, ca. 1910